

Shoulder to Shoulder: the co-existence of truths in the 'Theatre of Witness'

David Grant, Queen's University, Belfast

'Theatre of Witness' is a form of performance in which "the true stories of those who have been marginalised, forgotten or hurt by society are woven into collaborative theatre productions and are performed by the people themselves in spoken word, movement, music and visual imagery".¹ Unlike Augusto Boal and Jonathan Fox² who have respectively laid down clear protocols of practice for the Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback Theatre, the founder of the Theatre of Witness, the American theatre artist Teya Sepinuck, has been cautious about describing it as a genre or a system. Her practice with groups as diverse as prisoners and their families, asylum seekers and runaway girls in Poland, has consistently found new forms to serve the stories of each set of witnesses and has emerged organically over nearly three decades, consistently being inflected and adapted to the needs of each discrete context. In the case of her work in Northern Ireland, the context was especially challenging, founded as it was on the shifting sands of the Northern Ireland Peace Process.

The Good Friday Agreement in April 1998 is widely recognised as having been a pivotal moment in the recent history of Northern Ireland, fulfilling the poetic prophecy of the late Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney that "once in a lifetime/ The longed-for tidal wave/ Of justice can rise up, /And hope and history rhyme."³ But his "hope for a great sea-change/On the far side of revenge"⁴ has been long in coming. As the 'Derry dramatist, Dave Duggan once wryly remarked, we might be forgiven for wondering when the endlessly protracted 'Peace Process' will result in a 'Peace Product'! Instead, the intervening fif-

¹ Sepinuck, 'Living with Life', 163

² See: Augusto Boal. *Games for Actors and non-Actors*. London: Routledge, 1992.
Jonathan Fox. *Acts of Service*. Tusitala, 2003.

³ Heaney, *The Cure at Troy*, 77

⁴ Ibid.

teen years have seen talk of a 'Peace Dividend' give way to a preoccupation with 'The Troubles Legacy' (a predominantly pejorative term often used to refer to the communal state of post-traumatic stress), with funding arising from the former (mainly from the European Union) being focussed on an array of strategies to address the latter. The 'Theatre of Witness' initiative was just one of many such interventions, but as this article will seek to show, by allowing diverse perspectives to co-exist without insisting on a reconciliation between opposing views, it has provided a model, or perhaps more aptly, a powerful metaphor for the wider Northern Ireland society.

This article will reflect on the trilogy of 'Theatre of Witness' productions conceived and directed by Teya Sepinuck specifically in response to the Northern Ireland Troubles at the Playhouse in ' Derry between 2009 and 2012.⁵ The first production, *We Carried Your Secrets* (2009) involved a mainly male intergenerational cast, where the stories of the older men who had all been directly involved in the Troubles sat side by side with those of the younger participants, who spoke of the indirect impact of the legacy of the violence on their lives. The second production, *I Once Knew a Girl...* (2010) had an entirely female cast and exposed some of the painful memories so often suppressed during the years of civil discord. These were followed by *Release* (2012), where ex-prisoners and paramilitary combatants shared the stage with a former Prison Governor, a former soldier and a former police detective.

There has been much discussion in the Northern Ireland media, especially in the light of the failed 2013 Haass talks and the call by the Northern Ireland Attorney-General to find an alternative approach to courts and enquiries, of the need for a Peace and Reconciliation process akin to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). But

⁵ Sepinuck's fourth and final Playhouse production, *Sanctuary* (2013) involved asylum-seekers in Northern Ireland and had a more external perspective

reports from South Africa itself suggest that this has not been the panacea outsiders often imagine. Annie Coombes records that:

The TRC has been heavily criticised in South Africa for the compromise made in the name of 'national unity' and reconciliation that allowed many to walk free while conditions they had perpetrated under apartheid, and that had reduced so many to poverty and powerlessness, remained intact.⁶

In a distinct but similar way, there has been a growing perception, particularly in poorer Loyalist communities in Northern Ireland, that unresolved grievances have been ignored so as not to stall the progress of the overarching grand narrative of the Peace, and that the rights of victims are being ignored in a race for reconciliation. The 'Theatre of Witness', however, seeks to eschew labels such as victim, survivor and perpetrator, and to allow sometimes contradictory and unreconciled accounts of the region's recent history to sit together side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

