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# Repeating Repetition

## Trauma and performance

SUZANNE LITTLE

Theatre's current preoccupation with the Theatre of the Real, characterized by the use of 'practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical' (Martin 2013:5), signifies a desire to recover and reprocess through repetition. Moving beyond simple mimetic representation, practitioners in this field seek to encapsulate, interrogate and or reinstall the 'real' in performance. Arguably, the most interesting and troubling intersections in the Theatre of the Real occur where the reality being performed is grounded in trauma, in particular in forms of documentary and verbatim theatre. For example, verbatim theatre practitioners will often restage the verbatim testimony of victims, treating it as an authoritative archival 'document' of traumatic experience. Whilst it is possible to make a 'documentary without documents' (Carol Martin cites Hotel Modern's wordless memorial to the Holocaust, *Kamp* (2006), as an example (2013:5)), this article will focus specifically on theatre that employs verbatim testimony in a bid to represent trauma. Because verbatim theatre and psychological trauma operate through repetition, an examination of both will offer some insights into whether the shared characteristic of repetition makes verbatim theatre (and potentially other forms of performance) particularly suited to the challenge of trauma representation. Also, a discussion of trauma in relation to Rebecca Schneider's critique of the place of performance in the Western archive (2001) will begin to unpack the treatment of testimony as 'document' or 'flesh'.

Trauma is characterized by its resistance to expression and integration where the

traumatizing event is experienced only belatedly through repeated memory-mediated flashbacks (Caruth 1995:4).

Hence, pinning down the 'real' element for representation in performance is a fraught if not impossible exercise. However, the rewards for successfully completing the task are great. Such performances may provide the space to bear witness to what Cathy Caruth refers to as the victim's 'impossible history' (5) and theoretically form 'a bridge between disparate historical experiences' that can 'contribute to cross-cultural solidarity' (Craps 2013: 'Introduction', paragraph 3). Moreover, Mick Wallis and Patrick Duggan have argued that performance is particularly suited to the task of trauma representation because the trauma survivor or victim is ensnared in a parallel, performative *mise-en-abyme* structure 'in which the symptom is a representation or rehearsal of the original event but at the same time itself a traumatic event' (2011:2).

From a more cynical view, seeking to repeat the pathological repetition of traumatic experience in performance may produce further distortions. It may also contribute to a contemporary 'wound culture', characterized by 'a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound', indicative of 'a breakdown in the distinction between the individual and the mass, and between private and public registers' (Seltzer 1979:3). Nevertheless, trauma is often seen as tantalizing proof of 'real' experience: 'our only remaining guarantee of the reality of the past in a new era of technologically mediated memory' (Meek 2009: 'Introduction', section 2, paragraph 4). Arguably, the inclusion of trauma can thus elevate a

theatrical performance from a space of mimesis and representation to a site of 'truth' and historical recovery.

Much of the critical work in the humanities and social sciences on trauma has focused on the flashback, its connection to history and its perceived proof of exceptional overwhelming experience. But the repeating flashback is only one of myriad symptoms of trauma. Other repeating symptoms and conditions that arise in response to trauma include wordless and affectless states; loss of the ability to comprehend or use syntax; distortions of vision, taste, sound and touch and hallucinations (Wilson and Lindy 2013). The extent to which any of these are registered in verbatim theatre representations of trauma may be largely dictated by whether these are detailed in the recorded testimony that is re-presented in performance.

To begin to unpack some of the intersections between trauma, performance and repetition, two productions will serve as brief case studies: Jericho House's *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans* (2009), written and directed by Jonathan Holmes, and Version 1.0's *The Disappearances Project* (2011–13), for which the script was assembled by the company and directed by Yana Taylor and David Williams. These productions have been chosen for the significant differences in how the creators have used repetition and its effects and affects as a basis for the representation of actual trauma.

