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# Forum

## Performances of Healing and Reconciliation

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### Introduction

One of the key questions that preoccupies scholars of theatre and religion alike is the difficulty of talking about the *effect* of performances that they study. Both rituals and works of art are often differentiated from 'ordinary' action by their *lack* of direct efficacy. Ritual action does not directly cause a particular effect, which is what, for some scholars, differentiates it from magic. To Kant, the form of judgement appropriate to art is similarly disinterested, not concerned with any beneficial or pleasurable outcome that the work of art can promise. Traditionally speaking, then, art and ritual share their distance from a focus on effectiveness.

But this approach is clearly insufficient, and for centuries, scholars have tried to clarify the strange indirect but quite real functions that ritual and theatre can serve. From Schiller's 'third and joyous realm' in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, to Victor Turner's concept of the social drama and its effectiveness in solving communal dramas, to Catherine Bell's detailed teasing out of Jonathan Z. Smith's insistence that ritual should be understood as a form of *work* (Bell 1992: xiv), understanding the mechanisms of performative efficacy has been a key means of developing theory for both theatre and religious studies. More recently, the collection edited by William Sax, Johannes Quack, and Jan Weinholt (2010) has examined the question for ritual studies, and Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (2009: 10) have pointed to the "belief that theatre ... might make some difference in the way in which people interact with each other and with the wider world"—that is, that theatre might have real social efficacy—as one aspect of the (necessarily always provisional) differentiation of applied theatre from other, more 'conventional', theatrical practices.

This forum looks at a particular effect that is often claimed both ritual and theatre: that of healing or reconciliation, whether social, political, or personal. In this forum, we bring together artists who work both inside and outside what might be seen as the 'applied' theatre world to discuss what that healing or reconciliation might look like, and the challenges and problems with the way it can be thought about and executed. I would venture that most readers of this forum would be loath to abandon the claim that performance has the potential to offer some sort of social healing, but the critical examination here of just what sort of healing is possible, and how it might operate, can help us make better sense of the limits and possibilities of such claim.

Of course, this is a discussion amongst artists, and theoretical discussions of the nature of performative efficacy are not explicit in what follows. But the participants here speak with the authority of a strong practical knowledge of those who have worked and wrestled with performances surrounding healing and reconciliation. That practical knowledge—the 'know-how,' in Robin Nelson's (2013) terms—is an important counterpart to put in dialogue the theoretical reflections I mentioned above.

The discussion below was conducted over email, and has been lightly edited here for clarity. As always, we welcome reader feedback and contributions to our forum, which we are happy to publish in subsequent issues. Please email the editor at [j.edelman@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.edelman@mmu.ac.uk).

## **Participant biographies**

### **Sarah Woodland**

Dr Sarah Woodland is a researcher, practitioner, and educator in socially-engaged and participatory arts, with a particular focus on intercultural praxis and working within the criminal justice system. Sarah's recent roles include Research Fellow for the Australian Research Council Linkage project 'Creative Barkly: Sustaining the Arts and Cultural Sector in Remote Australia' (2016-2019), and Chief Investigator for 'Listening to Country: Exploring the Value of Acoustic Ecology with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women in Prison' (2017-2018, funded by the Lowitja Institute) - both projects led by the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, Griffith University. Sarah teaches theatre in Griffith's School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences and has published extensively in the fields of applied theatre and participatory arts.

**Joseph Morgan Schofield**

Joseph Morgan Schofield is a performance artist working in the United Kingdom. They are the lead artist of F U T U R E R I T U A L, a research and performance project considering the place, use, and function of ritual in contemporary queer and performance cultures. Joseph has performed throughout the UK and internationally, including at ]performance s p a c e[, Arnolfini, Tempting Failure, Thessaloniki Queer Arts Festival and Venice International Performance Art Week. Their recent writing has been published in *hereafter* (eds. Charlie Ashwell and Es Morgan) and *(re)collecting (f)ears* (ed. selina bonelli).

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**Rand T. Hazou**

Rand is a theatre academic and facilitator with experience working across a variety of creative and community contexts. In 2004, he was commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme to travel to the Occupied Territories in Palestine to work as a theatre consultant running workshops for Palestinian youths. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in Theatre in the School of English and Media Studies at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. His research explores theatre that engages with issues of social justice. His research on Asylum Seeker and Refugee Theatre has been published in a series of international journal articles. In Aotearoa he has recently led teaching and creative projects engaging with both prison and aged-care communities.

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**ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS**

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS is a queer performance collective led by the ongoing artistic collaboration between performance maker and writer R Aslan (they/them) and performance maker and scenographer Chris Gylee (he/him) with a changing constellation of collaborators engaging in each new work. These collaborators are often human people — performers, designers, an archaeologist, music-enthusiasts — but are equally likely to be non-human agents, such as a house awaiting demolition, a film archive, a former GDR watchtower, YouTube, a landscape. We have been making work together since 2012 and have focussed on performance in Berlin since 2015, working in the fertile ground between performance, choreography, installation and academic investigation. Recent stageworks include *Dogs of Love* (Ballhaus Ost, Berlin, 2019-20), and [These Magnificent Bodies](#) (theater wrede+, Oldenburg; Freies Werkstatt Theater Köln, Cologne; Oldenburgische Staatstheater, Oldenburg, 2019-20).

[www.oncewewereislands.com](http://www.oncewewereislands.com)

**Participant position statements****Joseph Morgan Schofield**

At the heart of my work is a conviction that performance is capable of opening up a space ripe with the possibility of transformation. I make work across the body and text. These works are rituals, even if I don't name them as such. Ritual performance is a technology through which transformation can be sought. This transformation might be

personal or collective. It might be emotional, social, spiritual. It is always speculative or tenuous.

I began making performance in order to know and transform a sustained experience of grief which I had failed to process in any other way. From 2016 to 2018, I made a series of works where memory, history, biography and feeling were distilled into a material language of earth, rock, blood and bones, collected from the West Pennine Moors (UK) where I grew up. In these works, sheep bones became totems of that which was not there, and the figure of a ram became a site of identification, to become, to lose, to rebirth. These works culminated in an action, [L'Ariete](#) (2018), taking place at Tempting Failure, an international festival of performance art and noise art taking place in London.

I used performance to process my own grief—and for me this speaks to the way that performance can be the place where ‘life’ and ‘art’ meet, where a practice becomes about life itself—but it isn’t enough to work solely on the (my)self. I suspect (and hope) that my actions offer up more than the possibility of witness for others. Rather, the body and action become a prism or vessel through which transformation might become possible, temporarily, for others.

Speaking of reconciliation also speaks to something around accommodation, relevant here to nonbinary subjectivity. I’m thinking of how a perceived, performed gender might function as the bridge between mind and body. Performance has been the space to encounter this in an embodied way, to process, to change.

I have approached recent works as mythopoetic processes. In these works, personal and cultural memory are disassembled and remade in new forms. [Here Comes The Sun](#) (2019) considers nonbinary identity and ecological collapse; [yesterday I dreamt of flying](#) (2018) and [\(from the shores of pleasure\) bliss](#) (2019) are two works in a continuum where the Icarus myth is abstracted into material language and rebuilt. These works stake a claim to queer futurity, providing space to think through questions of identity and body, to work towards some kind of reconciliation.

I won’t make big claims to the nature of this reconciliation for an audience, but I suspect it may sometimes be this: to understand a little better what it is to be in a body and in the world, to have time and space to meditate on one’s own experience of these, and to have an encounter with another.

### **Once We Were Islands (Chris Gylee + R Aslan)**

This statement has been written collaboratively and represents a synthesis of, and a compromise between, our sometimes divergent personal views. For the purposes of this statement, we will describe three works that an onlooker might easily identify as grounded in ritual forms. In the second part of this statement we will discuss particular aspects of theory relating to those works. We would like to point out here that we do also make works that *look* much less obviously like rituals—for example, using more traditional stage and audience conventions—though even in these works, we continue to notice the preoccupation with transformation and now understand our entire practice through the lens of queer ritual making.