The general anxiety to keep the fragile peace alive is understandable given what Welsh poet Gillian Clarke has described as its 'difficult birth'. Comparing the Good Friday Agreement with the birth of a lamb, she portrays Northern Ireland as "[a]n old ewe that somehow till this year/had given the ram the slip. We thought her barren... While they [Northern Ireland's political factions] slog it out in Belfast, eight decades/since Easter 1916, exhausted, tamed by pain [a particularly insightful phrase]... the lamb won't come... We strain together, harder than we dared.. and you find us/peaceful, at a cradling that might have been a death."⁷ This messianic imagery, inherent in the very notion of the Good Friday Agreement (though significantly Unionists tend to prefer the more prosaic 'Belfast Agreement') goes some way to help explain the tunnel vision that has characterised much of the political discourse ever since. But year by year, it has become increasing-

⁶ Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 8

⁷ Clarke, 'A Difficult Birth, Easter 1998'

ly difficult to maintain this blinkered approach as the disaffected make their presence ever more apparent.

How, they ask, are more than 3,000 unresolved killings to be investigated? Why should there be an amnesty or immunity for informants and perpetrators? And there are also the seemingly more symbolic disputes over parades and flags. In an attempt to address these issues, the American diplomat, Richard Haass, was jointly invited by the Unionist First Minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, and the Republican Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, to facilitate talks. As the New Year's Eve deadline approached in 2013, there was little surprise when it was reported that the talks had foundered, not primarily because of victims' issues, but mainly on account of the 'flags'.

While it is tempting to dismiss this apparently superficial preoccupation with emblems as the last gasp of the dispossessed dregs of an ideologically bankrupt unionist ascendancy, a more constructive approach may be to engage as artists with the language of symbol and metaphor which is our stock in trade. The display of flags and emblems has long been accepted as a contentious aspect of Northern Ireland life.⁸ The most recent crisis was triggered by the decision of the Belfast City Council on 3rd December, 2012, to restrict the flying of the national Union Flag to certain specified days, as is the usual practice elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Reaction from some working class Protestants was instant, vociferous and occasionally violent, with numerous street protests throughout the city causing significant commercial and reputational damage, some of which have lasted for more than a year. From a sociological perspective:

The persistence of ethnic conflict and its resistance to traditional techniques of diplomatic or political intervention is widely recognised. One reason for this intractability is the selective focus on the past of those engaged in conflict. Images of the past are used to legitimate the present social or-

⁸ Cf Bryan et al., *Public Displays of Flags and Emblems in Northern Ireland*

der, but social order presupposes collectively shared memories. When memories diverge, a society's members can share neither experience nor assumptions.⁹

One way in which the 'Theatre of Witness' circumvents this intransigence is to accord all memories equal space, permitting them to overlap rather than forcing them to diverge.

Teya Sepinuck has set out some of the core principles that have informed her practice with the 'Theatre of Witness', three of which are of special relevance here. Epistemologically, Sepinuck emphasises the importance of 'not knowing', which she sees as:

the very foundation of 'Theatre of Witness'. We live in a culture where high value is placed on knowing facts, achieving, proving ourselves, and being right. 'Not knowing' undercuts all of that, allowing us to see things afresh, to come in without an agenda or judgement.¹⁰

If 'not knowing' permits the emergence of undeclared truths, then a further ethical principle, 'holding the paradox', facilitates their transmission into performance. Arguably, paradox is inherent in the very concept of 'Theatre of Witness', the former word connoting artifice and the latter truth. Professor Baz Kershaw has distinguished the concept of paradox from that of oxymoron as follows:

An oxymoron - such as 'extremes meet' - is a contradictory coupling of (usually) two words/terms/subjects with no mediating factor, simply a clash of meanings which never resolves. Whereas paradoxes (especially strong ones) tend to yoke together contradicting statements in ways that relate ambivalently and so are capable of producing a range of interpretations but do not exclude 'over-riding truths'.¹¹

⁹ Roe et al., 'Forgiving the Other Side', 122

¹⁰ Sepinuck, *The Theatre of Witness*, 227

¹¹ email to author, 20th March 2013

Thus, the contradictions apparent between different testimonies in a 'Theatre of Witness' performance, invite the audience to reflect on the relationship between them. "To 'hold the paradox' ", says Sepinuck, "means to enlarge one's sphere of understanding in order to contain these opposites. It means holding the story in a vastness that's bigger than 'either/or'. It's when a multiplicity of meanings can co-exist that a new paradigm can be envisaged."¹²

The third of Sepinuck's principles that merits close attention in the present context is methodological: 'taking the problem and making it the solution':

An example of this was in working on *Years* with older performers, one of whom couldn't discern her direction on stage... I directed another performer to take her hand and guide her to her next position. The simple and caring beauty of that gesture became an integral part of the production.¹³

Beyond this example of a specific piece of stagecraft in an individual production, the idea of turning problems into solutions can be seen throughout the whole 'Theatre of Witness' process, as the apparent initial impossibility of dialogue provides (within a carefully regulated and conducive environment) the stimulus for participants to engage in it.

