

Bound to Honour: the Detention of David Hicks as Performance

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ABSTRACT: When you think of the war on terror, Guantanamo Bay and the incarceration of David Hicks you don't automatically think of an aerial performance. The 2006 production of *Honour Bound* created by Nigel Jamieson and choreographed by Australian Dance Theatre's Garry Stewart raises questions about human rights, justice and the role of politics in the war on terrorism. Using the processes of intermediality the production wages a physical assault, akin to David Hicks' experience, on the audience through a combination of set, sound and lighting with dance, aerial work and physical theatre to symbolically communicate the confronting aspects of imprisonment and incarceration thereby enhancing the visceral experience of the debate surrounding David Hicks for the audience. In the field of contemporary performance it is often said that form is content and content is form. This paper will demonstrate how the use of brutalised form personified the pain and distress of David and his parents.

Keywords: intermediality, liminality, Australian performance, performance innovation.

RESUMEN: Cuando se piensa en la guerra contra el terror, Bahía de Guantánamo y la encarcelación de David Hicks, no se concibe automáticamente un espectáculo aéreo. La producción de *Honour Bound* (2006), diseñada por Nigel Jamieson y coreografiada por Garry Stewart del Australian Dance Theatre, enuncia cuestiones sobre derechos humanos, justicia y el papel de la política en la guerra contra el terrorismo. Mediante los procesos de intermedialidad, la representación plantea al público un asalto físico, como el sufrido por David Hicks, por medio de la combinación de decorados, sonido e iluminación, con la danza, la acrobacia aérea y el teatro corporal, para comunicar simbólicamente los aspectos confrontados de la encarcelación y así enfatizar en el público la experiencia visceral de debate alrededor de David Hicks. En el campo de la interpretación contemporánea se aduce comúnmente que la forma es contenido y el contenido es forma. Este artículo

mostrará cómo el uso de una forma brutal consigue personificar el dolor y angustia de David y sus padres.

Palabras clave: intermedialidad, liminalidad, espectáculo teatral australiano, innovación interpretativa.

The paper's title is a play on words by inverting the performance's title, however, the notion of being bound to honour an individual's or country's historical narrative is very close to Nigel Jamieson's ontology of performance making. If, as Schrum (1999: 11) states «Theatre has always reflected the contemporary state of the world», then it would seem natural for Jamieson to tackle the subject of human rights within the arenas of war as seen through the eyes and experience of one individual – David Hicks. Here was an individual whose struggle for conviction or freedom was theatricalised, almost in soap opera like episodes, in the national press, on television and across national borders. Over the last few years Jamieson has created a number of works that have attempted to respond to stories of national interest like David Hicks, usually involving questions on morality, principles of habeas corpus (the assumption of innocence until proven guilty), and the principles of international treaties such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

1. The Oeuvre of Nigel Jamieson

The Theft of Sita premiered at the Adelaide Festival in 2000 was about the overthrow of the Suharto regime in Indonesia. It was inspired by the great classical story of the Ramayana. Transposing events to contemporary Indonesia, it follows the bemused clowns of the Wayang Kulit puppet theatre from an idealised classical landscape into a world transformed by forest fires, chainsaws and woodchip factories, half built freeways, theme parks and urban slums. Mirroring the classical story of the abduction of Sita, the pillage of contemporary Indonesia and the events leading to the overthrow of Suharto, the production is about a society gripped by change. At its heart lay a commitment to creating a closer understanding of the plight of our nearest neighbour.

Jamieson's production *In Our Name* was commissioned by Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre in 2004. It excavated the plight of an Iraqi family being held in detention. In making the work Jamieson commented that [it was] «the first time that I've been aware of an event where the country that I live in has

thrown away the basic tenets of humanity» (Jamieson, 2004). The al-Abaddi family fled Iraq, where other family members had been killed and tortured. They unsuccessfully sought asylum in Australia and spent three years in detention in Curtin, Port Hedland and finally Villawood. The family's teenage son, Haydar, tried to commit suicide a number of times. Haydar was allowed to stay in Australia. The al-Abaddi family was not. They are now living in New Zealand and trying to gain permanent residence there.