[Karma Accelerator](#)— developed in 2016-17, originally titled *The Last Great Late-Capitalist Karma Acceleration Engine*, and performed most recently in Cologne in 2019 — is a durational performance of three hours or more for theatre and gallery spaces. It is performed by a shifting ensemble coming from different disciplines

including, until now, dance, visual art, craft, witchcraft and music, and all with our own established practices of transformation. We activate a ritual space within a seven-metre diameter salt circle containing a changing selection of ritual tools — earth, branches, water, a crate of limes, LPs and a record player, dresses, high-heeled shoes, a microphone — and the audience are invited to come and go from a surrounding observation space while the ensemble work together within the circle for the duration of the piece. The fuel for this ritual engine is a series of ‘sorrows’ that have been collected in advance from the audience and/or the local community in the form of private, anonymous written statements describing life circumstances that are ‘stuck’ and which require transformation. Most commonly, we receive stories of troubling emotions, grief, and overwhelm in the face of problems that cannot be easily resolved. The collected sorrows are drawn at random in the ritual space according to a simple score. While they are shared among the ensemble, they are not read out to the audience and the contributor is not identified. The ‘karma acceleration’ consists of the ensemble working collectively to attempt to ‘shift the energy’ of each sorrow through focus and a ritual activation of the body and the tools available. The activations are largely improvised within a set of basic rules and employ a broad range of tactics including elements of sympathetic magic, role play, physical and verbal representation, catharsis, and others which arise spontaneously in the moment. We train ourselves to listen for, and trust our intuition around feeling the ‘click’ when a transformation is achieved — when ‘atoms convert into other atoms.’ The piece is framed in such a way that the audience understands that we are attempting to transform sticky and difficult emotions through our labour, yet at no point are the details of either the sorrow or the method being employed to shift it made explicit, either verbally or otherwise. This labour is a genuine attempt rather than a representation or a re-enactment. For this reason, any or all of the transformations may fail or be aborted if the ‘click’ is not felt. The authenticity of this labour is vital as the piece is also a Marxist comment on the working body of the queer artist.

In 2017 Aslan researched and wrote the book [\*Drycleaners of the Soul\*](#) (Circadian Press), which is conceived as a practical guide for the queer ritualist, and devised and presented an accompanying ritual performance of the same name. After a ritual circle is activated using tools including salt, flame, strong alcohol, smoke, and drumbeats, Aslan is robed and blindfolded and stands in the centre of the circle. They carry a placard inviting the onlooker to “make an offering, enter the circle, and whisper something in my ear that you want to change in your life.” Aslan then stands in vulnerable, immobile, blindfolded silence for three hours or longer, while self-selected participants follow the simple scored instructions. The labour of this ritual is for Aslan to listen to and absorb each these life stories with the intention of using their body as a tool for transformation. After the completion of the durational part of the performance, participants are invited back to a pre-arranged space at a pre-arranged time, where they receive a simple ritual making kit of their own, containing a candle, salt, string, and a sparkler.

In the summer of 2017 we created a one-night ritual vigil with performance artist Rachael Clerke for the first anniversary of the Brexit referendum titled *We Need to Talk About Britain: A Vigil for Brexitland*. Political events in the UK and their ongoing aftermath prompted us to look at the seemingly irreconcilable gap between ourselves and a majority of UK citizens who disagreed with us about the future of our shared democracy and our rights as EU citizens. We recognised the ‘brokenness’ of this split

and felt a need to process the strong and complex feelings of shame and bewilderment we felt at being implicated in this outcome. The resulting ritual was co-created with Clerke over nine consecutive days and was an instinctive attempt to create a space in which to acknowledge, share, shift, disperse, and transform these unsettling emotions *in spite of* our powerlessness and helplessness. We sent out invitations to a Shame Party in order to assemble a participation group for whom this malady resonated personally and which drew people to us who were already invested and primed to add their energy to transform something we commonly understood as 'sticky'. The performative actions that made up *We Need To Talk About Britain* were composed from ritual and secular/folk techniques, visual cues, symbolic actions, and popular influences. The participation group of 45 individuals was divided into three sub-groups who circumambulated through three interconnected ritual spaces. In one they radically altered their appearance with ritualistic costumes inspired by UK folk art, in another they listened to and then actively participated in producing a litany of political and emotional separations, in the third, they physically wrestled 'Brexit', and one another, amid smoke and darkness to the strains of Christina Aguilera's *Fighter*. This complex experience was drawn to a climax by the merging of the three groups to form a procession outside to the courtyard of the theatre where, visually altered and emotionally charged, they formed a ritual circle. Offering ourselves and our bodies as transformational tools, the three of us took to the centre of the circle, where we were doused in cheap whisky, and then engaged in a final, sacrificial wrestling bout.

Our work is intended to reactivate the theatre as a space for authentic transformation, to reclaim our bodies as tools of transformation, and to reclaim our *queer* selves as sacred transformative beings. We attempt this through the creation of 'alternative realities' that incorporate othered, ritual spaces and aspects of science-fiction world-making. Our strategies are specific and authentic but often replaceable. A ritual circle is taken deadly seriously, but might easily be replaced with another method of othering a space. Tools are employed according to their ritual significance, but might have been collected randomly from everyday objects. Our labour is sacred, yet also futile and ridiculous in its forms, and often consists of improvised action. Our work focusses on the helplessness of human experience: *What can we do when there is nothing left to do? How can we remain activists of our own emotional and physical lives in the face of violence and subjugation?* Our attempts are simultaneously practical, improbable, and even impossible. When we ask: *Can we transform grief?*, it is more important to us that we and the onlooker witness a sincere attempt, rather than prove in any way that the attempt was successful or even remotely achievable. This mysterious territory of 'not knowing' is an othered space in itself, raising enthralling questions around truth, authenticity, legitimacy, power, subjugation, fraud, and extortion. By asking our audiences to (re)consider the function of the performance space and the nature of the bodies that exercise their labour within it, we carve out space for the marginalised *queer* ritualist and artist, and create instances to witness these bodies working within the institutions of theatre.

At this point it is vital to address notions of 'healing' and 'reconciliation' in our work. We assert in a literal and metaphysical sense that ultimately all energy — including all manifested matter — shifts in form. *Change is inherent in it.* We also work with the hypothesis that 'sorrow' or 'malady' in its many surface forms is the result of energy that has somehow been impeded from spontaneous self-transformation. Pain is 'holding'. Pain is 'being stuck in the past' in the sense of psychological and



physiological understandings of trauma. In contrast to certain understandings of medical procedures, for example, we do not attempt to 'heal' in the sense of *returning* a body (human or otherwise) to an earlier, or idealised, state that was somehow 'more perfect', through external intervention. We are also wary of the term 'reconciliation' for similar reasons due to its semantic connotations of 'returning to'. Instead, we attempt to 'unblock' and 'accelerate' the transformative processes ('karma') that are inherent yet potentially frustrated in the energy we are dealing with. This energy is then hopefully freer to self-transform into a new, less painful state. We conceive of this transformation as a forward motion and do not attempt to direct its manifestation, but rather trust that the transformation *in itself* is a 'healing' process.

It is vital that we are authentically present in our performances in order to be viable as ritual tools. As artists, we are preoccupied with the choreographies that 'ordinary' bodies create when they are engrossed in performing complex, or unachievable, tasks. These bodies are 'ordinary' because they are untrained, non-virtuosic (or in non-virtuosic mode), and therefore less commonly seen in theatre spaces. We work with detailed action scores where tasks are defined and specific, but which also require interpretation and negotiation by the performer in the live moment. We avoid taking on fictional personas and 'acting', and work towards creating evolving, challenging, and unstable conditions that contribute to keeping the performance alive. We thereby engage with the body-mind of the performer of the action on a level that aims to avoid lapsing into re-enactment or the rote learning of ingrained patterns through repetition of movement, text, or behaviour.

There are frequent moments during the creation and performance of our work where we are confronted with the futility, failure, and impossibility of our thwarted gestures at transforming the great energies at play in our world. It is, however, vital that a sense of agency and freedom is reached for within a self-declared territory of hopelessness. This territory is, we have discovered, a place outside the logic of the usual capitalistic assessments of worth. It is a ritual space. It thumbs its nose at the question "*Is this worth my time and energy?*" It might well be a glorious waste of time according to those assessments, but it is also the investment of our entire selves into *doing something* when the world asserts we are worthless and can do nothing. It is, perhaps, a form of faith.