Whereas political imagery in Northern Ireland all too often becomes fixed within a rigid ideological frame, for artists the power of imagery lies in its potential for ambiguity. Echoing Sepinuck's thoughts on 'holding the paradox', Jonathan Freedland has commented on the difficulties that arise when discussion is:

reduced to a slanging match of binaries, each side hurling false dichotomies at the other - insisting that every aspect of [an] unfolding crisis can be reduced to an either/or choice, when in fact the truth very often comes down to both... But the world is not like that. It is rarely black v white. It usually

¹² Sepinuck, *The Theatre of Witness*, 232

¹³ *Ibid.*, 233-234

requires us to hold two apparently contradictory thoughts in our head at once.¹⁴

Freedland's argument provides a useful foreword for Stanley Raffel's idea of the 'Method of Metaphor'.

Raffel critiques the classical syllogism, identifying the limitations of a traditional analysis based on thesis, antithesis and synthesis in situations where the initial propositions are based on irreconcilable presuppositions. Using the Israeli-Palestinian situation as an example, he argues the impossibility of synthesis where there are mutually incompatible initial frames of reference: for instance, where one side's terrorist is the other's freedom fighter. He posits instead an approach based on metaphor, seeking to understand opposing positions by asking what each is like and unlike. "That is to say, one can try to depict the nature of any one or any thing by searching for the right metaphor for them or it."¹⁵ Raffel acknowledges Derrida's position that "one should prefer the discourse of full truth to metaphor [which] can manifest properties, can relate properties from the essence of different things to each other, can make them known on the basis of their resemblance, but nonetheless without directly, fully and properly stating essence itself."¹⁶ But the very aspiration to establish the direct and full essence of a phenomenon is precisely what has proved so problematic in deeply contested situations like Northern Ireland.

Reading Raffel's chapter on the Middle East, I was reminded of workshops I facilitated in July 2009 near Jerusalem with school teachers from a mix of Jewish-Israeli, Arab-Israeli and West Bank backgrounds. I regularly use a warm-up game where participants create images of Samson, Delilah and a lion, and was uneasy about whether this would be perceived as a Jewish story. But my hosts reassured me that these characters would be understood by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike as part of a shared history. I proceeded to ask participants to create in groups an image in tableau form of a typical family. This is

¹⁴ Freedland, 'As the Ukraine debate rages, both sides are getting it wrong'

¹⁵ Raffel, *The Method of Metaphor*, 5

¹⁶ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 238 & 249

a standard Augusto Boal exercise, which generates in a consciously stereotypical way, predictable results in specific geographical contexts. The usual Belfast image, for instance (regardless of class or creed), consists of children squabbling on the floor, the father sat with either the local paper or the TV remote control, with the mother ironing. I toyed with the idea of dividing the groups in my Jerusalem workshops by religious background, but decided to keep them integrated. The striking result was the centrality of food in all the resulting images, emphasising the common importance across the political divide of families eating together (an image that rarely occurs in Ireland!).

Freud's phrase, "the narcissism of minor difference", comes to mind (as it often does in relation to the social reality of Northern Ireland): sundered communities have much in common but it is the few differences that divide and preoccupy them. Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, themed many of the early episodes of the series in relation to current affairs. His attempt at addressing the intractability of the early Northern Ireland Troubles involved a storyline where a man, half of whose face was white and the other half black, was 'beamed aboard' the starship Enterprise. Shortly afterwards, a similar looking man arrived and the two fought tooth and nail, to the great bewilderment of Captain Kirk and his crew. It materialised that the difference between them was that the white halves of their faces were on opposite sides. For while Americans could relate to difference based on race, the division of people who seemed so similar was more perplexing. As I once heard an exasperated Irish-American politician complain: "There's more diversity in one New York City block than in the whole of Ireland. Why can't these people get along?!"

