

On Performance Writing

This piece addresses itself to the task of making text for performance, especially within a collaborative process. It is a revised version of a presentation I made in Dartington (UK) at a 1996 conference entitled 'Performance Writing'. I was keen to open the door to a broad, adventurous description of what writing for performance might mean — beyond ideas of playwrighting which is still, sadly, the measure too often employed in the UK, despite a rich history of writers in theatre spaces who are doing something quite different. The piece talks about physical action and set construction as forms of writing, it talks about writing words to be seen and read on-stage rather than spoken, it talks about lists, about improvisation, about reading, about whispering and about collage as a form — in each case implying a critical dialogue with more traditional notions of theatre or performance writing.

Obsessed in any case with lists and indexes, he tried one night to write a list of the texts that he had made, or else texts that he might make. Or of texts that he could make. Through the night the list would slip and slide — breaking up into stories and speculations and then returning to listing again.

Which text should go first in the list? A real one or a possible one.

I chose a real one, remembering that I'd left my son at home ill, to come to a conference. And deciding to talk about him, sometimes, in the list.

1. A text to be whispered by the bedside of a sleeping child.
2. A text to be yelled aloud by a single performer in a car park at dawn.
3. A text to be left on the ansaphones of strangers.
4. A text to be spoken while fucking secretly the partner of a good friend.
5. A text for megaphone.
6. A text which could be used as a weapon.

Remember that prison I told you about? The troops found it deserted, jailers and torturers fled, their prisoners / victims executed in haste, dead in the cells.

And how in one room, stored amongst the bloody implements and signed confessionals, they discovered a strange and endless non-sensical near-gibberish text. How it transpired that the jailers would sit outside their prisoners' doors in the dead of the night and read this text aloud to them repeatedly — denying them sleep and, by destroying language or demolishing sense, attacking the very bounds which tied their charges to the earth and to sanity.

A true story. I keep wondering about those men knelt on the floor of a corridor and reading strange language to their prisoners. Did they think of themselves as performers? Did they chat, in the kitchen or the bar after work, discussing how well or badly their reading work had gone? Did they think about the pauses, the language, the emphasis? Did the reading drive them crazy too? Perhaps.

I think about the text they read from, and at night sometimes in a dream of a handwritten page, I think I can see it but I cannot read the words.

1. A text of lines from half-remembered songs.
2. A love letter written in binary.
3. A text composed of fragments.

In bed, early, Miles is jabbering and making jokes about breakfast and porridge in particular. He tells me that for breakfast we will have spider porridge, and I ask, 'What's that?' and he says '*spider porridge*—with *spiders* in it...' and I say I will feed him helicopter porridge, or something like that, and he threatens me with many other kinds of porridge until at last he gets to this one: radio porridge. He says we will have radio porridge with voices in it.

All summer we lived in the house with the stars up above it and the earth down below and we ate of radio porridge. Immensely filling, the porridge satisfied hunger but left one haunted with voices under the skin.

Who puts those voices in radio porridge?

No one.

Whose are the voices in radio porridge?

The voices in radio porridge come from the dead. They come from stray signals, lost letters. They come from the people who wrote graffiti on all the walls in town, or the people in books and stories we'd read, and many other places.

1. A text for people to find in their wallets, days later, when you are forgotten.
2. A text to come through people's doors—perhaps a letter.
3. A text for someone to find in the street, caught in one of those eddy-pools of blown leaves and ragged polythene bags.

One day in New York I am walking along, see a note on the floor, blowing past me in the wind, pick it up. The note says this:

'What in the World are You Doing, why are you taking some much time with the ...'

A voice like that is the linkman in radio porridge.

It's radio porridge or something like it that speaks in all of the shows. I couldn't get excited about a deep voice or an authentic voice, but I could get excited by a gabbling voice composed of scraps and layers, fragments, quotations. No editorial, or at least no centre. Like I don't have a voice—I'm just a space this other stuff is flowing through and lodged inside.