### **Sarah Woodland**

For this discussion, I am considering *Šxʷ?amət (Home)*, a Forum Theatre work produced by Theatre for Living, Canada in 2017-2018 exploring the theme of reconciliation. There were 43 performances across British Columbia and Alberta to audiences ranging between 100-400, and the final forum was webcast to globally. (A full video of the webcast from the 10 March 2018 performance can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/UNvOF8sb3-A>.) I saw the performance in March 2018, and interviewed director David Diamond shortly afterwards. Using Diamond's 2007 adaptation of Augusto Boal's original interactive form, the play sought to investigate, "What does reconciliation mean to you?" In the context of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) process, this is a potent question, where the nation is still grappling with the scope and scale of oppression and intergenerational trauma that has continued to affect First Nations Peoples as a result of colonization. *Šxʷ?amət (Home)* invited multicultural audiences in communities across Canada to engage with the complexities surrounding this question, and to accept some responsibility for the process of healing. As a theatre

scholar and practitioner in Australia, I am interested in how performance (participatory theatre in particular) creates aesthetic spaces for intercultural encounter and dialogue around the painful history and legacies of colonization (see Woodland 2019). In the Australian context of Indigenous-settler relations, where we have never undertaken a legal TRC process to properly address the displacement and cultural genocide inflicted on our First Peoples, the word “reconciliation” is often charged with negative connotations. It has been bureaucratized and deployed by successive governments in an implicit effort to hose down First Nations’ demands for treaty and constitutional recognition. Through this process, the idea of reconciliation has often shifted towards abstract symbolism, and away from the practical realities of what true reconciliation looks like when enacted “on the ground.” A key argument among First Nations leaders in Australia is that there must first be truth and justice before there can be genuine reconciliation (see Davis 2018). I was therefore interested in how *Šxʷ?arhət* (*Home*) walked through this terrain, inviting audiences to consider both the practical and the symbolic ideals of reconciliation, through an embodied, interactive, performance event.

David Diamond’s key adaptation of Forum Theatre is to consider the complexity of the “living community” rather than focusing on the oppressor-oppressed binary that is present in Boal’s original conception. Audience members at *Šxʷ?arhət* (*Home*) were, in David’s words, invited into an “action-based dialogue” to investigate the issues “inside the person, inside friends and family, inside the larger structures that get in our way, that block us from true and honourable reconciliation”. The play was devised after an intense, week-long workshop with twenty-two Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants and then a three-week creation process with the cast and production team. The action centred on several intersecting stories told naturalistically through a culturally diverse group of characters living in Vancouver:

- A young Cree man (Lucas) has been adopted by a white Christian couple (Sarah and Robert), has very little knowledge of his family history, and is trying to connect with his culture. Sarah and Robert feel threatened by his newfound interest.
- An older Coast Salish man (Joe) is somewhat disconnected from his traditional language and culture. He grew up in the notorious residential school system and suffered significant trauma. He is Robert’s colleague and friend, working together on construction projects. Joe’s daughter Sia is protesting against a pipeline being built on her mother’s traditional lands in the interior of the province, with a spill that will devastate the coast in Vancouver. Her father Joe is resistant to the idea of the protest. Sia and Lucas are friends at university, and Sia is helping Lucas understand his culture. Sia wants to understand more about her father Joe’s past in the residential school and his cultural heritage.
- A young Filipina woman (Chase) is friends with Sia and Lucas, and is involved in the pipeline protest for environmental reasons. She wants to feel a sense of belonging, but is challenged by Sia, who feels that her own reasons for protesting (land rights and survival) are more legitimate than Chase’s. Sia sees Chase as a settler, and therefore her sense of belonging and connection to the land cannot be as strong.
- A First Nations man in his thirties (Vince), a product of the broken foster care system, is trying to find work but has unstable housing and a problem



with alcohol. He spends a morning working for Robert (Lucas's white father) on a building site and gets fired for taking an unscheduled break. Robert stereotypes him as a useless "native guy."

These stories were told through a series of twelve short scenes, moving between characters as they negotiated their differences and tensions in the space of only 30 minutes. For example, one scene showed parents Sarah and Robert discussing whether or not to tell Lucas about his cultural heritage and past. Robert asks, "Do you want to see him turn into one of those angry native guys we see on TV banging drums?" Lucas walks in on them, and on hearing that they knew all along his nation and real name, becomes angry and upset for not telling him sooner. Sarah spits out the whole story of his adoption in an angry tirade and storms out of the room. Each short scene had a similar structure, culminating in a crisis or conflict that that might be explored by the audience through the forum: Sia and Chase angrily arguing about Chase's claim to Indigeneity; Robert and Vince shouting insults at each other before Vince is fired from the job; Sia trying to push Joe to speak more about his past as he grapples with the trauma he experienced at residential school, and so on. Yet in the lead up to these crises, the audience progressively gets a glimpse of the depth and dimension of these characters and the complexity of their relationships.

When the play finished, Diamond as the Joker asked the audience the first question: "How many of us recognise blockages to true and honourable reconciliation inside this play?" before moving gradually into the process of replaying the scenes and inviting interventions. Diamond never defined what he meant by "true and honourable reconciliation" or indeed reconciliation itself, explaining to me later that this was purposely left up to the community ensemble to interpret through the devising process, and the audience to explore each night through the forum. The forum, Diamond explained in his introduction to the play, was "a small attempt to make reconciliation something we can taste, on the ground as we look each other in the eye," and to find "creative ways through the blockages." In this way, the performance joined a legacy of theatrical responses to First Nations and settler relations in countries such as Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, where artists have long attempted to bring complexity and nuance to the abstracted debates being played out at the political level. After warming the audience up to the idea through a couple of questions, Diamond as the Joker moved to the forum part of the process, where the scenes were replayed and audience members were invited to stop the action and replace any of the characters on stage when they saw an opportunity to "find a way through the blockages to true and honourable reconciliation." After a 30-minute show, this process took around two hours, as audience members dealt with the different conflicts and tensions manifest in the play. From my perspective, the forum allowed us to move beyond a bureaucratised or abstract notion of reconciliation in two key ways. First, by investigating the idea through the characters' personal, intimate relationships with each other, and the quotidian nature of the conflicts that they experienced. And second, by enabling audience members to play respectfully across culture.

In terms of the first example, I discussed with Diamond later how the ensemble had devised a short series of elegant, personal-level scenes that spoke very clearly to the structural level of the debate. He said this had been a lengthy process, but each character and scene had come organically from the ensemble's own experiences, and the community conversations that had occurred in developing the project. As Diamond further explained:

Nature teaches us that it is patterns of behaviour that create structure, not the other way around. I know a lot of people doing great and necessary work on structural change, but the theatre does not deal with those structures well. Theatre is, at its best, about relationships—human patterns of behaviour. So, we make plays about the patterns of behaviour and allow that human interactions to teach us about the need for structural change.

During the scene described above between Christian parents Sarah and Robert and their son Lucas, where Lucas is trying to make a stronger connection with his culture and Robert is terrified he will turn into “one of those angry native guys,” a man in the audience offered to replace the mother, speaking from the heart about her fear of losing Lucas. This, in turn, led Robert to become slightly more open and respectful, yet the scene was by no means resolved to a happy conclusion. As the Joker, Diamond observed, “How many people see that this scares the shit out of Sarah and Robert? We’ve got Canada up here on this stage. How many people see that this scares the shit out of Canada?” The original scene, the intervention, and the Joker’s provocation, all gave weight to the notion of trying to “reconcile” in the face of the misguided paternalism and fear of losing control that can operate on a national scale.

The second means by which *Šxʷ?arhət* (*Home*) brought complexity to the notion of reconciliation was in allowing space for audience members to play across culture within the forum. Diamond said that while it was important that the ensemble members were all cast according to their actual ethnicity, the forum allowed audience members to replace any character on stage that they wished. As an audience member, this rang huge alarm bells for me at the start, bringing to the surface all my fears around misrepresentation, cultural appropriation, and recolonization. Yet in terms of how forum theatre represents an “action-based dialogue,” it quickly became obvious that this was an essential part of the process, with the Joker’s role being to ensure that this was dealt with safely and respectfully. Speaking about this tension later, Diamond said that through all the performances, only white people had seen a problem with playing across race; “Indigenous audience members understood exactly what we were doing.” He described one example where a white woman had replaced the character of Joe, the Cree man who had grown up in residential school:

That white woman does not understand residential school, but she might have her own very deep experience of trauma. So, in order to understand [each other], do we have to overlap one hundred per cent? If that’s the case, we’re doomed. We find the places where we overlap and understand each other, at the ten per cent.

Given the prevalence of hate speech, divisive language, tribalism, and outrage culture in current social commentary and debate, it was refreshing to be in a respectful space where we could tackle such potent issues by engaging on a deeper aesthetic level, and finding our shared humanity in this way.

