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Whispering secrets

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Abstract

These artist-reflections aim to give an insight into somatic-informed arts practices as acts of reconciliation and personal transformation in a post-World War II Europe. The author worked for more than twenty years in collaboration with writer and theatre director Julia Pascal, creating works that in her words aimed ‘to challenge the idea that theatre cannot explore the Holocaust imaginatively and without exploitation, sensation or sentimentality’. This collaboration culminated in a site-responsive choreographic performance *The Secret Listeners* that the author directed in 2012 using somatic-informed choreographic processes to construct an experiential journey designed as a guided tour for all participants. The article draws on the author’s artistic practice, including collaborative work with Pascal Theatre Company, and the author’s extended period of study with Holocaust survivor choreographer Hilde Holger (1905–2001). This work is contextualized through micro-narratives of the author’s family history.

Keywords

Holocaust

Feldenkrais method

corporeal theatre

European modern dance

reconciliation

heritage performance

somatic-informed choreography

Lighting a Candle

These artist-reflections aim to give an insight into somatic-informed arts practices as acts of reconciliation in a post-World War II Europe. I worked for more than twenty years in collaboration with British Jewish writer and theatre director Julia Pascal, creating works that in her words aimed 'to challenge the idea that theatre cannot explore the Holocaust imaginatively and without exploitation, sensation or sentimentality' (Pascal 2013: 13). Our collaboration culminated in a site-responsive performance *The Secret Listeners* that I directed in 2012 using somatic-informed choreographic processes to construct an experiential journey of spectatorship designed as a guided tour for all participants.

The article aims to retrace some acts of repair, through embodied artistic practices, of my own becoming as a male born in the post-World War II period in Germany. Over the last five years I have returned regularly to Germany to teach Feldenkrais-informed Contact Improvisation and dance workshops, often to groups of peers of my age. Again and again, after playful processes of gentle embodied undoing, I meet tearful familiar stories of past and unresolved trauma within my peers' families. The Jewish grandmother who committed suicide to protect the dancer's mother; the uncle in the SS; the brutal Nazi father who attempted to get his disabled brother 'euthanized'; the parents' fear and survival in the air raid shelters; the ex-Nazi teachers; the numbness; the distorted posture, the hardness of the muscular armour; the lack of empathetic or nurturing environment. I know it well. Am I

different? As an adult in my 50s who has lived most of his adult life abroad, who has taken time to experience, move and 're-move' much of his own distortion, I often feel distantly healed yet compassionately close to my peers. I feel liberated.

A few years back my brother confessed to me that what radicalized him in his world-views early on in his life was the reading of a brown paperback book discovered in my parents closet – a printed documentation from the Nuremberg trials about Concentration Camps in Germany. I had read the same book, I was stunned by the same images of skin turned into lampshades, cut up bodies, heaps and heaps of corpses, stories of mutilation, sadism, torture, execution chambers, industrial scale of disembodiment and murder. How do you face the world knowing about this as an 8 or 9 year old? How can you want to become a male, when you see each adult male as a possible perpetrator or victim?

I stepped aside. As a young art student I worked with Performance Artist Harry Kramer, who introduced me to Tom Waits, Billie Holiday, John Cage, Installation and Body Art. I found in theatre, dance and performance art a possibility to interact with the world in different ways; to step out of domination and abuse; to re-imagine myself, to re-image male identity through the means of performance.

Figure 1: *Lighting a Candle....* Basement Gallery (Newcastle upon Tyne 1983) Photograph ©

Thomas Kampe.

In the performance *Lighting a Candle is more Sensible than Complaining about Darkness* presented in the Basement Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1983, I explored telling stories of childhood, dream and patriarchal abuse, through movement, song and the use of

projection. As concluding simple action I placed myself naked, with blackened genitals and chest and a dismembered doll strapped onto my back, into a John Heartfield collage of grim looking World War I male army personnel titled 'Animals are looking at you'. How can I belong?

Danced with Jewess (1)

On 9 November 2008 I presented a piece called *Danced with Jewess* at Tanzfabrik Berlin. The improvised performance coincided with the 70th anniversary of the anti-Semitic Pogroms in Germany of 1938. I began the event by standing at the entrance of the venue with a large upside down portrait of the Jewish choreographer Hilde Holger strapped to my chest with the script '... Danced with Jewess' written on the sign, in resemblance of the anti-Semitic self-accusatory signs that German Citizens, who had had sexual relations with a Jew, were paraded with through the streets after 1934.