1. A text written in condensation.
2. A text written, learned and performed to pass a polygraph test.
3. A series of texts written on a lover. In biro, in lipstick, in permanent marker, in blood, and semen.
4. An invisible text.
5. The same text written every day for a year, in different places, in different locations.
6. A text written on the floor of an old factory.

Ending the coach tour of Sheffield we made—a piece called *Nights in This City* (1995)—the bus arrived at a huge building—a building that served first as the tram depot for the city and then as the main bus depot and which is now disused. In this space, upon the floor we had written out the entire A–Z of the city—an alphabetical text in ten 75-metre-long columns—chalk on concrete floor. Climbing off the bus people would see the exit far down the end of the room, walk towards it, realise they were walking on something and then, in the end, realise what it was—often slowing down to walk and find their own street names, taking people to see where they had once lived, even having their photographs taken next to the name of their streets. In some way this index on the floor served the purpose of a reprise, where the city explored in the performance was laid out in textual miniature for people to survey as a whole.

Very often in the shows there were these lists or catalogues. Sometimes ordered, sometimes chaotic. Language like a camera on endless tracks, zooming everywhere, close-up, wide-shot, tracking shot, point of view. Language jumping you from one story, one world, one discourse to another.

1. A text written at 3am in the middle of a war.
2. A text written in the fast food court of a large European shopping mall.
3. A text which raises questions of ownership.

I come into the front room one afternoon and the TV is playing, and I am shocked beyond belief to find that the characters are speaking words stolen directly from our piece *Some Confusions in the Law about Love* (1989).

Moments pass, and then I realise, in a slow internal turning round, that this is some nameless film I must've flipped through five years ago or more and that I stole the lines from it, scrawling them on a newspaper, transferring them to notebook and then at some later point writing them into the work. Still, watching the film from this point on I am gripped by a feeling of strange violation

as a handful of moments from our show *Some Confusions* are repeated, out-of-context, out of character and out of costume.

'Come here honey...' the drunk vamp woman says to her boss's henchman turned betrayer/lover 'If you'd like to see me again I'll give you a list of the times that Charlie's always out...'

The house full of shelves, full of notebooks, full of overheard and copied lines—film, life, dreams, literature. Anything. Shit—I'm like some teen-burglar—I nicked so much stuff I can't even remember what is mine anymore. And of course Miles is already the same, since his stories when he tells them just recycle verbatim the best lines and characters from the stories he's heard. One night he was feeding the birds in one picture book with bread taken from the pages of another. A kind of gorgeous economy in his madness.

A thieving machine.

When provoked into discussing where their writing 'comes from', some of my students will invoke the notion of a voice. To be looked for intently and nurtured when found, this voice lives in them somewhere, deep down inside. When they find it they want to write in it. This voice is authentic in some way, by its very nature profound. It is knotty, connected to the body. It comes *from them*. Often at night.

And whilst I've done my share of night writing, I never know exactly what they mean.

Because for me writing was so often about collecting, sifting and using from bits of other people's stuff—copied language like precious stones. Authentic has not really been in it.

Working in performance they were always tempted to think about writing (or even speaking) as a kind of trying on of other peoples clothes—a borrowing of power. I speak for a moment like my father. I assume the language of a teacher. I speak for one moment like they do in some movie. I borrow a phrase from a friend, a sentence construction from a lover. A writing that's more like sampling. Mixing, matching, cutting, pasting. Conscious, strategic and sometimes unconscious, out of control. I'm quoting and I don't even know it. Perhaps it's best to think of one's relationship to language like this, as the novelist Michael Moorcock once described a character 'skipping through fragments of half-remembered songs like a malfunctioning juke-box'.

And when my students mention this *voice* (a frighteningly singular thing) which comes from *themselves* I always have a second problem, because not knowing the voice I also fail to recognise (at least not with the same confidence) the 'self' of which they are speaking. For us, in the work and out of it, this notion of self has often seemed after all to be simply a collection of texts, quotations, strategic and accidental speakings—not a coherent thing, much less the single-minded author of some text. What I am, in this text (now) at

least, is no more (and no less) than the meeting-point of the language that flows into and flows out of me (these past years, months, days)—a switching station, a filtering and thieving machine, a space in which collisions take place.