This kind of theatre is not without its challenges, and is certainly not everybody’s cup of tea. It is a very particular form of community-based performance: naturalistic, discursive, and designed to stimulate discussion rather than provide an immersive performative experience. A key tension for me was the power held by David Diamond – a white man in his 60s – as he “jokered” the performance, steering its direction, facilitating the interventions, and holding the space. Diamond admitted he had been extremely uneasy about this at different stages, and had discussed this tension at length with the play’s Associate Director, First Nations performer Renae

Morriseau. Morriseau apparently referred him back to the original impetus for the project:

One of the reasons I took this on was that I was going to reconciliation events and all of them were run by and hosted by Indigenous organisations and Indigenous people. I started to go, of course that's fine but why? Is reconciliation their job? I started asking some Indigenous friends and colleagues and a whole bunch of them went, "Yeah, exactly!" So, like it's *our* job.

For Diamond, the performance was not only about allowing people to "achieve insights into their own blockages to true and honourable reconciliation," but also taking collective responsibility for it at a personal, interpersonal, and societal level. It is virtually impossible to gauge the success of a performance like this in achieving those aims, however. Speaking personally as an audience member, it certainly *de-institutionalised* the word reconciliation for me. Certain moments in the forum made me feel uncomfortable, such as the first time I noticed someone playing across race as described above, or moments when I felt that the material might trigger members of the audience in different ways, but there were support workers present, and these riskier moments were contained by the structure of the forum. As Diamond pointed out,

I think part of the challenge of reconciliation is that we [need to] get comfortable being uncomfortable. There's no way we're going to work through these issues and not go sideways, and we have to sit in the sideways because sitting in the sideways takes us somewhere valuable.

The question with performances such as *Šxw?arət (Home)* is whether insights reached by the audience will reverberate beyond the communal moment of the performance into everyday life outside. Perhaps it is useful to think of it in the way Rustom Bharucha (2001, 3766) suggests, that no reconciliation is absolute, whether performed in the context of the theatre, or a legal TRC process: "They are fragile, partial and in constant need of renewal."

### **Rand Hazou**

My father is a Palestinian journalist, my mum is a Kiwi nurse, and I grew up in Jordan in the Middle East. I completed my university education in Australia with a PhD exploring Refugee and Asylum Seeker theatre. I have worked across a wide variety of community contexts. In 2004, I was commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme to travel to the occupied territories in Palestine to run workshops for Palestinian youths. In 2011, I was awarded a Cultural Leadership Grant from the Australia Council for the Arts to lead The '7arakat Project' which developed a series of theatre related initiatives between Australia and Palestine. I am currently a Senior Lecturer in Theatre at Massey University in Auckland New Zealand. In Aotearoa, I have led teaching and creative projects involving both prison and aged-care communities. I am committed to theatre that engages with issues of social justice. I am interested in marginalised stories, and the experiences of individuals or communities who seem present but who are nevertheless invisible or voiceless. I am interested in the role of theatre and the creative arts in challenging this [in]visibility.

Since 2016, I have been delivering theatre projects at Auckland Prison. Located at Paremoremo on Auckland's North Shore, the prison is a few minutes' drive from the university where I work. When I first heard that *the* maximum security prison in the country is located close to the neighbourhood where I live and work I was a little

surprised. It is a nice, leafy area with lovely beaches nearby. But what intrigued me even more was that no one I asked seemed to know anything about the prison or the community that was located there. I ended up driving out the prison to have a look. The security towers, fences and razor-wire make it hard to miss. It is place that is very 'present' but nevertheless seems to house a community that remains relatively silent and invisible.

New Zealand's prison population is one of the highest in the OECD, at around 220 per 100,000, and rising, compared to an OECD average of 147 per 100,000 (Gluckman 2018, 5). According to the Department of Corrections, in March 2018 New Zealand's prison population reached an all-time high of 10,700 (Owen, 2018). Incarceration in New Zealand disproportionately impacts Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa. Māori constitute more than half the prison population (Department of Corrections NZ, 2018), despite being only 15 per cent of the overall population (Stats NZ, 2015). The over-representation of Māori in corrections has been linked to the ongoing impacts of the legacy of colonialism (Jackson, 2017; McIntosh & Workman, 2017). We seem to be locking up more people than ever before in this country and yet we hear very little about the personal experiences of people directly impacted by incarceration or the stories of people living behind bars.

June 2017, I invited David Diamond, Artistic and Managing Director of the Vancouver based company *Theatre for Living*, to visit Aotearoa to work on a forum theatre project at Unit 9 at Auckland Prison, Paremuremu. As part of the creative process the small group of ten prisoner/participants explored Image Theatre techniques to create frozen images (or tableaux) using their own and other participant's bodies. The images explored the struggles the men experienced within the prison institution and connected with issues of social justice. These images were developed into three short plays that were presented to a small audience of about forty invited guests made up of visitors and Auckland Prison staff. The focus of the performance was to use theatre to bring attention to particular dysfunctional experiences within the prison, and to provide a focus for dialogue among the audience and the wider community in an effort to stimulate social change. The first play, 'Personal Safety', explored the importance of confidentiality around information about charges and how this could put certain inmates, specifically sex offenders, in danger. The second play, 'Cell Search Code Black', explored issues of racism in the prison system and the perception that Māori might be targeted for extra cell searches and security measures simply because of their racial background. The third play, 'Loneliness and Self-Harm', explored issues of mental health and self-harm that were anecdotally reported by the inmates as being a widespread problem in prison. Each short play was performed once for the audience. Each play built to a crisis and then stopped. Each play was then performed a second time but the audience were invited to intervene on the action by shouting 'stop' and entering the playing area to replace a character that they identify with the intent of testing a solution that will resolve the dysfunction and make the prison a healthier place.

After working on the forum theatre project, which involved devising performances based on the real life experiences of prisoners, the men we had been working with expressed a desire to work on a text and to create a production based on a drama script. This led to the Puppet Antigone project which I co-directed with Derek Gordon and which was staged at Auckland Prison in December 2017. In encouraging the prisoners to engage with *Antigone*, a text that is part of a Western and European

literary and theatrical canon, it was important that we did not reinforce a colonial cultural hegemony that might risk further alienating a community that had already experienced forms of educational exclusion in the past. Rather, our approach was to encourage a Māori adaptation of the text by situating the play within the Māori world and incorporating certain indigenous cultural elements in the performance. We also suggested that the production utilises puppets, based on the half-life sized Japanese Bunraku puppets, because we wanted to create a piece of physical theatre in order to develop the physical skills of the performers. The use of puppets was also proposed as an innovative approach to staging the female characters within the all-male prison environment. Within the hyper-masculine context of the prison, the use of puppets for the female characters offered a potentially useful approach to circumvent anxieties and the ridicule that cross-casting gender roles might entail within the strict time limitations that the production schedule afforded. The use of puppets also provided an opportunity for the prisoners to incorporate stylised and dynamic movement into their presentation rather than relying on naturalistic acting techniques. In this way the puppets served as a potentially liberating distancing device that encouraged freedom of movement rather than self-consciousness among the untrained prison actors.

In June 2019, I directed a documentary theatre production entitled [Ngā Pātū Kōrero: Walls That Talk](#) (2019), featuring the verbatim stories of incarcerated men at Unit 8 Te Piriti, a specialist therapy unit for those convicted of sex offences located at Auckland Prison. Documentary theatre covers a wide range of approaches and practices that share a common methodology of using documentary material (newspapers, government reports, interviews, etc.) as source material for scripts and performances. Documentary theatre tends to rely on actual rather than imaginary events and is a practice that often provides commentary on marginalised events, issues or experiences. The project involved a collaboration with Dr. Sarah Woodland (Griffith University) and Pedro Ilgenfritz (Unitec). A central motif in the performance was *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (or the House of Four Walls) which was a theme that emerged early in the workshopping process. *Te Whare Tapa Whā* is a model of Māori health developed by Sir Mason Durie. This indigenous model of well-being uses the metaphor of the whareniui or meeting house with four walls or sides. These walls include *taha tinana* (physical health), *taha wairua* (spiritual health), *taha hinengaro* (mental health), and *taha whānau* (family health). Within this holistic model, each wall is necessary to the strength of the building. The idea of *Te Whare Tapa Whā* and the metaphor of building a house remained a central device that structures the final play and performance. Throughout the performance the cast of characters erect walls and comment in some way on how prison impacts on aspects of the physical body, the spirit, mental and emotional states, and on family and social relations.

In each creative project that I have facilitated in prison there is a focus on healing. Yet this healing is not predominantly a concern with the therapeutic effects of theatre on participants. While there are no doubt therapeutic outcomes, my focus is instead on contending with the structural forms of power and the legacy of colonialism that adversely impacts on minorities. This is ultimately about repairing the harm caused by legacies of colonialism that continues to impact on incarcerated communities. In this context, healing becomes an important principle of justice.