Figure 2: Hilde Holger; Photograph ©Alisa Douer.

The piece included the presenting of footage of 95-year-old Hilde Holger breathing on her deathbed – shown with permission of Holger's daughter – while interacting with spectators, and dancing to a secretly recorded tape of Holger greeting me at her door in Camden in the early 1990s. Holger here tells a joke differentiating between people who should be onstage, and those who should stay offstage. Hilde is dead, but bemused.

I studied and collaborated with Hilde Holger for thirteen years in London. A European dance tradition which was rooted in the Bodenwieser Method, was transmitted to students by the aged Holger in an intimate setting, where creativity and 'being a good human being' (Holger 1988) were essential part of her artistic handwriting. Dancing for her and for us, her students, was a gentle act of repair within a sheltered place. And in unspoken agreement a group of students who understood the cultural context of her work, took turns to go to her classes to continue this danced and embodied dialogue. Working with her meant an embodied commitment outside of traditional studio boundaries;

Figure 3: Holger teaching in her studio in Camden 1990s, Photographs ©Thomas Kampe.

Each dance we performed for Holger, enriched and revitalized her, at times waking her up while she was falling asleep teaching. Hilde shared her secrets with us. Her unprepared classes, the small improvised studies performed in class were a mantra for survival, an act of resistance for her in honour of her vanished family. She had survived, dance had survived. Not Hitler.

Danced with a Jewess (2)

In 1990 I began collaborating with Pascal Theatre Company in London, bringing my visual and somatic artistic knowledge into the text-based work of the company. The first project *Theresa*, written by Julia Pascal, mixed the true story of Viennese Jew Therese Steiner and verbatim material from British actor and Warsaw Ghetto survivor Ruth Posner who, then in her late 60s, played the lead role in the play. Therese Steiner was deported from the Island of Guernsey in the 1940s with the help of the British Authorities who delivered all foreign

Jews to the Germans. She died in Auschwitz. The play used text, movement, dance and song as a Brechtian episodic narration to embody a questioning of British collaboration with the Nazis. We performed the play in Germany, the United Kingdom and France, with a final week of performances in Vienna in 2003, the home of Therese Steiner.

Figure 4: *Theresa* (London, 1990); performer – Sarah Finch, choreographer – Thomas Kampe; photograph© Pascal Theatre Company.

I performed the male lead opposite Ruth Posner. Finding a trusting dialogue between Ruth and myself was a difficult act. As a young, inexperienced actor I was playing numerous German males, Jewish boys, a British policeman and the German soldiers who had to brutalize and arrest her. At times I had to change roles from victim to perpetrator within seconds. How could I rehearse performing the Hitler salute with gusto in West London Synagogue in front of a Holocaust survivor? I felt nothing but shame and resistance. I could feel the dis-ease of Ruth. Or was I imaging this? How could I play the seduction of a young woman onstage in the guise of a Nazi soldier? How can I enact my sexuate assertive masculinity, while embodying evil? I met my limitations, my fears, my deepest cultural pain. My association of male with strength, strength with violence and abuse, father with evil, sexuality with rape and pain.

The rehearsal process was a learning process, a negotiation between all participants, a gentle, often humorous guiding, a therapy and befriending. I learnt that I could learn – to be violent, to enjoy the beating of a Jew, that I can switch on sound-cue, like a Pavlovian dog,

from angry defiant suicidal son to violent beast. That I can move from an angst-ridden dance of death to a playful game of seduction within a few seconds. I learnt to speak in the voices of anti-Semites. At the end of the play, to the harsh thundering sounds of trains, I stand holding on to Ruth Posner in the fading spotlight. I am the aggressor, symbolizing the annihilation of the European Jews. My grip of Theresa's arm symbolizes domination and murder, yet I hold Ruth with care and she leans trustingly against me. In the blackout we guide each other offstage. We are safe. The story must be told. A performance of *Theresa* in the ex-concentration camp Breitenau, near my hometown Kassel in Germany, that had its dark secret exposed through the critical journalism of the young Ulrike Meinhof, brought myself and Ruth Posner together with groups of German teenagers. Ruth told her story of surviving to the silent group of school children, and she notes that this moment of collective listening brought trust, hope and potential personal resolution as cultural healing back into her life.

Figure 5: Ruth Posner as Theresa (London, 1990); Photograph ©Pascal Theatre Company.