Any regrets?

I once asked Ron Vawter (Wooster Group) if he ever wished they could deal with new texts instead of (as he described it to me) going back over the tapes of the twentieth century to see what had happened, to see what had gone wrong. He said yes, he could see a time when that might be fun, but for the moment at least there was so much work left to do. There's so much stuff left in the archives.

1. A broken text.
2. A discredited text.
3. A text to be utterly disowned by all those that perform it.
4. A series of texts in a language that doesn't work.

Perhaps our first subject was always this inadequacy of language. Its unsuitability for the job it has to do, its failure. And in this failure—by definition language is not and cannot express what it seeks to describe—an admission of the struggle in everyday life—to get blunt tools to do fine work, to carve out a life in, around, despite of and through what passes for culture in the late twentieth century.

And in this love of the blunt edges and limits of language he always cared most for illegitimate texts, finding hope and inspiration in the clichés of straight-to-video films, the tortuous prose of a book of instructions for chemistry experiments, a catalogue of the contents of a museum of curious, the simple language of cartoons, comic-strips, the disposable ease of plot summaries for a soap opera or the antiquated text of a fairy story or some mythical tale. The words 'good' and 'writing' never went together that well for us. Bad writing was always more our style. Language transfixed on its own inadequacy. Language at the point of breakdown, at the edges of sense, on the edge of not coping at all.

A writer of nonsense.

A writer of shapes that only look like letters.

A writer of filthy words.

Working on *Pleasure* (in summer 1997) we loved a text I downloaded from the Internet—a huge list entitled simply '2,334 Filthy Words and Phrases'—a pedant's catalogue of obscenities, slang words and descriptions containing some 500 alternative ways to say masturbate. First time I printed this list I left it running on the printer and on returning to the office some 20 minutes later

found that people there had stopped work and were gathered around the printer from which the text was still spewing. They were poring over the words like so many scholars and obsessives. They were, in a mixture of fascination and repulsion, reading out the lists to each other, revelling in the awfulness, the unsayableness, the unwriteableness of:

YANK THE MEAT

PISS-FLAPS

GET SOME HOLE

PUSH SHIT UPHILL

EAT HAIR PIE

BURP THE WORM

Language at the edges of sense, on the edge of not coping at all.

Our favourite game, working from this text in *Pleasure* rehearsals, was to write these words and others like them on a blackboard on the stage—a piece of kids' language instruction gone wrong, or a foreign language course with a bitter little twist. The words written calmly in capitals, the performers stood beside the blackboard, owning the text written up there, meeting the gaze of the audience like 'this is your lesson for today'.

Months afterwards we made a film *Filthy Words & Phrases* (1998) of Cathy writing each of these words, on a blackboard, in an old abandoned schoolroom. We shot in one continuous seven-hour take and by the end of it Cathy (and crew) were blank with exhaustion and white from the chalk dust. We premiered the film in a Rotterdam porn cinema and could never quite decide if the film was an attack on the profligate redundancy of language or a hymn of sorts to its absurd inventiveness and its complete commitment to change—a marathon naming of the parts in which language proliferates around a crisis.

1. A text for email.
2. A text to be written in blood.
3. A text in a made-up language.

Using gibberish in (*Let the Water Run its Course*) to the Sea that Made the Promise (1986) we used to talk a lot about the sound of voices coming through walls—like the blurred and awful sound of people arguing in the flat downstairs, the sounds of voices gabbling madly in a party—language reduced to its raw shapes, where listening, you do not know the words but you can guess what is being spoken of.

In *Hidden 7* (1994) Cathy and Robin speak a version of this gibberish too—only here it has become most definitely foreign—not a fucked-up English, but

a shattering of languages from broken Europe — Serb, Russian, Polish swinging to Italian in places. Cathy invisible in the house centre-stage and curtains drawn, speaking down the telephone — and incomprehensible — railing and whispering, yelling and urging, demanding, accusing. And outside the house all we see are the other performers waiting, some of them messing around, Richard peering, upstaging, but in the end all of them heads down, listening. It's not just the audience that listen to the text. Cathy railing and whispering, yelling and urging, demanding, accusing.