Before discussing the productions, it is necessary to engage with the notion of witnessing, a practice based on repetition that has become a central theme in Theatre of the Real focusing on trauma. In a current 'witness turn', practitioners are seeking to configure audiences as witnesses, in order either to ensure ethical spectatorship or to invoke the semantically authoritative and therapeutically affirming role of witnessing that is recognized within trauma and Holocaust studies and psychology (Little forthcoming). Arguably, this turn is related to the wider ethical turn that has swept through the humanities and social sciences and coincides with an increasing focus

on relationality – the notion that as relational beings we are co-implicated in other people's lives and are thus drawn into responsibility for the other. It is unsurprising then that there is often a desire in the Theatre of the Real to give 'voice to the voiceless' (Wake 2013: 105), and/or an expectation that witnessing repeated testimony will provoke audiences to create social or political change.

Within trauma and Holocaust studies, the term 'witness' also describes actual victims who are considered direct or survivor-witnesses to her or his own trauma. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer use the term 'survivor-witness' in response to Giorgio Agamben's observation that there are two types of witnesses: one that is a third-party witness, such as someone who may witness testimony at a trial; and the other, the person who has experienced a traumatic event first-hand and thus is both witness and survivor (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009: 153). There is a contradiction within this dual role. As Thomas Elsaesser explains, 'because trauma affects the texture of experience by the apparent absence of traces' and 'involves an "event that precludes registration", even the category of witnessing ... collapses in the face of its inaccessibility even to the subject, quite apart from its non-representability' (2001: 199). Theoretically, then, testimony is thus restricted to what elements and fragments of the traumatizing event or situation the survivor-witness has been able to assimilate and share with another person.

In the majority of instances, it is not the survivor-witnesses who present their testimony in theatrical performances. It is instead presented by actors, as is the case in both the productions to be discussed here. The question arises as to whether this remove constitutes a nullifying of the witnessing effect central to trauma studies, whereby a survivor-witness may therapeutically 'work through' or have her or his experience affirmed through having their testimony witnessed by another in a live personal exchange.

From an audience-as-witness perspective, the repetition of recorded testimony by an actor may not be considered significant, particularly if

the production is identified as belonging to verbatim theatre, a term denoting and connoting a documentary authority. However, as Geraldine Harris observes, there is a significant difference between “witnessing” a performance and “witnessing” an actual significant event’ (2009: n.pag). Rebecca Schneider has argued that performance ‘remains *differently*’ (2001: 105), and so it would seem likely that performance witnesses and is witnessed differently also. This has ethical and authority-related implications for the audience-as-witness and for the survivor-witness. Difficulties arise even when the notion that therapeutic witnessing for the survivor-witness may require first-hand oral transmission is put to the side. Where once testimony based on memory was considered highly subjective, the work of trauma studies theorists has contributed to a sense that trauma survivors and their testimony provide access to a literal non-linear ‘objective’ history.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the recorded verbatim testimony of trauma survivor-witnesses is often given an uncritical reified status within verbatim theatre.

A paradox emerges when this is considered in light of Schneider’s arguments regarding performance and the archive. The structural experience of trauma, particularly the flashback, would seem to exemplify the ‘messy and eruptive reappearance’ that Schneider claims is inherent to performance, where the ‘flesh’, or that which slips away into the past leaving no material remains, is given to resurfacing (2001: 103). In verbatim theatre, the tendency is to regard recorded testimony as a direct account of and conduit to trauma experience. This is problematic for a number of reasons, not least because testimony is the result of processed traumatic experience and is not the experience itself. Furthermore, no testimonial account is self-identical to the experience it describes, subject as it is to the difference and *différance* that arise in its translation into language. This would seem to be increased in the case of trauma, characterized by its resistance to language and integration. This does not mean that traces of experience may not be present

in the testimony and in its repeated form in a written record or performance. Indeed, performance may in some way capture a sense of the experience that exceeds that offered by a verbatim script.

The problem lies in a tendency to equate recorded verbatim testimony with what Schneider would refer to as the ‘bones’: the material document and object, the authoritative and “savable” original’ of the Western archive (2001:101). In doing this there is a danger of falling prey to the institutionalizing practices of the archive.