## Discussion

**Joshua Edelman:** Reading all four statements together, I'm struck by the relationship between healing and witnessing. Sarah, it's clear how the Boalian method that Diamond uses in *Home* gives a particular job to the audience (the spect-actors), and how that's necessary for the reconciliation you're describing. But I'm not as sure about the other cases. Chris, Aslan, Joseph, it's clear that the work you're doing needs to be witnessed, but I'm not as clear as to what the audience's role is in the artistic rituals you're describing. And Rand, it struck me that the audience in the work you're talking about in Auckland Prison almost isn't necessary at all, except as a kind of motivator for the final performance. The healing comes from the performers' witness of their own (and each other's) own work. But I'm not sure. Where do the witnesses fit in the healing work we're talking about here?

**R Aslan:** We definitely don't do our work *for* the audience, and there have been times when there was no audience anymore but it was clear that we had to carry on because the work was on behalf of someone else. I think in rituals in the sense that we make them, the main parties are the enactor(s) and the beneficiary/ies. An audience can be either, or both, or neither. Their role is activated as soon as they take part in some way, even emotionally through identification. An audience that doesn't do that is actually not necessary to the ritual, but nevertheless often necessary to the economic and cultural structures around a performative space. They buy tickets, they justify funding, and so on. There is also a very important part of our work that is about claiming space for queer and other intersectional bodies. In our case these spaces are often stages and stages are activated to a degree by the presence of an audience. And it's important that underrepresented people see and hear other underrepresented people claiming space. It's also important that those taking away space witness it too. This isn't always a calm, peaceful action of healing; there is fury, frustration, and despair in there. And those emotions and powers are welcomed. They're certainly not the things we're trying to 'heal'. It's about taking the sanitised, gentrified, whitened, straightened theatre and attempting to turn it into a space where marginalised bodies carry out risky activity again.

**Joshua Edelman:** I like the way you spell out the different roles the audience can play. I'd be interested how this maps onto the work of others. When you discuss queer space claiming, though, is the audience there to witness that act of claiming space? Or are they claimants too? Is that act of claiming one they participate in?

**R Aslan:** That's something interesting. I think we make our work for the people who need to claim the space. And the claiming is done by us but also on behalf of others. It's not exclusive though; it's more like concentric circles. When a queer person sees a queer love story enacted on a stage, it has a different meaning to someone who is not queer watching it, though of course the love story may touch anyone who may be touched by a love story (that is, everyone). There is an angry political side to claiming space, but there is also a gentle soft side to it too. Also, to witness is a form of participation, I think. To witness something and not be changed by it, or not change the thing witnessed, is quite a difficult thing to achieve.

**Morgan Schofield:** Maybe what follows is a semantic misunderstanding, but I've always been wary of this word *witness*—as a white person, as someone whose body is read as male, as someone who makes body-based performance art, I try to offer something other than to ask an audience to witness the work. For me, it's totally bound up in a particular artistic history where the (white/cis/straight/male) body is placed in situations of often aggressive duress or difficulty or pain, and art historical discourse represents the artist as some kind of hero who withstands or overcomes. The audience is witness to their 'heroism'. I am not interested in this kind of masculinised heroic suffering.

What I hope is that in my performance rituals, which do involve duration, duress, difficulty and pain, there is also a spirit of generosity—the body becoming a prism through which the audience may meditate, process, mourn or commune. In this sense, their presence also claims, holds, and charges the space.

In a similar way, I find the notion that artists should simply be a witness to their time to be apolitical. This often seems bandied around. Again, should artists not seek to, in some small or large way, transform themselves, their community, their society? This is the work of magick surely? Of course, healing is one form of transformation.

And I think one form of healing, can be the collective act of coming together and holding space and doing this personal/communal work. This is particularly true with queer, or other othered subjects.

Similarly, I don't think being an artist makes one special, or at least any more special than anyone else, yet I do think there is something sacred about it. Sacred is an embarrassing word to use in some contexts maybe, but I think it's ok here? And what I'm talking about is a kind of sacred commons, rather than the sacred of the tower, the steeple or the palace.

I've just spent the week facilitating *FUTURE RITUAL* in London, which was a gathering of all kinds of perspectives around ritualistic performance practice, and I find myself leaning more towards the idea of artist as (spiritual) functionary. This is quite a well rehearsed position in art history (Joseph Beuys as shaman, for example) but I think there are all kinds of contemporary ways to engage with this idea whilst resisting the tendency to enact colonial politics and appropriations. Thinking about service and use are also ways of resisting the capitalist territorialisation of art making.

What I'm winding my way round to is the absolute essential presence of the queer or othered audience because the work is for them.

Thinking speculatively about the future, I imagine that the performance artist, one who truly understands the nature of presence and live encounter, will have a crucial role to play in helping folk navigate a society that is ever more completely mediated by technology. I battle this state myself all the time, and performance has been one space to be freed from technological mediation. We will have to resist the impulses to commodify this ability. You see this already in the way the experience economy functions. In London at the moment we have *The Wolf of Wallstreet: the Immersive Experience* (dir. Alexander Wright, 2019) where those who would be as bankers and hedge fund managers and venture capitalists can rehearse their fantasies of total decadence (I mean decadence in the most banal and vicious sense of its possibilities) and where performers are having to be protected from the impulses of their audiences. Capitalism consumes everything. If and when they come for our ritual spaces, how will we resist them?



**Chris Gylee:** On the relationship/tension you raise between artist as (spiritual) functionary and all-consuming capitalism—and the question of how to resist to protect queer ritual spaces—I would go back to the old examples that Aslan gathers together in their short book *Drycleaners of the Soul*. I agree that artists are special/not-special because of the social function we have - in the same way that I would understand the role for the bodies who clear trash, deal with the dead, collect resources from dangerous situations etc. These actions are all done on behalf of someone else, and carried out by marginalised bodies with reduced social power. They're special/not-special, by which I mean there is something very ordinary about their roles, and at the same time heightened and undeniably required by society. There is a difference between the undertaker and the call-centre operative. I also agree with you and Aslan that we carry out many of our actions for, on behalf of, and with our own queer community—and this is my primary motivation for working.

But I also recognise that I am bound by the system of capitalism, and this means I cannot be exclusive about who I perform a ritual for. I don't desire to carry out rituals for the straight, white, cis-male, privileged class, but I also don't know who the requests come from when we attempt transformations in *Karma Accelerator*—they are always anonymised. So, to deal with this, I make the connection to the 'heritage' of other queer ritualists and to transaction (and extortion), which is always present in their labour. I ensure that I get paid to work when I do *Karma Accelerator*. It is a generous action, yes, but it's not one that I do from a position of financial privilege. Someone else has to pay to make this work happen. I wonder—can we find a stance of resistance within an understanding our social position, and inside of knowing how to operate from that place? How can we make distinctions between the work we do for ourselves, and if and when the entire pack of Wall Street experience-wolves descend, making their requests for transformation with the loudest voices?

**Sarah Woodland:** We started with Josh's provocation around witnessing, and I agree that this is a problematic term, not only because of the connotations that Joseph brought up, but also because the triumvirate of trauma, testimony and witnessing have been so comprehensively appropriated and commodified in contemporary culture. It seems to me that these performances all resist the idea of 'witness' in the passive sense, and invite embodied (sometimes viscerally charged) participation on the part of an audience. And in these practices, 'audience' need not be a dirty word that connotes the capitalistic pursuit of 'bums on seats'—but rather points towards the notion of *communitas*, sharing in the ritual, feeling its energies, and being (hopefully) inspired towards action.

In this way, reading back through the original statements I was particularly struck by the idea of the artist engaged in the labour of embodying the sorrows of the world, so that they themselves and others (audience? informants? participants?) can experience transformation. This was also echoed in the idea of the artist 'processing their shame and bewilderment' at being implicated in the mass injustices of contemporary society, of course without wishing to become martyrs or missionaries. This resonates for me as I navigate my own work in prisons, and I wonder also whether it does for you, Rand? While ours are very different practices from those being discussed so far, there seems to be some commonality here?

I also loved Chris and Aslan's idea that their work represents a 'sincere attempt' to transform grief, and that there is sacred power in the sincere attempt, regardless of whether it is achieved or resolved. To my mind this certainly underpins Boal's forum theatre. In *Šxʷpaṁət* (*Home*), as in many such performances, the 'solutions' presented by spect-actors were sometimes partial, problematic, clumsy, ill-informed; but the act of making an embodied 'sincere attempt', in this case to address the blockages to reconciliation, might have moved us into a more empowered collective space.