When Jamieson began *In Our Name* the fate of the family was unclear, as was the conclusion of the story in performance. This unfinished nature of a story was to be encountered again in the work of *Honour Bound*. Jamieson says, «On one level this is the price you pay for trying to create truly contemporary work; on another it reflects the temporal nature of life» (Jamieson, 2006: 3). It could also be argued that this is the territory of contemporary performance – form equals content and content equals form. It is open, sometimes unfinished, it is ephemeral or has the qualities of what Auslander (1997) calls «disappearance».

2. Intermediality in the Work of *Honour Bound*

Jamieson's approach to performance-making is to «try and create a new form of storytelling for each new story [he] tackles» (Jamieson, 2004). In the case of *Honour Bound* he tried to imagine the personal and human consequences of abandoning an Australian citizen, no matter the gravity of the supposed crime, to a place like Guantanamo's Camp X-ray. Jamieson's challenge was to find a brutality of form equal to the brutalising story of David Hicks.

In making *Honour Bound* Jamieson was interested in having the performers find a way of making a parallel physical journey to that which David Hicks was experiencing – humans being stretched to their limits. Enter Garry Stewart. In asking Stewart to choreograph and collaborate on the work, Jamieson was seeking to use a brutality of physical language in an attempt to function as an analogy of the psychological, emotional and physical turmoil that David and his fellow inmates experienced. In doing so, Stewart states that he was:

Eschewing a dancerly aesthetic and pushed the performers into a zone that took them to the brink of their physical limitations. Their struggle becomes real rather than illustrated and thereby we can hope for the possibility that we have represented David and Terry Hicks' story with honesty and integrity. (Stewart, 2006: 2)

The form for *Honour Bound* emerged out of necessity. It had to be as hard and confronting as the content of the piece. Performance iconoclast, Robert Lepage, notes that «in the theatre, the audience has to be immersed in the show's

argument, every sense has to seize it so the form has to become an incarnation of the subject and themes» (Lepage, 1997: 164). It could be argued that the form used in this work positions it within in the field of performance innovation. Blumenthal suggests that «performance innovation occurs when the performance process informs us in a way that the medium has never informed us before, through connections that redefine conceptual relationships in the craft» (Lepage, 1995: 7). In the case of *Honour Bound* the relationship is made tangible through the inter-related nature of both content and form.

Honour Bound was not an easy performance to watch in terms of engaging with either the form or the content, but it was shatteringly good. It took the audience inside a giant wire cage inhabited by the people kept there and their keepers, whose job is to break down the humanity and spirit of the prisoners. Its model is immediately evident from the orange boiler suits – Guantanamo Bay. An explosion of movement puts the six performers into dizzying spins as they hang in space; heart-stopping drops from the height of the stage; disorienting situations in which we, as audience, seem to be observing them from above. Savage emotions of despair are counteracted by the poignancy of glimpses of compassion.

At the point of making the work in 2006 David Hicks had been incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay for nearly five years. David is the pivotal subject. Comments from his father, Terry, and his stepmother, Bev are screened with the action; excerpts from his letters are read as part of the soundscape and segments of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and Geneva Convention are scrolled across the floor, bodies and sides of the cage. Nigel Jamieson wisely and skilfully kept away from the question of guilt or otherwise amongst these prisoners. Instead, the piece explored the impact of mental and physical torture on all those involved: the tortured, the torturers and those whose governments allow this to happen. Us. Through *Honour Bound* Jamieson asks us to question our complicity in Hick's detention.

The artistry that turns the piece from documentary into theatre is the way imagination has given reality wings. The title is from a quote about freedom – incredibly – on the gates of Guantanamo Bay – «Honour Bound to Defend Freedom». Video artist Scott Otto Anderson has taken lines from international declarations of human rights, screened them for us to read, then turned them into a fractured sea of words for an aerial performer to walk along, climb - and fall, time and again. Garry Stewart's characteristically action-packed and at times bone-jarring choreography is given new urgency and a fresh dimension of aerial work that does mind-boggling things with gravity in the service of conveying how the prisoners might feel. Paul Charlier's score is an evocative blend of conventional music and techno sounds that hint at helicopters, blips of medical monitors and the like.