The archive is built on ‘house arrest’ – the solidification of value in ontology as retroactively secured in document, object, record. This retroaction is nevertheless a valorization of regular, necessary loss on (performative) display – with the document, the object, and the record being situated as survivor of time. Thus we have become increasingly comfortable in saying that the archivable object also becomes itself through disappearance as it becomes the trace of that which remains when performance (the artist’s action) disappears. (Schneider 2001: 104)

There is not the space here to explore further Schneider’s critique of the valorization of loss and disappearance. More thinking needs to be done about what is at stake and at play in the practice of ‘saving’ oral testimony as a ‘document’ that is then repeated ‘verbatim’ in performance. This investment in identity is more in line with the solidifying retroactive practices of the Western archive, than an acknowledgement that oral testimonies, as with the oral histories that Schneider discusses, are themselves rich performative archives (103). The challenge is to identify how to reanimate and host the ‘flesh’ remains of this archive in performance. In other words, the task is to determine how to ensure the eruptive reappearances of remains that occur within oral testimony erupt again as reconstructive repetitions within a theatrical production. This would require a move from using testimony as a presentation of the material ‘bones’ or ‘document’ of the historical archive to understanding testimony as an embodied

<sup>1</sup> See Cathy Caruth for a detailed discussion of trauma as a return of history (1995:3–12).

memory practice that produces residue or 'flesh' remains in its transmission from one person to another. This corresponds with the shift in Holocaust and memory studies where testimony is no longer considered to be that which delivers facts (invariably blurred over time), but that which affectively testifies to the past through transmitting or bearing the emotions, sensations and psychological imprints of traumatic experience (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009: 154–156). Significantly, this may be transmitted more in moments of silence, cries and gestures than in words (158).

The success to which verbatim performance may accommodate the remains of traumatic experience and facilitate witnessing would seem dependent on how practitioners approach the representation of testimony. The temptation may be to match the emotional tenor of the testimony and/or to re-create the original traumatizing event in order to stage an extended traumatic flashback. An attempt at such literal repetition underpins Jonathan Holmes' production of *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans*. The production differs markedly from the predominantly affectless, stagnant world created in *The Disappearances Project*. Comparing the two productions provides insights into the differences between aiming to represent the traumatic event and experience through the structure of an emotion-filled re-enactment presented as historical document, as opposed to the attempt to facilitate the eruption of the flesh of traumatic experience through other dramaturgical forms of repetition.

*Katrina: A Play of New Orleans* was staged as a promenade production in the Oxo building on London's South Bank in 2009. The multiple levels of the building were used to present pre-, during- and post-hurricane scenes and settings in an attempt to physically stage (through elaborate sets, lighting, soundscape and media footage replayed on televisions) both the traumatic event and its devastating aftermath. An additional fictional last scene, involving a rousing jazz funeral for one of the hurricane's victims and the city itself, served as a joyous, cathartic ending. In my view, the intention

was to configure the audience as witnesses to the testimony of survivor-witnesses of the hurricane, as relayed in convincing and highly emotive fashion by actors, as well as to enrol audience members as vicarious survivor-witnesses of a representational repetition of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. This attempt at a phenomenological equivalency of experience through repetition is similar to that employed in the Young Vic's 2009 production of Claire Bayley's *The Container*, in which audience members were shut in a shipping container with actors playing refugees being smuggled across the border into England. This was a partial bid to immersively place the audience within an experience of refugee precarity, replete with airless, dark, disorienting and claustrophobic conditions as well as sound effects to mirror the sound of the container in transit (Little forthcoming).

Ethical and slippage issues arise in these types of literal repetitions. From a postcolonial perspective, representing the trauma of peoples from other countries risks the erroneous wider presumption that all experience and processing of trauma are the same across cultures (Craps 2013: chapter 2, section 1, paragraphs 3–6). In such representations, there is also the possibility of marking the other as 'victim' and inscribing a hierarchy of power around the notion. Moreover, literal repetitions can promote uncritical empathic responses and identification, encouraging audience members to feel that they too have 'lived through' or now know the 'real' experience of the other. In *Katrina*, this sense is bolstered by the use of verbatim testimony that functions as the 'bones' of Schneider's archive, institutionalizing a documentary veracity around the production, presented here as proof of experience and guarantee of 'reality'. Significantly, if an audience member becomes vicariously traumatized through her or his immersion in this or another production, this new, usually lesser, trauma is not the same as that afflicting the survivor-witness. Despite apparent evidence of direct transmission, the vicarious witness feels the 'pain evoked by empathy-

arousing mechanisms interacting with their own traumatic experiences' (Kaplan 2005: 90). Thus, if an audience member were to become traumatized during a performance of *Katrina*, it would be the result of seeing or hearing things that invoke personal memories or associations rather than an assimilation of the trauma of the represented other.

