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Hyperrealism and Everyday Performance: How is the text constituted in Everyday Theatre?

Raimondo Cortese

As a professional writer since the early nineties, I have written, dramaturged and developed over forty texts for theatre or performance. In 1994, I founded Ranters Theatre along with other graduates of the VCA School of Drama; it is this company that has produced the majority of my texts, and with whom I have shared an ongoing exploration of the practice of everyday and hyperreal aesthetics and processes in relation to writing and theatrical production. My work with hyperrealism and everyday theatre began in the early nineties alongside companies such as Oriza Hirata's Seinendan, Richard Maxwell's New York City Players, Philippe Quesne's Vivarium Studios, Pan Pan, Back to Back Theatre Company, Tamara Saulwick, Rimini Protokol among many others.

The practice of everyday theatre has also seen a corresponding rise in theoretical analysis of its methodology and practice, the most notable being by writers such as Peter Crawley, Sarah Gorman, Noelia Ruiz, Sodja Lotker, Peter Eckersall and Eddie Patterson.

Everyday theatre aims to reject prevailing theatre aesthetics; a dominant manifestation of theatre that is beset with a reverential attitude to stage conventions, which, in my view, undermine theatre's potential for immediacy and 'liveness'. In everyday theatre, traditional performance codes, such as character development, plot, conflict, representation (temporal/spatial/persona), mise-en-scene, dramatic trajectory and theatrical language (i.e. metaphor, theme, narrative, history) among others, are minimised or rejected. The languages of everyday existence, while lacking a narrative epicentre, possess a rawness and vitality that transforms into theatrical content via their enactment as an experiential engagement, one that emphasises the audience's ability to

contaminate the experience. The banal, the ordinary, the vital, the fantastic all bound up to create a complex but fragmented textual entity.

While everydayness might now be considered *de rigueur* in the contemporary theatrical festival environment, it hasn't come about overnight. My own practice has also been influenced by various Situationist exponents, such as Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and Constant, who have theorised on the everyday as a field of performance. Constant's research into dynamic space, which 'leads to constantly changing behavioural patterns' (1998, 275) has been an inspiration for the design of the non-representational setting for many of my plays. My methodology for sourcing material has been informed by Debord's notion of the *derive*, where the spectator, rather like a Baudelairean *flaneur*, engages in wandering about the everyday environment as a 'mapping of the psychogeographical areas and ambience of the streets' (Read 1993, 117). Recent theorists, such as Alan Read, Sarah Gorman and Noelia Ruiz, provide a critical focus on everydayness in theatre, which expound on the ways the text of the everyday offers fragments, multiple trajectories, and 'seemingly random configurations making the viewer responsible for the production's dramaturgy' (Crawley 2010, 23). For Read theatre is a process of 'giving everything, of not keeping anything for oneself' (1993, 95). The everyday offers immeasurable minutiae of verbal and physical acts that infects and contaminates the way theatre is constituted; traditional performative codes and structures can be dissolved and re-bound together in a multifarious, inter-relational matrix. This new everyday theatre 'resides in the micro-gestures of society, not in its flamboyant theatrical expressions concretised as the discourse of theatre' (Read 1993, 95).

In my experience, much of what occurs on the stage is a process of conventional wisdom that has been passed down via the skills base of generations of writers, directors, actors and theatre workers in response to practical questions that arise when working within particular performance contexts, such as a stage. As Lefebvre states, 'Every space is

already in place before the appearance in it of actors... space conditions the subject's presence, action and discourse' (1991, 57).