In 1995 the *Theresa* cast travelled to Munich, to open the Jewish Cultural Festival at the large Gasteig Theatre. Before the performances a fellow actor asks me to join her to visit the Dachau concentration camp memorial site: 'Some of my family vanished there'. Three company members travel to the site of horror. I remember two moments very clearly. At the entrance of the memorial centre a room with large images of arriving inmates. I burst into tears sobbing uncontrollably. My colleague actor Sarah Finch comforts me. What is it that suddenly overwhelms me? The images suddenly become too familiar – the arriving prisoners have nothing in common with the emaciated skeletal images that I have often

seen as the horror of the Nazi death-machine. They show ordinary people, of all ages, yet all male; they are not othered yet ; not yet part of what J. M. Bernstein (2004) called the 'pornography of horror'. They are me and you in their still intact embodied dignity.

I visit the gas chamber. I step inside, stand in this unimaginable space a little too long. I have the privilege to stand here – and to walk out again. Everything in life is pulled into perspective, renewed. At night we perform *Theresa* in English and German in front of 1200 people. Our performance attacks the story with unusual intensity. Munich was the heart of the Nazi Movement before the war, and we are playing for German survivors.

Figure 6: Photograph ©Thomas Kampe.

In a danced scene that invokes the mimed beating and torturing of a male character, I end up hanging and falling from a rope, normally attached to the stage wall. At the Gasteig, the rope is long and attached to the rig at the high ceiling of the theatre. At the end of the scene I jump at the rope. The rope swings, across the stage. For a moment I am flying above the audience, somewhere, a delirious angel, angel of death, an angel of life.

For the piece *The Dybbuk* (1993–2010), a re-telling of Ansky's myth of a person who dies too early and must return, I designed a set of walls, heaps of clothes, ladders and objects, as a transforming installation for the performers within an imagined Ghetto in Eastern Europe. I choreographed and danced a 'dance of death' as a solo and duet, which the *Guardian* describes as 'profoundly disturbing in its ability to [...] combine beauty with horrible intent'.

Figure 7: Thomas Kampe in *The Dybbuk* (London, 1993); Photograph © Pascal Theatre Company.

My face whitened with flower and my abdomen drawn in deeply I transform into a walking skeleton, an emaciated Auschwitz Muselmann, stumbling between life and death. I performed this role between 1993 and 1995, and then again in 1998. How do I trade this role on to another actor? How do I stay true to my own personal embodied responses, and give space for the enaction of the narrative through the visceral truthfulness of new performers. I reworked the piece twice in dialogue Swedish actor Stefan Karsberg and a wonderfully dynamic new cast. Do we share the same cultural references? That brown paperback book that I discovered as a boy?

Figure 8: Adi Lerer and Stefan Karsberg in *The Dybbuk* (New York City, 2010); Photograph © Thomas Kampe.

The Secret Listeners

In 2012 I directed the large scale performance project *The Secret Listeners* as a site-responsive guided tour. The project was designed as a heritage arts project, in response to recorded transcripts by high ranking World War II prisoners of war interned in Trent Park Mansion, London between 1943 and 1945. The piece used verbatim material, secretly recorded conversations by Nazi Officers, and the original site of the recordings as a starting point for intergenerational dialogue with audiences mainly consisting of elderly Jewish London residents; often either Holocaust survivors or the children of Holocaust survivors.

Figure 9: *The Secret Listeners* (London 2012); Photograph © Mike Tsang.

The performers were young students or school children between 17 and 22 years old, often of non-European cultural heritage, with little or no cultural or historical knowledge of the period. By the end of the day of performances I was deeply moved and exhausted. Even though I had worked for nearly twenty years with Holocaust topics and survivors, rehearsing and responding through embodiment processes, together with young people in a historically difficult site, demanded empathy and a cold heart at the same time. Witnessing the journey made by elderly Jewish people through the site, queuing to climb down a long flight of stairs to make sure they would experience the whole project was utterly moving. I spent time holding hands with an elderly couple, guiding them through the more uneasy scenes within the piece. We shared tears and had the most moving conversation about the need to be released from the trauma of our parents' generation.