A number of theorists offer models for ethical rather than vicarious encounters with the other. Dominick LaCapra advocates the position of 'empathic unsettlement' whereby 'the other is indeed recognized and respected as other and one does not feel compelled or authorized to speak in the other's voice or take the other's place, for example, as surrogate victim or perpetrator' (2001: 27). It is, however, difficult to satisfy LaCapra's requirements whilst representing the other in performance. In a promising move, Helena Grehan offers 'radical unsettlement', whereby spectatorship is deemed ethical if the audience is 'engaged with the other, with the work, and with responsibility and therefore an ethical process, long after they have left the performance space' (2009: 22). In the case of *Katrina*, whilst some residue of the experience of the survivor-witnesses may erupt in moments of repeated testimony, it tends to be eclipsed and fictionalized, and thereby opened up for vicarious consumption, due to the exciting and distracting 'disaster movie'-like framing of the milieu. Furthermore, editing and arranging the individual testimonial accounts to fit within a causal linear narrative produces a coherence that belies traumatic experience. As a result, the production wavers between fiction and documentary. Rather than radically unsettling the audience member, the overall effect creates the safe distance of 'entertainment', and, in the case of the added cathartic ending, produces an emotional release and a closure that suggests the 'real' trauma has been dealt with, thereby relegating it to history. In Adornian terms, such neat aestheticizations could 'make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning', removing some of the horror and contributing to 'clearing' it to the past (Adorno 1980: 189). This will

always be a possible charge against aesthetic representations of trauma.

Ultimately, *Katrina* is a nexus point for a number of key issues around trauma, testimony, repetition and representation. There is no proven means or guidelines for ensuring that the flesh of traumatic experience transmitted in the original oral testimony will reappear as repetitions in performance. The dramaturgical approaches taken by Holmes in *Katrina*, however, seem to indicate a desire to control and institutionalize testimony as 'document', and in doing so limit its potential to produce transmittable remains.

Version 1.0 takes a more promising approach in *The Disappearances Project*. This verbatim production sought to detail the experiences of Australians whose friends or family members had become missing persons. Whilst the title suggests the forced disappearance practised by some political regimes, here it refers simply to missing persons and a project to illuminate the often traumatizing sense of loss and unknowing felt by the individuals and communities left behind. The production begins in total darkness. Gradually, nebulous lights appear on a large screen placed onstage, eventually coalescing to reveal the lights lining abandoned streets at night as viewed from the side window of a slow-moving car. These images play as one continuous shot throughout the length of the performance. Paul Prestipino's soundtrack of industrial and domestic sounds accompanies the screen image in similar repetitive patterns. Dim side-lighting grows to reveal a male and a female actor seated near the edges of the large screen, facing the audience. They remain in this near frozen state throughout, reflecting a dissociated or paralysed state of grief. The actors recite the verbatim testimony in near expressionless tones, suggesting a trauma-induced affectless state. The accounts of grieving by different family members and friends are shared, overlapped and swapped between the two performers, providing no opportunity for coordinates of character; this denies empathic identification and disrupts any possibility for linear narrative.

The testimony is interspersed with lengthy silences, cohering with the loss of syntax or wordless states of some trauma victims. The stories share eerie similarities in terms of their scenarios, strategies for finding the missing person, frustration at government agencies, and emotional responses to loss and uncertainty. The repetition of these features again and again creates a chorus of collective experience.