Rather than place the focus on external indicators of change, such as narrative, story, or physical action in the text, everyday hyperrealism places the focus on the minutiae of moment-to-moment expressivity. The dialogic content is made up of independent yet relatable fragmentary sequences. As Sobjka Lotker puts it in relation to postdramatic theatre: 'The traditional coherent plot of a 'well made' theatre play was atomised into a script with fragments as the main dramaturgical building blocks.' (2011, 198). My plays reject conventional unity and symmetry in favour of a 'rhizomic' structure in which 'unsurveyable branching and heterogeneous connections prevent synthesis' (Deleuze and Guattari cited in Lehmann 2006, 90). The theatrical ciphers are recalibrated and turned away from fictive content towards the dynamic, contaminated space between audience and performer. The pay-off for the audience is direct contact, a continual transference and intersharing. The audience is placed at the heart of narrative and story construction; narrative fissures are created, in which the audience weave their life experiences and thus contaminate the fabric of the performance. According to Jacob Wren, artistic director of PME-Art, 'the most consequent contemporary theatre is that which deals with the immediate, concrete situation (2011, 64). Performing as ourselves, we create actions, conditions and speech executed with a singular intimacy and familiarity. This intimacy reduces the separation between performer and spectator, opening up a space for thinking, tension, reflection and confusion. Within this space we present meticulously prepared material in a manner that is open and loose, sliding the situation towards the unexpected, towards a sense of connection with whatever the audience brings.'

The plays I write are designed to create a continual rupture in the dramatic pattern; the focus is on revealing an underlying ontology which expresses itself through an everyday physical/linguistic dichotomy. In this respect the plays are aligned with Grotowski's

objective to see theatre as a means to crack open the conscious rituals and games people play to reveal something essential about their humanity. The theatrical event should enable us to 'experience what is real and... in a state of complete defencelessness unveil, give, discover ourselves' (1975, 212-13). This implies a form of performative consciousness within actual everyday discourse that inhibits the way we behave. Our performative awareness, rather than liberate us, forces us to contrive our behaviour, usually in order to appease an agenda or further a cause.

The text in my plays such as *St Kilda Tales*, *Holiday* and *Intimacy*, is constructed to follow an objective end point, which is then resisted and obstructed by the dialogue, through 'an elaborate labyrinth of sidesteps and manoeuvres' (Cortese 2005, ix). Each of these plays, as with all Ranters productions, unfolds in real-time. They might use everyday language as a model but they are not verbatim texts. The dialogue in these plays emulates the nuance, rhythms, ellipses, non-sequiturs, repetitions, and speech effects of everyday language but are structured in order to achieve an aesthetic objective. These plays utilise textual shifts in the dialogue to open up cracks in narrative authority and to ultimately disintegrate it. The action and dialogue are out of alignment and progress down an uncertain and difficult path. The personas are rubbed in the wrong direction; they are contaminated by unconscious impulses from each other and the audience, which bring into being unexpected consequences. The social register, meter and rhythm of the dialogue are continuously altered to disrupt the reception of literal narrative. Sentence structure is often fragmentary, or interrupted, causing a break in the linear trajectory of an argument. These conscious manipulations of the text are not designed simply to create a mirroring of the everyday, but also to refocus the emphasis on the relationship of the text to physical responses. The text disrupts and contaminates the relationship between the actor/character and the audience, between the material presence of the actor and the coming into being of the enactment. The audience are invited to contaminate these uncertain spaces with their own narratives that emerge from the enactment of the text. The texts at once create a realness, a fragile space that suggests the existence of multiple

domains. Everyday language, once manipulated and enacted in this way, 'leads beyond presentness, towards an elsewhere' (Lefebvre 1991, 135). The audience now occupy the same concrete reality as the performers, 'sharing an as yet only partly defined space' (Wren 2011, 64). This theatre beyond representation enters a crucial phase where the boundary between the everyday theatre and the audience becomes interchangeable and blurred, and serves a process of continuous contamination.

In theatre, and in real life, it helps to understand the context and parameters of the performance; we are more likely to accept what we are already familiar with. In a process defined by Goffman as 'anticipatory socialisation', we are already 'schooled in the reality that is just coming to be real for us' (1963, 79).