And for these moments the two cultures of the piece — drunk git English and war-zone Mainland — sit in their most appalling relationship — the one can neither see, help or understand the other at all. It's the opposite of those British Telecom ads where Bob Hoskins implores one that 'it's good to talk'; in this case it is no fucking good to talk.

A list of streets:

1. Hope Street
2. Furnace Lane
3. Winter Hill

4. Market Street. San Francisco's Oxford Street of lunacy and the wheelchair homeless — drunk and drugged crazies on every street corner; those that aren't lying in comatose sleep in doorways, or propped against the sides of buildings are the ones too fast for sleep — the ones each dancing to some inaudible tune — jigging, walking, twisting, turning (one woman beating the side of a trash can with glee in some unfinished, never-ending symphony of noise) — and all of them muttering in some individual yet strangely collective voice — whispers, threats, assumptions, delusions — random samplings from the last days of the mechanical age ...

... that was, pretty well, the kind of theatre or performance text I had in mind.

Or at least not the spectacle of 'new playwrights' at a 1997 conference in London's Royal Court Theatre whose biggest (almost only) topic of conversation seemed to be long long pontifications on the understanding of a comma. How directors and actors can't understand a comma these days. The terrible shame of it.

Hard for me to understand, having never much cared for punctuation.

I mean I'd rather say:

here are 26 letters:

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

now write a text for performance.

Never cared much for playwrights. And in any case in some recent shows the text was generated in good part by performer improvisation—in reaction to written stimulus or without it. In this way a two-paragraph fragment becomes a ten-minute monologue—a growing, generative process of improvisation, negotiation, discussion, more writing and eventual fixing. A kind of speaking that becomes writing.

Working in this way—around the rhythms of text that's at least half made-up on the spot he was interested in precisely those textures—of thought, repetition, self-correction, hesitation, and so on—in which speech excels and which writing can only begin to approximate. Working with video-tape and transcripts of improvisations they were concerned to capture some of that sense, in speech, of how a voice finds itself, of how language stumbles, corrects and then flies—explorations of the struggle and process of language itself. A concern with language not as text then, but as event.

A series of spells:

1. To Bewitch a Service Station at Midnight.
2. To Exorcise a Bad Spirit from a Housing Estate.
3. To Escape from Prison or Some Terrible Place.
4. To Bring Some Ecstasy Kid from a Coma
5. To Combat Insincerity in a Soap Opera
6. To Summon the Power of Angels.

In *200% & Bloody Thirsty* (1987/8) the characters try on the voices of angels as if by speaking like them they might have power to raise the dead. Borrowing language for your own purposes, for its power and authority, for its style. Language is always a suit of someone else's clothes you try on—the fit is not good but there's power in it.

Football fans on a train some months ago boasting about their drunken exploits at a previous game: 'We *proceeded* to the White Hart pub and we were there *observed* to drink several pints of lager.' The whole conversation taking place in the style of an arresting officer's report. Stealing other people's language to bolster your own power.

In performance we use the struggle to feel right in the text, and the distance between the performer and her text is always visible. In recent shows this gap is all the more visible because the text features as paper or script—a physical object which can be picked up, handled, subjected to scrutiny, curiosity, indifference, contempt. In the work you can see the performers eyeing up the text, wondering about it, knowing that whatever it is it isn't them.

Or, if the fit is good between performer and text, it is a good fit that has to

be struggled for and a fit that makes surprising use of the original material — the scenes of clichéd TV cop shit and emotion-drama in *Club of No Regrets* (1993/4) are smashed to pieces in Terry's final exertions as the 'character' Helen X — she jumbling the phrases, cuts from one scene to another, regardless of one sense whilst making another. It is like getting blood out of a stone but in the end she does get the material to mean for her, even if it is almost destroyed in the process.

The characters/performers always moving from outside language to a relationship in which they seem to own it.

Back on market.

One wrecked woman goes past me, her eyes wide, her arms folded tight across herself like she's a parcel wrapped too tight — she catches my eye and without breaking pace with her whisper, threatens out loud: 'Don't look at me you fucking psycho-killer.'