**Rand Hazou:** I am responding to Josh's original provocation and his comment that in the context of Auckland Prison there doesn't seem to be a need for an audience at all, except as a kind of motivator for the final performance. I think there is some truth to the idea that an audience is not necessarily a prerequisite to prison theatre work, only in the sense that most of the projects I have been involved in are attempting to privilege the creative process over the creative product, at least initially. What I've found is that the prison community often has little experience of theatre—and if they have been exposed to theatre it was usually through being forced to study drama at school at a time when learning difficulties may have been abundant. Most of the prison community actors I've worked with have literacy challenges and some have struggled to read words on the page. There are also issues with brain injuries or medication which impacts on focus and concentration. All these factors mean that for some actors the idea of learning lines, or even keeping track of scene changes, are huge challenges. All these factors combine and are expressed as real anxiety about performing in front of an audience. In the prison environment—a space of continual and heightened observation and surveillance—there is a real danger in exposing actors to potential ridicule and further harm. So there is, I think, a sense that with theatre in prison a particular type of 'audience-ing' can be potentially harmful.

In delivering theatre in prison I am attempting to do no harm. I want participants to get a sense of real achievement and empowerment at the end of a creative process. I certainly don't want them to lose face. So I think I have started each project that involves learning scenes and lines with the proviso that we make a decision collectively later down the track about whether we invite an audience to see what we have created. I am grateful that so far each project has been performed to an invited audience of other prisoners, outside guests and prison staff, and in each case the outcomes have been really positive. The actors have been left with a real sense of achievement. The work reinstalls a sense of dignity which is crucial in an environment that is built on power structures that dehumanise. If there is a sense of healing that emerges in/through the performance it is connected to the re-establishment of dignity that can accompany the performance.

So having started my contribution by questioning the necessity of an audience, I want to also recognise how important an audience can be to this process and how important this theatre work can be for an audience. We often think of prison theatre as playing a particularly important educative and rehabilitative role for the prison actors. But I have been increasingly understanding the important role that this work plays in educating the audience, especially those members of the 'outside' public that might venture into prison to see a performance. The power of this work not only resides in restoring dignity for the prison actors, but I think it also works to dispel stereotypes about criminality and prison that might be harboured by the general public. The

performance can work to humanise and restore dignity not only for the prisoners but for the audience as well.

**R Aslan:** I wanted to answer Joseph's question about digitality in relation to my/our work. I think I tend to see things as tools and don't discriminate much when it comes to using them. This goes for analogue as well as digital tools. Having said that, I definitely tend toward using the simplest tool for the job, and don't delight in complexity for complexity's sake. So I'd use something found first, something made second, and love to use very simple digital tools for making sound, for example. There is resistance to allowing the digital/virtual/complex to take the place of the analogue/concrete/simple when there is a choice, but I wouldn't shy away from digital/virtual when the alternative is nothing, or insufficiency. I'm a huge fan of how virtuality has contributed to the erosion of isolation for queer people and built communities that just wouldn't otherwise be there. Like the witches on Tumblr, like the friends whose hands I haven't held for years, but still speak to every day, the siblings I haven't met in the flesh yet. I guess every tool can be used to make or destroy, and digital tools are no different, though they are obviously over-wielded right now.

I was having a think about why I am uncomfortable about the words healing, reconciliation, dignity etc. I think it's something to do with the dual meaning of the word 'better' in relation to sickness or grief in English. It's so hard to differentiate between 'not as bad as before' and 'all better right as rain'. Are you better? Yes. Good, all fixed. It's too easy, too external. It doesn't recognise the onion skin, kaleidoscope of it, somehow.

We did a residency recently and it made me realise how strongly I resist certain kinds of positivity, bright-siding, or silver-lining-hunting. I also realised how the work I/we make is predicated on the territory of the subjugated/abused/traumatised body. I suppose sometimes easy solutions feel like the 'problem' hasn't really been listened to or appreciated.

**Rand Hazou:** Aslan, I share your concern about the words healing and reconciliation. For me, reconciliation especially is a process that comes *after* substantive issues of rights have been addressed, not before. In the context of Israel/Palestine, humanists, and especially musicians and artists, often insist on the role of the arts in bringing communities together. But this bringing together is not a substitute for justice. Often cultural activities addressing the Palestinian/Israeli conflict work to 'normalise' oppression rather than address the root causes of injustice.

In the context of facilitating Theatre in Prison, engagements with the arts are often framed in terms of their utility and therapeutic use. Prison authorities and funding bodies want to know how an art project will develop the soft skills of prisoners or how it will contribute to their rehabilitation. Sarah and I and others are trying to challenge the language around how engagement with creativity in prison is framed. Instead of framing engagement with arts as making better workers or healthier citizens, we are trying to insist that engagement with culture is a right and not a privilege. I believe that we should be supporting and encouraging access to the arts in prison because it is a fundamental right. For me this connects to the language of dignity which underscores the human rights project.

Aslan, I appreciate where you are coming from and the critical lens that you are shining on words and how they frame identities and existence. But I wouldn't agree that

engaging with the language of *dignity* in the context of corrections or justice is 'easy'. I offered the concept of dignity in my last post because I think it might offer us a way to think beyond simple constructions of healing and reconciliation. At least for me, I see dignity as a possible strand that might underscore and connect ideas around healing, reconciliation and rights.

**Sarah Woodland:** In response to your comments, Aslan, about healing and "fixability," as well as "silver-lining-hunting" (a term I absolutely love by the way!), and your question about coming into communities from outside: there is certainly a tendency for community-engaged artists to behave as if art will fix, or heal, or transform problems or issues. This is where the idea of an "arts missionary" comes from, and one which is heavily critiqued and problematised in the field of applied theatre (the academic field I most often play in). Community engaged artists who go in with those kinds of attitudes fail to recognise the nature of art (and life) in revealing complexity, tension, uncertainty, paradox...etc. etc. etc. Indeed, I have fallen into this trap in the past, particularly in relation to the notion of hope, where the material being explored with a group might go to a very dark place and stay there for a time. I'm thinking of a testimonial performance I made just over a decade ago with adult survivors of childhood abuse. At the time, I felt a sense of responsibility to try and shoe-horn some hope and lightness into the work (silver-lining-hunting!). But that is not what these performers wanted to create, they wanted to represent faithfully the pain and injustice that had been inflicted upon them, and therefore the audience experienced a very confronting work that probably left them exhausted, and perpetuated a kind of aesthetics of trauma—one that may not be helpful to healing and reconciliation in the wider world. I still don't know. I have also experienced working with incarcerated women where the work that they created was also quite dark, which was remarked upon by some audience members who wanted there to be more sense of hope in the piece. In both cases, the process of making these performances had contained many moments of humour, light, hope, joy, empowerment, fun, and frivolity. So the provocation might be to expose this somehow in performance, so that audiences get a sense of it, rather than seeing just the dark message. Again, I'm not sure.

Either way, I agree that healing and reconciliation fall into the category of things that are not fixed, nor should they be thought of as an end in performance work. As Rand said, and I discussed in my opening statement in the context of settler-white relations, reconciliation is a process that comes after truths have been acknowledged, and issues of rights have been addressed. I return to Rustom Bharucha's notion that no reconciliation is absolute, but "fragile, partial and in constant need of renewal" (2001, 3766). I would suggest the same goes for healing, or any form of transformation that our performances lean towards. It is the *learning* that is a potentially sacred act, and when we do it in concert with other humans, it can bring us into a state of dignity or grace. I thank Rand for introducing the notion of dignity, because I have not really thought of it in relation to my own work. And I am embracing these somewhat spiritual terms intentionally here—dignity, grace, sacredness. I am not really a religious or spiritual person, but I think they are inherently human ideas that we need to keep alive in these divisive times.

**R Aslan:** Thank you so much, both, for the considered and so interesting replies. It's fascinating to learn how we use words in such different ways. I guess 'dignity' to me

always had some extended connection (and perhaps trigger) with conformity to norms and 'dignified behaviour' around gender roles and sexuality etc. It's very interesting to hear more about your quite different habitation of the term and concepts around it, Rand.

Sarah, grace is a concept we've considered a lot too (also firmly non-religiously) as it seems to be able to encompass so much, even seeming opposites like acceptance and resistance.

**Chris Gylee:** I'm curious about our different relationships to the role of artist as 'spiritual functionary' - which Joseph touched on, earlier in this thread. And to ask how (or if) you see this artist-as-functionary (or art-facilitator-as-functionary) role in relation to the concept of service? The question is important to me because we use the idea of service as one way of understanding our work and our position to it. I also feel there is a similar sense in some of the examples Rand and Sarah raised in their opening statements. Joseph also talked about the concept in relation to the recent F U T U R E R I T U A L events.