While the imagery of flags and emblems continues to set Northern Ireland's communities apart, the use of stage imagery, and by extension of the metaphors that these evoke, has the potential to let them see how much they are alike. Just as the 'method of metaphor' operates by allowing us to see differences and similarities between different related concepts, the 'Theatre of Witness', by setting stories side by side, operates in the

strictest sense metaphorically. It serves to allow ideas to be carried across from one story to another by a kind theatrical osmosis, seepage from one story into another making similarities manifest even as differences are asserted. For each member of the audience, each story can also acquire a metonymic quality, when the empathetic resonance of an individual witness's story comes to stand for their own.

Evidence for this can be found in the extensive archive of comments collected after many of the 'Theatre of Witness' performances.¹⁷ Jonathan Fox, whose Playback Theatre invites audience members to contribute stories to be spontaneously by a troupe of experienced improvisers has identified a similar phenomenon: how one story often triggers another, sometimes because of its similarity to the original story, but often because of its differences. In some cases the links between stories are more direct. The most powerful example in the Northern Ireland 'Theatre of Witness' programme was when Kathleen Gillespie, the widow of Patsy Gillespie, the civilian victim of a notorious 'proxy bomb'¹⁸ at the height of the Troubles, attended *We Carried Your Secrets*. One of the witnesses in that production was Robin Young, a former RUC officer who included as part of his testimony his account of gathering body parts in the aftermath of the incident. Kathleen's experience of attending the performance was so profound that she undertook a central role in the second Theatre of Witness production, *I Once Knew a Girl...* Robin's wife, Maria, herself a serving police officer, also joined the cast of the second production.

In these cases, the recruitment of witnesses arose from connections between them. Inevitably, however, given the sectarian sensitivities of Northern Ireland, commentators often focus on difference, classifying participants as Protestant or Catholic, victim or perpetrator. While my own experience as an audience member has demonstrated the reductive nature of so simplistic a taxonomy (one is constantly struck by the complex net-

¹⁷ <http://www.theatreofwitness.org/reflections-theatre/>

¹⁸ i.e. where a third party under duress delivers an explosive device to its destination (usually by car). In Patsy Gillespie's case he was chained to the car while his family was held hostage. David McKittrick et al. (eds.), *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999), p.1214.

work of echoes and interconnections between even the most contrasting stories), there is, nevertheless, an undeniable power in seeing the juxtaposition of starkly contrasting perspectives.

In *We Carried Your Secrets* there were two main kinds of contrast - politics and age. Of the three older characters, alongside Robin, James was a former member of the Protestant paramilitary organisation the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), while Jon had been a member of the IRA. The younger characters included Victoria (the only female member of the cast) whose father, like Robin, had been in the RUC; Fionnbharr, whose father (a Sinn Fein politician) had been shot dead in Fionnbharr's early childhood; and Chris, whose history of antisocial behaviour he attributed to the wider legacy of the Troubles. The final member of the cast, Kieran, while a memorable presence on stage, remained silent throughout the performance, standing for those who choose not to speak.

This implied acknowledgement of everyone's right to bear witness or to remain silent is an important dimension of the 'Theatre of Witness' process. This typically begins with an extensive period of interviews and workshops during which Sepinuck gathers a rich range of material and in consultation with the cast members, develops a fixed script which is then learnt by the performers and intensively rehearsed. So while the audience are aware that the words being spoken were originally the performer's own, the fixed nature of the final script... "not only protects the performers themselves from the rawness of their memories, but also licenses the audience to engage, because they are aware of the artifice behind the performance".¹⁹

Declan Keeney, a filmmaker who has documented many of the Northern Ireland projects, emphasises the strict code of confidentiality that governs this stage of the process:

¹⁹ Grant & Jennings, 'Processing the Peace', 316

To build trust and to reinforce the sense of a 'safe' working space, it is important for us to have consistency of crew, all of whom sign a confidentiality agreement. There is a public and a private face to the Theatre of Witness. The iceberg metaphor comes to mind. The final performance represents one tenth of what goes on. The participants will tell you they find it a profoundly engaging experience but a lot of what comes out is untellable.²⁰

It is surely the intensely collaborative nature of the 'Theatre of Witness' process that generates the complex web of interconnections, lending each production a strong sense of seamless integrity. So while Victoria and Fionnbharr's stories depended as much on their present reality as their experience of growing up, James' story was rooted in a specific traumatic experience from childhood. This dialogue between early and later life underlined the extent to which the legacy of the Troubles crosses the generations.