Much of what transpires in the relationship between performer and audience is dependent upon the expectation of the latter. In the work of Ranters or other contemporary theatre makers, like Richard Maxwell or Oriza Hirata, which seek to emulate the feel of everyday discourse, the audience consists of literate festival goers who are primarily familiar with the theatrical codes they are about to witness. In Hirata's case, the attempt to reconstruct a delicate, quiet theatrical space on stage, with its denial of the dramatic, allows for the audience to impose their own mental framing of the action, or to drop out into isolation. The meditative space created requires a degree of discipline to appreciate it, an ability to let go, focus and watch. The audience contaminate the theatrical frame with their own imaginings. In Jerome Bel's *The Show Must Go On* the dancers simulate everyday postures and gestures in a way that is consciously contrived as performance. The intention is to confront the audience's desire to be entertained at all costs while rejecting classical dance aesthetics. But the audience that attend these festival shows are mostly familiar with the aesthetic domains being presented; rather than being confronted, the danger is the audiences will enjoy the fact that their knowledge and aesthetic awareness of new forms is being validated. It has the potential to ingrain a new form of cultural snobbery.

A recent work by Not Yet It's Difficult called *The Olympic Training Squad*, required performers to run a dedicated circuit through a city, and incorporated audience response to the event. This movement of theatre from organised theatrical constructs into everyday life is being progressively advanced through the use of digital technology in contemporary art practice and with the tendency of theatre makers to cross-over into other artistic disciplines, such as Live Art, where audience interactivity is at the heart of the work.

My own hyperrealist texts are constructed to allow a moment-to-moment reconfiguring of the dramaturgy. The instability of the narrative patterns, the creation of diegetic fissures, breakages in dialogic response, the lack of history or character information in the content, is a way of dissembling the audience to experience mutual contamination with the performers, the performed is turned into a question. By creating a realm of ontological uncertainty, the text requires the actor and audience to follow pathways that correlate with their own emotional and psychological perspective. The role of silence, pauses, disruptions of physical dynamics, the use of repetition, and the sustained durational presence of the performers are a way of enabling the audience to activate an invented response to what they experience. According to Lehmann, a performance 'with a low density of signs aims to provoke the spectator's imagination' (2006, 90).

Richard Maxwell's plays demonstrate a similar objective to dissemble narrative and story construction. Maxwell's work also embraces everyday language, closely following the rhythms, ruptures, repetitions, and circularity of natural conversation. As with the work of Ranters, Maxwell tends to smooth out dramatic tension, or dramatic patterning in the text. Unlike Ranters, Maxwell's productions thus far, maintain a degree of characterisation and representation. The texts are usually set somewhere, incorporating fictional content, often as a way of addressing a socio-political question, such as presented in *Good Samaritans* and *Neutral Hero*.

In his play *House*, the causal relationship between scenes is scrambled; conversations are begun around a topic then soon abandoned; at the extreme end, characters are murdered without obvious repercussions. Maxwell's plays share similar characteristics to a plot in Commedia; events/scenes move from one point to the next, 'but not as a series of psychological consequences... the action continues as if nothing has happened' (Rudlin 1994, 35-57). The absence of causal plot in Maxwell's plays forces the audience to supply their own rationale, provide an internal logic of their own. This is further aided by the writer's refusal 'to permit the actor to prioritise the fictional scenario over the reality of the performance' (Gorman 2011, 182). The structure of Maxwell's plays (absence of causal and narrative coherence) together with his use of the dialogue (inclusion of pauses, ellipses, grammatical errors, illogical argument et al) creates an uncertain contaminated space between the fictional character and the material presence of the actor.

These plays require a different style of performance that engages with the changes brought about in human behaviour from a generation of people who have grown up contaminated by digital media. What has the camera and digital media in general, taught the audience to 'read' in a glance, a gesture, a miniscule expression in the face, a manifesting of the physical in relationship to the spoken? Nicola Ruiz suggests that postdramatic work places the focus on audience experience, while 'highlighting the liveness of performance: the unique and unrepeatable encounter between audience and performers' (2011, 126). The audience engage the material presence of the actors in a space; the experience is one of mutual contamination, which is unambiguously real and spontaneous. The performances, in their relationship to audience, are specifically designed to draw out phenomenological responses to the liveness of the enactment. The viewer is affected by and gives impetus to external circumstances that prompt a phenomenological form of contamination in order to convert a particular space into a passage, or transform a nameless occurrence into a significant event. The everyday audience provides spaces and events with form and meaning by a 'poetic geography' that contaminates the geography of the literal' (de Certeau 1988, 105).