I'm specifically curious about how the role of the functionary might change according to their relationship with the perceived beneficiaries of the work. For example, is the role of the functionary different when we serve members of our own community? (This, of course, raises questions about what it means to be part of a community, or to be an outsider.) After considering this tension, Aslan and I took the decision to only make work with and for communities we felt we were not outsiders to. I am curious about how each of you might have considered and faced this tension?

Sarah has talked about the tension in the power held by David Diamond working as the joker in *Šxʷ?arhət (Home)*, and his own uneasiness with his role as an outsider. Despite his (insider) Associate Director Renae Morriveau reassuring Diamond in his role, I still find myself troubled with the feeling that Diamond's unease was too easily put aside. Do Indigenous people really need an outsider 'expert' to hold space for them and facilitate their reconciliation process? It's no accident that the person with the expertise is older, white and male—this is the predictable outcome of cultural/social/institutional systems of privilege. I would love to hear about instances within the practice of applied theatre where these privileges have been challenged or even shifted.

I am also curious about the complexities around autonomy in the context of working with prisoners. Taking up Rand's thoughts around dignity and the fundamental rights of prisoners to engage with art, I wonder: Are there instances in which the prisoners gain autonomy by having directorial/authorial control over their own performances? Or does this inevitably come into conflict with performance work being seen as a tool to 'improve' or 'rehabilitate' the prisoners according to the criteria of those who imprisoned them? Is it naïvely optimistic to consider that being an autonomous author is also potentially a right, rather than a privilege?

As I write this, I realise this relates back strongly to the artist-as-(spiritual)-functionary role as simultaneously special and not-special. In one sense this role is set-apart from the community by being Othered or 'expert'. Yet at the same time I find myself drawn to situations where marginalised communities possess their own tools and use them autonomously. Perhaps I am drawing a distinction here between being outsider on the one hand, and set-apart yet still an insider on the other. I am curious to

hear your thoughts. What are the power problems that arise in being an outsider? Or being set-apart? Or even in being an insider?

**Joshua Edelman:** Chris, your discussion of what we're actually being asked to do as spiritual functionaries, as outsiders, as experts, is fascinating. I can't help but be reminded of the piece *The Skoghall Konsthall*, by the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar. Jaar was asked by the Swedish town of Skoghall to make a piece of public art for the town, which had none of the traditional forms of culture one might expect (a gallery, a museum, a theatre, etc.) Jaar decided that, as an outsider, he didn't want to be responsible for just *giving* that to the town; that should be the job of the community. So he built a small museum in the town out of material from the local paper mill (the town's biggest employer), and used it to display works by locals. But it was only open a day; after it was complete and the work had been shown, he burnt it to the ground. I'm not sure the folks of Skoghall were so happy about that—they rather liked the museum!—but Jaar insisted, and his way prevailed. I completely see the problem that Chris is pointing out, and I've seen too many examples of applied theatre being called in by a local government or a developer to 'heal' (i.e., paper over) a problem that they have no idea how else to address. It doesn't offer any sustained healing other than a reassurance to those already in charge, and it puts the artist in the position of comforting the powerful and instrumentalising a community they know nothing about. That's not what we want, of course. And yet, I don't want to give up on the idea that, well, we as people can share our skills and tools in solidarity to help one another in moments of need. Perhaps that's naïve. I'm not sure.

I also wonder if we want to think about witnessing a slightly different way. A while back, I wrote about a group of survivors of clerical sexual abuse, mostly in Ireland, who had developed their own religious service of anger and healing to assert their identities and their continued place in the Church. I wasn't part of this at all; I simply heard and wrote about it a few years after it happened. But I really wanted to draw attention to this extraordinary performance that had been built by this small marginalized community for itself. If there was any reconciliation work done there (and I understand the difficulty of that term), I had no meaningful part of it. And yet I felt an obligation—not just as a scholar, but as a moral individual—to acknowledge that work. Is that a kind of witnessing? It's not the sort of witnessing that's necessary to validate or achieve anything; the work was complete long before I came along. But I do wonder if this smaller understanding of witnessing might still be useful to the work we're describing.

**Sarah Woodland:** In the realm of applied theatre (which is a term that is in itself slippery and constantly in question), I would recognise the many and varied roles that the outsider artist plays in a community context: facilitator, teacher, animateur, director (sometimes), researcher—and in the case of forum theatre, all of these plus 'joker' (in the Boalian sense). I would be uneasy attributing 'spiritual functionary' to this role, especially in the case of cross-cultural practice (e.g. with Indigenous peoples) where it would be wholly inappropriate, even if I recognise the historical resonances of this term. There are of course power problems that arise in this outsider/insider dynamic, and the more rigorous applied theatre practitioners and scholars constantly interrogate these, and work assiduously to de-centre themselves throughout the process. A key starting point for ethical practice is an invitation from the group or community itself,

which is often extended to someone from outside who has the skills and tools (as Josh put it) to support the community. Working ethically also means supporting the group or community to become autonomous in their creative practice (if that is what they wish to do). But of course, as Chris pointed out, it is no accident that the person with expertise is often older, white and male; and these ideal approaches to the ethics of practice are often ignored or minimised. Applied theatre therefore must (and often does) also concern itself with working elsewhere (e.g. inside institutions such as universities) to challenge prevailing power structures and neoliberal discourses of utility.

In response to Chris's question if Indigenous people really need an outsider 'expert' to hold space for them and facilitate their reconciliation process: the answer is of course emphatically no. But David adopted the position that reconciliation is not theirs to resolve, but the responsibility of us all. In fact, in Australia, I know many Indigenous leaders speak about being tired of being expected to take on the burden of healing and reconciliation themselves without a sense that we all have a part to play. This idea has informed my own approach working with women in prison (many of whom are Indigenous), and working in cross-cultural collaborations with my Indigenous colleagues and recognising that the aesthetic space is most powerful as a place to navigate this terrain. But of course, then there is the question of optics, because regardless of the ethical groundwork and backstory to a project, it sends a powerful message when a member of the dominator culture gets up and takes the limelight.

Also in answer to Chris's question, there are some great examples of where the power dynamic has been challenged and/or shifted. One of the best examples I can think of that also speaks to Chris's query about those who are incarcerated gaining autonomy is [William Head on Stage](#), a theatre company that has been running for thirty-seven years inside William Head Correctional Facility and making work for the public. They do commission outside artists to come and work with them, but their governance structure and creative process is very much led by the incarcerated men themselves. In terms of autonomy in prison theatre, I would suggest that this kind of structure must almost always come into conflict with the notion of utility, unless it is practised subversively, privately, and beneath the gaze of heightened surveillance and control. Rand and I recently had the pleasure of hosting Amie Dowling from the US, a practitioner-researcher who has worked in and out of San Quentin with imprisoned men to create dance works that respond to the crisis of mass incarceration. She is very clear to highlight that dance occurs inside San Quentin without the help of artists or facilitators, and that this is an act of resistance and expression that must be recognised and honoured. The same can be said for any artistic practice.

Josh's statement about not wanting to give up on the idea of sharing our skills and tools in solidarity to help one another really resonated for me, but the questions and problems around power and control are always invigorating. I also really appreciate Josh's provocation to reposition witnessing in the way that he describes. I too feel a moral obligation as a scholar to act in this way, but of course, this raises more questions about power: who has the power to interpret others' good works for an audience, who is that audience, and what cultural lens and critical vocabulary is being used.

**Chris Gylee:** I do love the image that your text produces for me Josh, of Jaar's paper *Konsthall* burning to the ground. I had never heard of this work before, and am drawn to the strength of defiance in Jaar's action. It makes me think about what was



given to the community of Skoghall, what was taken away, and what was perhaps only perceived to be taken away. The building and burning definitely appears in my imagination like a ritualistic action. Thank you also Sarah for expanding on some of the different power relations in the (wide) realm of applied theatre, and for bringing both William Head on Stage and the example of dance as an act of resistance in San Quentin to my attention.

Your emails arrived with me late on Sunday night, in the final hours of Taylor Mac's *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, which has been showing in four parts here in Berlin these last two weekends. I was still thinking about the role of beneficiary and witness, and the dynamic of insider/outsider during the week, and these thoughts continued to resonate with me as I sat in the audience for this work. In the evening-programme Taylor Mac is quoted as saying "I work in catharsis. That's my job" and later (in an interview with Dennis Pohl), "One of the major goals of my theatre is to heal people. I can't say that I have accomplished that but one of my main aims is to ask how we are hurting and how we can use that to help other people" (Mac 2019).