Among the most remarkable encounters brought about by the Northern Ireland 'Theatre of Witness' productions was that between Kathleen Gillespie and Anne, a former IRA volunteer, in the second part of the trilogy, *I Once Knew a Girl...* Sepinuck was careful when the group met together, to ensure that Anne had an opportunity to tell her story before the group before Kathleen shared hers. As is evident from the relevant footage in Derry film-maker, Margo Harkin's remarkable film about the project, *The Far Side of Revenge* (the title tellingly drawn from Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*), Anne was extremely apprehensive about meeting Kathleen, let alone about setting her story of involvement with terrorism next to Kathleen's searing account of living with the memory of the horrific death of her husband, whose body was shattered out of all recognition by the IRA bomb that killed him.

In the event, Anne's telling of her story resulted in a warm embrace both literally and figuratively from Kathleen. Anne's account of her own experience of domestic abuse also connected her story with those of other witnesses who laid bare the way in which the

²⁰ Keeney, interview with author

dominance of the Troubles narrative suppressed a pervasive culture of violence against women, most vividly evoked by the story told by Therese.

Sepinuck recalls her first meeting with Therese in a family support centre in ' Derry:

I'd only just begun my introduction when my eyes rested upon a diminutive and beautiful woman who intrigued me with her silent demeanor. Some inexplicable connection was forged in the instant our eyes met... Therese who had always been too scared to talk in the group, immediately took me up on my offer [for an individual meeting] and our friendship grew from there. When we met I was struck by two very different things. The first was the absolute horrific violence, abuse and poverty Therese has suffered. I've rarely met anyone who has suffered more trauma in her life. But somehow, her inner strength and love of beauty hadn't been dampened... Therese's story encompassed both familial violence as well as the tragedy of the Troubles.²¹

That Therese was able to share her story, not just to Teya and the rest of the performing group, but to a wider audience, provides persuasive evidence of the spirit of mutual support that sustains a typical 'Theatre of Witness' cast.

The idea of stories sitting 'shoulder to shoulder' (an image I owe to Alison Jeffers of the University of Manchester, who observed at a conference at Queen's University, Belfast in March 2012 which featured the work of the 'Theatre of Witness', that the best way to speak to a teenager was in a car because you sat side by side rather than face to face), is especially evident in the third of the 'Theatre of Witness' productions, *Release*, which toured towards the end of 2012. Originally, the intention had been to focus on the stories of members of the security forces, but as is so often the case with the 'Theatre of Witness', the eventual emphasis of the performance emerged more organically from the pro-

²¹ Sepinuck, *The Theatre of Witness*, 201

cess of research and initial interviews. In the end, the performance became shaped around three pairings: William, a former Prison Governor and Syd, an ex-UDA man who had served time for racketeering, in the same prison at one point as William; Vincent, a Civil Rights activist, who it emerged during the development process had once been interviewed by Kevin, a former Senior Detective in the CID (Criminal Investigation Department) of the RUC; and Adrian, a former British army sergeant, and Paddy who in childhood had narrowly escaped death in a car-bomb incident. Although Paddy and Adrian had no direct connection, Adrian's experience of the notorious Enniskillen 'Poppy Day' bombing, in which the Provisional IRA detonated an explosion at the town's war memorial during the annual Ceremony of Remembrance for those killed in war, linked their stories together.

Declan Keeney is careful to emphasise the danger of seeking to reduce any aspect of the Troubles to too narrow a range of experience. Specifically, he stresses the range of attitudes to be found within the security sector, whose representatives are very reluctant to speak out. He shows a clear regard for Adrian's readiness to take part in the 'Theatre of Witness':

Adrian's very proud of what he did. The experience of serving in the army was important in his own life. He did two tours here [in Northern Ireland] and having retired from the army is now married and living here.²²

Yet although each participant's contribution to a 'Theatre of Witness' production is by intrinsically individual to that person, the intensity of engagement by many audience members evident from the bank of archived responses underlines the metonymic quality of the work - that is, that each witness's story comes to stand for many others. Sepinuck recalls a comment by Tony Carlin, one of the company's resident counsellors (who are available to audience members at the end of each performance to help address any issues

²² Keeney, interview with author

raised by the show): “What you’re trying to do is get everyone in touch with their own story.” “Not - ‘I could be you’”, Teya concludes, “but - ‘I am you’.”²³

The use of a life-size paper puppet in *Release* to represent Vincent’s character at the end of a protracted hunger strike illustrates this phenomenon in quite a literal way. The puppet was created from paper by the South African puppeteer, Aja Marneweck, who sees the power of this medium to lie partly in its organic origins. As the paper is worked to create a multi-faceted texture, it attains an extraordinary combination of strength and fragility. Being both real and unreal at the same time, it invites the audience to project their own reality onto it in their imaginations. The process through which many observers come to connect their own stories with those of the witnesses on stage is analogous.