And I say: 'It takes one to know one.'

She follows me.

1. A text of obvious lies.

2. A text of promises.

3. A text of accusations.

How does Claire begin in *Hidden 7* (1994)?

Long ago and far away there was a country and all the people there were a bunch of fucking cunts ...

and of course she is talking about England and all the people on the stage.

1. Write like the text were by someone else.

2. Adopt another's handwriting.

1. Use a different pen.

1. Write the text on cardboard, as if this were the only thing you had left, scrawl on the cardboard like urgency erased all style.

and,

2. Write about personas.

I should talk about Mark E. Smith here. Better yet, read the back of The Fall's 1978 or 1979 *Totale's Turns* live album recorded in Working Men's Clubs in Wakefield, Doncaster, etc.

CALL YOURSELVES BLOODY PROFESSIONALS?

Was one of the shower-cum-dressing room comments The Fall received after completing their 'turn' which makes up side one of this record, along

with 'everybody knows the best groups cum from London' and 'You'll never work again'.

Enough, Side 1 was recorded in front of an 80% disco-weekend-mating audience, but we never liked preaching to the converted anyway. Side 2 other places — 'New Puritan' at home, during which said home was attacked by a drunk, which accounts for the tension on that track.

I don't particularly like the person singing on this LP. That said I marvel at his guts. This is probably the most accurate document of The Fall ever released, even though they'll have a hard time convincing their mams and dads about that, ha ha.

R. Totale XVII

Honorary Member

Wakefield Young Drinkers Club.

Smith always casting himself in other personas, as other people, as fucked up narrators with a bad attitude. Like Ballard's central character in his science fiction books who are always called Traven or Travis or Trabert or Talbot, sometimes called by all of these names in the space of one chapter. Always some version of the same bloke, whose name, like his identity is forever in question. Like I don't particularly like the person writing this text.

1. A text which sticks in the mouth, begging you not to say it.

2. A text that spills and slips and runs.

3. A text that no-one will ever hear.

In *Marina & Lee* (1990/91) Cathy delivered several of her texts at an ever-decreasing volume so that the final sections of each were completely inaudible.

I had to write these texts anyway but was puzzled for weeks about what to put in them. In some ways it didn't seem to matter at all but in other ways these seemed like the most important texts in the piece. What might one wish to say, but have no one hear?

1. A text where the voice is clear and sharp.

2. A text where the voice is compromised.

3. A text where the voice is under heavy pressure.

Watching the film *Performance* (Nicholas Roeg and Donald Cammell) and watching the 'character' of James Fox — East End gangster plunged into the underworld of drugs, rock'n'roll, hippie sexuality. Like Jack the Lad cannot cope. Like his voice cannot deal with the things it has to describe.

That's the thing you have to do with a voice after all — make it speak of the things that it cannot deal with — make it speak of the illegal.

I'm a man, I'm a man, I'm all fuckin man ...

James Fox as drugged out gangster transformed in wig, kimono and make-up, not able to cope.

That was something we always loved to do—play a gap between the voice and the bodies from which it arises. The teenage shop-girls were making physics lectures and then slipping into descriptions of long Russian winter romances. The bloke at a wedding was making an announcement about bombs in the car park. The clumsy pantomime skeletons were performing a very old poetic text. Like all the time these texts take the people who speak them by surprise.

Round midnight he made an end to his listing of texts and tried instead to think about silence. It was silent in the house. He made a list of silences, like the list from *Pleasure* (1998).

The kind of silence you sometimes get in phone calls to a person that you love.

The kind of silence people only dream of.

The kind of silence that is only for waiting in.

The kind of silence as a thief makes away with the gold.

The kind of silence that follows a car crash.

The kind of silence in a crowded house when everyone is asleep.

The kind of silence between waves at the ocean.

The kind of silence which follows a big argument.

The kind of silence that happens when you put your head under the water of the bath.

The kind of silence that only happens at night.

The kind of silence that happens when you close the curtains and climb into bed.

The kind of silence that has everything in it.