I found the performance (of which I only saw the last six hours, or the final quarter) very affecting, being addressed from a queer artist standing on a huge theatre stage and speaking to their (and my) queer community as the primary transmission. (Actually Taylor Mac uses the preferred personal pronoun *judy*, so that should read: "speaking to judy's (and my) queer community ...") The work was open, using popular music to appeal to a broad audience, but it constantly made clear who it wanted to speak to first and foremost. White bodies were asked to move to the poor-view seats and give up their places to people of colour. Non-queer bodies were asked to participate in a mass queer-prom, slow-dancing with someone of their own 'gender', perhaps for the first time. The whole work tells the story of the United States from the perspective of a queer history.

In relation to my last response in this thread, I would say Taylor Mac was working from a position *inside* the queer community and presenting a work *for* a queer community of beneficiaries. I wondered during the evening about what tools were at judy's disposal, and how many of these may or may not have been imparted from older, white, cis-male 'experts'. How many tools are already within the community?

I also felt uncomfortable about the surly security guard sitting next to me at the end of the aisle, thinking often about what he was there to look out for, or to break up, or to supervise. How he affected my behaviour, or perhaps diminished to a degree how receptive I felt to the full transmission. I imagined his role must be necessary but perhaps not one of the tools that Taylor Mac would have individually chosen to utilise in making this space of transmission (or healing) and holding it open.

A friend (LGBT, though perhaps not self-identifying as queer) left before the end. They wrote to me later: "I guess if you're not American and/or [a] queer activist, it's not really for you." I wondered if this was true. Do you need to be a queer activist (or American) to be a beneficiary? I would like to think of this work as open, especially as it resonated strongly with me and felt inclusive (desiring for participation), but perhaps there is some truth in this reaction. Is it a work, at the end, from a queer activist (special and set-apart with wild costumes, talent/skill, huge reserves of energy and recollection of song lyrics) to other queer activist beneficiaries? Perhaps that's enough.

I don't know how to reflect further at this moment on notions of moral responsibility of witnessing, and also aware I am speaking as an artist (from a

marginalised community) and not a scholar. This most recent experience as a beneficiary made me question if anyone else beyond Taylor Mac and the queer (activist) beneficiaries needed to witness this exchange, or ritual. To some degree I would have been quite happy for the security guard next to me to just leave the building, along with the bourgeois patrons of the Festspiele who left in a steady trickle during the later hours, and—if I'm honest—quite probably any powerful gatekeepers or 'allies' who permitted the performance to occupy this particular stage. This feeling was crystallised late in the performance (in the 1980/90s) by Taylor Mac recounting an experience of an Act Up group meeting that kept circling around the problem of not being able to afford to make photocopies for a strand of their direct activism. Totally exasperated after several hours, one of the attendees stood up and demanded that they just 'steal the goddamn copies!'. Go into work and use the office Xerox machine without asking. A paraphrased mis-quote: "You don't have to seek permission to participate in your own fight for survival."

**Morgan Schofield:** It's interesting to hear from Sarah of these dances of resistance. I imagine the difficulties and necessities of sustaining this action. This feels powerful.

Expanding on this sense of the artist as spiritual functionary (to the audience), I'm thinking also of the functions we might provide to one another (as artists, friends, lovers, caregivers, etc). We have already acknowledged the fraught multiplicities of these words *healing* and *reconciliation*, and so without wanting to necessarily reopen that ground, I find myself thinking of my friend and mentor, the artist Martin O'Brien.

In 2016, I assisted Martin and his collaborator Sheree Rose in their work *Sanctuary Ring* at SPILL Festival, in the UK. For context, Sheree is an iconic performance artist and figure in the Los Angeles body modification, BDSM scene. She's also an septuagenarian dominatrix. For many years, until his death from complications related to Cystic Fibrosis, Rose collaborated with her partner Bob Flangan on a sadomasochistic life/sex/art project exploring pain, submission, and "fighting sickness with sickness". Martin also has CF and his work is concerned with physical endurance, disgust, long duration and pain-based practices in order to address a politics of the sick, queer body. Martin and Sheree also make collaborative works now, often reflecting upon, or drawing from, the sick, queer lineage between the three artists.

Martin's work clearly contests any medicalised notion of healing. CF is terminal. His life expectancy is significantly shorter than mine, he will not be an octogenarian sub. Rather performance becomes the pace to do the critical and affective work of understanding life. Over four hours, we helped Rose shave, flog, pierce, fuck, spank, cut and, finally, hoist O'Brien over the altar of a deconsecrated church. In this work, as in many of their works, the performance reimagines acts Sheree and Bob carried out, and becomes a space for Martin and Sheree to address mortality, memory, illness, their different griefs.

This is a different kind of outsider/insider relationship to the one we have been discussing, but, as an assistant, I oscillated between the role of performer and audience member, participant and witness. My job was simply to fetch sex toys, to hold a light so Sheree could pierce Martin's genitals, to protect his head as he was lifted from the altar. In the space between action, I felt empathy of course, but also duty to bear witness to this act, this confrontation with death and memory. It was important to Martin and Sheree to do this ritual work, this communion with Bob's spirit, and so it was

important to me! It was also affirming and moving and so on, but I suppose what I'm trying to get at is that the idea of witness, for me, extends from and returns to the community. This is a deeply personal relationship but a vital one.

Chris, your feeling that it was possibly OK for the Taylor Mac work to speak solely to a small group of marginalised folk resonates with me. One of the wild things about the *24 Decade* project is the scale of ambition and production and budget. It's massively empowering to see queer work on this scale, though important also to acknowledge the roles and agendas of gatekeepers and institutions in this work. There's a tension of course, which Taylor addressed, when I saw a three-hour performance of the first three decades in London. The tension surrounds the way that culture that was previously underground is now so visible and can now be accessed so readily. There are all kinds of advantages to this of course, but there are also problems, such as (to use Taylor's example) queer and other marginalised performers becoming instrumentalised in clubs like The Box (a secretive, expensive club franchise in NYC and London, frequented by rich people looking for kicks and freaks), and (my example) the tedious moral panics that emerge from time to time when an audience member who had no business being at some kind of sex/body based performance work causes a media storm because they were offended, because in the semi-mythical past when underground meant underground, these people would never have found their way to this work. I'm not proposing any resolution to this tension except to affirm of course that, in my view, it's OK for things to be for *us*, and that doesn't invalidate the thing. I'm feeling quite abolitionist and separatist at the moment.

**R Aslan:** I felt very moved by Joseph's last post and I feel it articulated very clearly certain aspects of what I have so far only been able to reach for when discussing the problematic nature of fixing things.

It led me to certain thoughts which mean I would like to return to the idea of the territory of the subjugated body, as I think the realities of this territory can be obscured when we talk about it in terms of communities, or being inside or outside those communities.

The subjugated body is characterised by the fact that it is available to be entirely objectified by the external/coloni(al)ising/oppressive gaze, ideation, or imaginary. The subjugated body is habitually (made) invisible (often even to it/ourselves), only to crash into objectified visibility when it fails to survive (often en masse), or in a more hopeful (to the external eye) proxy, survives heroically the unsurvivable. In these moments, it becomes a fully owned dehumanised object of horror-romance for the benefit of the oppressive gaze, and a reminder to maintain or broaden further the distance between the onlooker and mortality. The 'rescuing' or saving of these bodies is another way of broadening that distance.

To make work from the territory of the subjugated body for the benefit of other subjugated bodies by making the subjugated body visible *without* indulging in displaying the horror-romance of the non-surviving subjugated body for the benefit of the immortality fantasies of the subjugating classes is activism. It also attempts to declassify the subjugated body as the property of the subjugating classes to be invisibilised, visibilised in horror-romance, or saved. It also attempts to reclassify the potentials of the subjugated body beyond invisibility, horror-romance, or salvation.

To do this work and express these potentials, I don't think we, as subjugated bodies, can turn to narratives that are founded in realities that exclude/utilise the subjugated body. I often feel ritual work carried out by subjugated bodies on behalf of subjugated bodies is an attempt to de-/re-classify and visibilise our own selves on our own terms.

**Joshua Edelman:** There is so much more that could be said here, and I hope our readers will take up these threads and develop them further. My thanks to all of you for being part of such an inspiring conversation.

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**Title:**

Performances of Healing and Reconciliation

**Date:**

2020-04-29

**Citation:**

Aslan, R., Gylee, C., Hazou, R., Schofield, J. M., Woodland, S. & Edelman, J. (2020). Performances of Healing and Reconciliation. *Performance, Religion and Spirituality*, 2 (2), pp.143-169

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