Because people are telling their own stories in ‘Theatre of Witness’, there is necessarily a limit to the number of performances that can be given of each production - typically between twelve and fifteen, and usually in venues accommodating around a hundred people. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that the ‘Theatre of Witness’ has had such widespread impact within and beyond Northern Ireland. In part, this is because experiencing a ‘Theatre of Witness’ production tends to generate the need in those who see it to tell others about it. And the ‘Theatre of Witness’ team have also contributed to a number of national and international conferences, notably the International Community Arts Festival in Rotterdam in 2011. The close involvement of film-makers like Declan Keeney and Margo Harkin has also given the productions an extended life, with workshops regularly being held in conjunction with screenings. Sepinuck has worked hard to ensure that these workshops encourage participants to engage actively rather than merely reactively with the films, and the workshops use exercises to encourage participants to explore their own story, either publicly or privately. One such exercise invites those taking part to imagine what was expected of them on the day they were born, which often leads on to pro-

²³ Sepinuck, interview with author

found personal reflection on where and who they are now. But crucially for Sepinuck, these techniques “avoid endless analysis of the content of the films.”²⁴

Declan Keeney explains the care taken when editing the films to involve the original performers:

We looked at many performances by Paddy [McCooey, one of the performers in *Release* who vividly evoked the childhood experience of being trapped in a car with a bomb in it and his father’s frantic efforts to rescue him] to decide what would be used for the documentary. He didn’t really appreciate until he saw it back how far he’d gone with it. He was silent for about twenty minutes, smoked about twenty cigarettes and came back in and said: “It’s ok you can use that”.²⁵

The film record, then, creates an afterlife for ‘Theatre of Witness’ performances to complement the memories stored by those who see them live.

Keeney is circumspect about ultimate significance of the work but clearly wholly committed to the enterprise, nevertheless:

All of this kind of work contributes to the archive of this place but not all is equal. They are like jigsaw pieces: some are small, some are large; some are very obvious and some are very tricky to connect. This particular kind of work is more about Paddy and more about Vincent and more about Kevin. But if you look at all of this kind of work in the broader view it becomes more significant round the broader narrative of how we’re trying to deal with [the legacy of the Troubles].²⁶

Keeney’s holistic view places the work of the ‘Theatre of Witness’ in the context of the broader debate about how the arts can contribute to helping Northern Ireland society to come to terms with the lingering impact of the Troubles. This article has sought to un-

²⁴ Sepinuck, interview with author

²⁵ Keeney, interview with author

²⁶ Ibid.

derstand this contribution in terms of the ‘method of metaphor’. Raffel’s exposition of this method acknowledges Derrida’s position on the imprecise nature of metaphor, but concludes that the strength of the ‘method of metaphor’ lies in the accumulation of a wide spectrum of comparisons, which helps establish through the amalgamation of its many facets as definitive a sense as possible of what a phenomenon entails. “A good metaphor” according to Raffel, “would be one that helps us to see, in the sense of appreciate, unapparent - unobvious - similarities”.²⁷

In a ‘Theatre of Witness’ production, the lived experience of the live theatre event as embodied by both performers and audience, generates (as if in an intensive theatrical laboratory) a broad, if sometimes seemingly contradictory spectrum of metaphoric meanings which together communicate a profound understanding of traumatic experience through a process of kinaesthetic empathy. In this way, each audience member is able to find a personal connection, however indirect, with something in the stories being told on stage, so that the story of the witnesses metonymically becomes their own. More crucially, in relation to the main thesis of this article, each witness’s story becomes a potential metaphor for the stories told by each of the other participants. Where they actively engage in re-enacting these stories, they go one step further becoming, however paradoxically, a literal metaphor, in the words of the title of the first play, carrying one another’s secrets in an embodied way.

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²⁷ Raffel, *The Method of Metaphor*, 9

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