Honour Bound is an intermedial work in which meaning-making for the audience resides somewhere in-between the live bodies and the mediatised world of text and image. According to Chapple and Kattenbelt (2006: 11) «the incorporation of digital technologies within the theatrical and performance space is creating new modes of representation; new dramaturgical strategies; new ways of structuring and staging words, images and sounds; new ways of positioning bodies in time and space; new ways of creating temporal and spatial interrelations». It is within Chapple and Kattenbelt's words that we situate the work of *Honour Bound*. In this sense, I am using the term intermediality not to describe the nexus of live and mediatised components of the work, but to what Chapple and Kattenbelt define as an inbetweenness.

This work is an arena and mental space that may be best described as in-between realities. The reality of the performance which is both fiction and fact – a kind of factional theatre. There is also an in-betweenness of temporal and spatial relations. The performer and the audience are simultaneously in the same space and, at the same time, the unseen performer, the silent avatar of David Hicks, is in another space whilst being tangibly present in image and word. It is in this space that there is a possibility of generating new cultural, political, social and psychological meanings in relation to the debate on the war on terror, which is being waged in yet another space beyond the confines of the theatre.

The inclusion of mediatised forms within live performance provides practitioners with the tangible reality to explore simultaneity through form. In the case of *Honour Bound* simultaneity was experienced as an in-between reality, a conflation of time, space and various truths. The resulting performance was more open to a multiplicity of interpretation, blurring of boundaries and non-hierarchical use of art form. (Gattenhof, 2007)

Viewing intermedial works requires a change in perception from the audience (Chapple and Kattenbelt, 2006: 22). It requires an embracing of a liminal space where, according to Chapple and Kattenbelt, there is a «meeting point in-between the performers and the observers, and the confluence of media involved in the performance at a particular moment in time» (Chapple and Kattenbelt, 2006: 12). This mirrors the reportage of David Hicks' incarceration. Somewhere in-between the mediatic portrayal and Hicks' personal experience lies the truth. This is what *Honour Bound* does. It asks the audience to question the nature of truth. It is not an Aristotelian narrative in structure with a neatly packaged resolution. Instead, it asks questions, poses problems and then invites the audience to juxtapose their lived experience of events, with the images, soundscapes and voices of David, Terry and Bev Hicks.

3. Conclusion

Honour Bound was not a box-office success. Michael Kantor, artistic director of Malthouse Theatre (Melbourne) believes this was due in part to the material being perceived as being too dark. But he notes that it «preceded the groundswell of sympathy for Hicks by about six months» (Kantor, 2007: 10). Affective theatre and performance, the type that Marianne Van Kerkhoven (2007) describes as «making a hit», that is, an emotional, psychological or social impact, is not dictated by financial outcome or bums on seats. It was unnerving to watch torturer and tortured emerge from the same boiler-suited figure: confusing at first but then a salutary comment on the impact the humiliation of an individual can have, not only on those involved but the wider community. Jamieson dislikes didactic theatre rather he is interested in working on a metaphorical level. On a number of levels, this work produced an un-utterable response from the audience, silenced as perhaps the Australian government tried to silence truth. As I sat in the audience at the conclusion of the performance, there was palpable silence and not spontaneous clapping usually encountered. After the performers were acknowledged and did leave the stage, a large number of audience members remained in the theatre, silent, weeping or just sitting. Like many of the other audience members I had been immersed in the debate in the newspapers, on radio and on television broadcasts, but the gravity of David's situation really hit home via the brutality of the physical performance - the sound of flesh crashing into wire, being subjected to harsh almost blinding lights, to the cacophony of sound. This for the audience was the world of David Hicks.

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