The Canadian company PME –Art, like many contemporary theatre makers working with post dramatic forms, have adopted a similar approach to character. The impulse to construct character via technical preparation and the exploration of psychological motivations can be used to hide qualities that are perhaps more vital to theatre. According to Jacob Wren, it can be argued that this impulse distances the actor ‘from what is most immediate, to defuse the intimacy and potential for conflict and in doing so undermine what really is at stake’ (2011, 65). The artistic director of Pan Pan, Gavin Quin, similarly requires his actors to shed characterisation, and employ tasks to access the core of an encounter. The aim of the task, in association with a segment of text, is designed to create a ‘spontaneity that seeks the quality of improvisation or unpredictability to achieve realness as opposed to rehearsed repetition’ (Ruiz 2011, 129).

The work of Ranters Theatre employs what Eckersall and Patterson refer to as a ‘dwindling of the dramatic impulse’ (Eckersall & Patterson 2011, 7). The dialogic sequences have a theme-based juxtapositional organisation. There are no naturalistic segues between sequences. The conversations in *Holiday*, *Affection* or *Intimacy* begin around a particular theme, but then abruptly end or wind down. Conversation flows laterally from one subject to the next without any logical coherence; topics include; taking pets to the vet, Chinese medicine, the nature of performance in the everyday, poetry, architecture, roller-coaster rides, travelling and so on, but devoid of narrative unity. These plays also utilise intertextuality, such as occurs in *Holiday*, where there are quotes from Hafiz and Ernst Jandl, alongside references to pop culture, Hinduism and Mexican filmmaking. The use of songs further breaks narrative hegemony, while revealing hidden content in the concrete relationship between the performers.

There is no attempt to represent a reality beyond the material presence of the space the performers occupy. This is reflected in the dialogue, which at no point refers to a fictive space in proximity to the space being performed in. The fictive spaces mentioned are not

localised to this degree; they are stripped of specific details so that they can be positioned in a city anywhere in the world. In other words, the audience have no way of knowing whether these spaces or locations are real or not. There is also no information about the characters that can be construed as fictional. Past events are described, but are devoid of information pertaining to the lives of the personas/characters. There is a 'collapse of boundaries' that distinguishes post-modern theatre, but in the case of the later plays/texts, the removal of the desire to perform and fictionalise creates a space that is contaminated by the audience's expectation of the dramatic. The creation of a meditative, relaxed ambience creates an open invitation to the audience to reflect, fantasise and invent their own narrative that infects the original text with their own meanings and significance. The texts are structured so that at any moment they could stop; creating what Eckersall and Patterson describe as 'dramaturgical collapse' (2011, 7).

In my play *Holiday*, a metonymic space is created with a gentle, fluid ambience, the performers then demolish the 'real' by suggesting that one of the performers is in fact 'dreaming'. It posits the question, which is underpinned throughout the play: is the 'real' just as illusory as fiction? Is the suggestion here that the material reality of the space and the performers is in fact no less illusory than a fictive space or persona? The play's phenomenological method creates an underlying tension between the audience's desire to contaminate the space with the expectation of the dramatic and the disintegration of the action that beckons during the silence. This tension is compounded by the ontological ambiguity that presents itself as the play progresses. The development of a material space and persona presence is blurred within a real-unreal dichotomy.

In this new variant of everyday theatre, what Eckersall and Patterson describe as a 'new alternative-dramatic paradigm', the removal of the action/dramatic imperative offers the audience the temporal space to reflect on their own internal stories (2011, 7). The text is designed to slow down time, to create fragile, ephemeral and contaminated spaces between performers and audience. These momentary spaces are filled by the audience's

awareness of their own tenuous performances within the entire field of human interaction. This new everyday theatre takes the audience beyond the boundaries of self-imposed exile and into the streets and buildings we inhabit and contaminate daily with our own desires, and beyond that into our own imaginary lives.

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