Rather than diminishing the place of testimony, these practices work to privilege it through forcing the audience to listen more attentively, theoretically making them more attuned and receptive to any re-eruptions and transmissions of 'fleshy' remains. The fragmentation of the verbatim testimony, stripping it of endings and beginnings and overlapping and sharing it variously between the two actors, turns it into a repetitive yet compelling loop of similar-sounding statements. In my view, this produces in the audience a profound desire to make sense of the testimony and find closure. This was palpably evident in a Brisbane performance where audience members seemed to simultaneously tense and seize on a statement made by the male actor about keys – 'There was something on the keys that made me recognise the keys – a key charm or something' (Version 1.0 2011) – that appeared to offer clues to the whereabouts of a missing person described in an earlier statement, only to find that this went nowhere. There was no real link between the statements, just as a distorted sound effect resembling jangling house keys, suggesting a return, offered no resolution.

Other repetitive elements reinforce this dramaturgy of non-closure and displacement, such as the clear sound of a clock chiming that begins halfway through the performance, morphing distortedly to contribute to an already repetitive soundtrack of distorted industrial and domestic sound. There are points where the pace of the images on the screen seems to be slowing to a stop or dissolving into blackness. In these cases, however, the image either reappears or the change in pace is used to mark the turning of a corner before entering another street

similar to all those that have been shown before. The performance thus suspends distinctions of time and place and creates distortions. As such, it mimics the effects of a traumatic event, which Elsaesser observes, 'intimately links several temporalities, making them coexist within the same perceptual or somatic field, so much so that the very distinction between psychic time and chronological time seems suspended' (2001: 197).

The way that the dramaturgy of *Disappearances* is based on trauma symptoms themselves creates a haunting effect that persists in the mind beyond the production. Whilst it may not produce ongoing ethical responsibility, as in Grehan's ideal, the effect is one of ongoing engagement. For example, unresolved repetition may prompt an audience member's memory to 'repair what performance has not accomplished by adding a last piece to the sequence' (Kartsaki 2012: 134). Here, it could be an alternative ending where the disappeared are found. Ultimately, this is a theatre of non-closure, echoing, at least in part, the positions of the family and friends of the missing, as well as following the structure of the flashback, where the victim relives the traumatizing event in a possessing loop of repetitions until the trauma can be successfully assimilated into experience. In the production, as in the cases of many of those who offered their testimony, there is no reintegration: the missing person remains missing and the repetition continues. The audience is made to witness the non-closure of those who have been left behind and simultaneously is denied the reassuring comfort of narrative closure. The 'negative performative' of trauma, characterized by its 'apparent absence of traces' (Elsaesser 2001: 199), is seemingly staged within a performance that allows for the 'flesh' of oral testimony to resurface. Whilst this is still indicative of 'inadequate telling' (Kaplan and Wang in Meek 2009: 2, 14), it offers hope that performance may be able to challenge the purported unrepresentable nature of trauma.

The representation of trauma demands well-considered dramaturgical and narrative

practices. Repetition may play a vital role, in part because it marks a parallel constitutive operation/symptom of trauma and performance. However, repetition and a shared performative quality do not automatically qualify performance as a reliable host for trauma representation. In the case of verbatim theatre, revisiting Schneider's critique of the institutionalizing practices of the Western archive provides some clues as to how to allow the performative 'flesh' of oral testimony to re-erupt and be transmitted in a theatrical production. Treating recorded verbatim testimony as a 'guarantee of reality', which may be inserted into a production to frame it with documentary authority, appears tantamount to retroactively securing value in ontology. This configures testimony as proof of experience that was once present, rather than as something that can still transmit remains. Furthermore, in the quest for a means to represent the distorting, overwhelming and repetitive qualities of trauma, solidifying recorded testimony as archival 'document' or 'bones' is a counterproductive move because it appears to diminish the capacity for trauma testimony (and arguably performance itself) to 'remain' in what Schneider refers to as 'messy and eruptive' reappearances (2001: 103). A deeper analysis of the notion of remains as a repetitive return of knowledge or experience is required. This will provide a greater understanding of the nature of oral and recorded testimony as well as insights into what remains, and what is potentially lost, in its representational repetition in theatrical performance. Theatre is emerging as a viable means for 'performing' trauma, but more work is required if it is to consistently avoid contributing to a growing vicarious 'wound culture'.

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