I used somatic-informed processes, dance-theatre and choreographic strategies to create an embodied and empathetic experience, for both the performers and the participating audiences. As a director I deliberately chose unusual and 'difficult' spaces. Each of these was slightly problematic, difficult to access or view (photos). Spectators were constantly asked to shift focus and attention to different spaces during the event. A steep staircase required great care. A dark, damp narrow outside-corridor demanded that audience hold on to one another or that they be supported by the 'nurses'. The experiential 'problems' and disorientation within the piece were understood as psycho-physical stimuli for the spectators. They too became performers. Participating spectators described the experience as 'multi-dimensional and deep':

The way we were guided through the narrow corridors made me feel like I was a prisoner at times. (<http://secretlisteners.pascal-theatre.com/audience-feedback/>)

[...] it was pleasing to see such a wide ranging audience including many young and non-Jewish people there. (<http://secretlisteners.pascal-theatre.com/audience-feedback/>)

Figure 10: Agnes Funradi in *The Secret Listeners* (London, 2012); Photograph © Mike Tsang.

Our key concern was not to create linear, chronological narratives but to create an open montage form that allowed for a broad range of readings to stimulate questions and debate about the encountered narratives and location, and to allow for personal, perhaps visceral responses by the spectators. A woman dressed in a night gown in an officer's bedroom tells a story of Nazi atrocities from a German general's perspective, moving and gesturing in close proximity to the spectators. This cross-gender visual image appears to make no sense. Abandoning visual logic forces us to pay more attention to the narration of the text and to the kinaesthetic experience of the spectators' sharing this tight space with this agitated woman. The image was created as an ambiguous juxtaposition. The woman's body evokes qualities of vulnerability, intimacy, sensuality and domesticity in harsh contrast to the reporting of mass shootings of Jews and Russian POWs on the Eastern Front of World War II.

Figure 11: Harriett Wakefield in *The Secret Listeners*; Photograph ©Mike Tsang.

In a scene performed simultaneously in the 'neighbouring bedroom', a narrator speaks from the inside of a cupboard. While the cupboard door was gently opened by a 'nurse', the narrator, a man in evening dress emerged reciting texts about gas chambers originally spoken by German Generals. The figure in the walk-in wardrobe becomes, through the use of bodily posture, for one moment a person pushed into a confined space, then, while exiting and addressing the surrounding spectators transforms into a confident general speaking to his peers. The scene concludes with the male figure sliding off the bed, which is being lifted by two nurse/military characters. He slumps to the ground resembling a corpse thrown into a mass-grave. The nurse then asks the spectators to leave the room. This project was an experiment designed to facilitate learning in multi-dimensional ways – factual, experiential, personal and communal – and sought to find a form of contemporary storytelling that does not ignore living beings, subjectivity, emotions and contradictions. As audience members commented, such project 'helps to restore my faith in the young generation', and 'the young people were a reminder of the generation that was lost'.

1

Epilogue 'Mother'

In 2001 I directed *Dora Experiment* a piece based around texts by Julia Pascal for Rose Bruford ETA programme. For some of the research I decide to visit the concentration camp Dora Mittelbau in Nordhausen Thuringia, a slave labour satellite of death-camp Buchenwald nearby. After tearful discussions on 'Why are you always doing these things against Germany?' – 'But I am doing these things against the culture that killed your father!', my

mother decides to join me visit the camp. We visit the crematorium that is covered in beautiful paintings of flowers on the walls and around the ovens, painted by the prisoners. In the archives we discover that the last 'Director of Planning' of the camp, Albin Sawatzki, had worked in the Henschel train and arms factory in Kassel where my grandfather had been his superior, prior to Sawatzki's career-move to Dora. My Mother revealed that Sawatzki had blackmailed my grandfather for refusing to greet him with the Hitler salute – subsequently my social democrat grandfather lost his job, and Sawatzki was promoted. We read that after the war in 1945 Sawatzki was discovered by a group of Polish ex-slave workers in a hospital in the town of Warburg and was beaten to death by them.

In 2013 my family celebrated my Ph.D. award in the city of Dresden; prior to the evening meal we visited the grave of my grandfather who, as a Social Democrat, had been abducted by the Russian secret service after the war in Berlin in 1947, was incarcerated in the ex-concentration camp in Sachsenhausen, and died in the infamous East German prison of Bautzen in 1953. My brother had discovered the mass grave with the remains of my Grandfather and all remaining documentation about him, a few weeks before. This discovery of my grandfather's grave 60 years after his disappearance, and a family celebration that brought my mother in touch with the resting place of her father, blended into a celebration of my Ph.D. that had articulated the integration of Feldenkrais-informed processes into performance making practices. My work with the cast of the 2010 tour of *The Dybbuk* in New York City had formed the culminating project within my artistic research, which Julia Pascal (2010) had described as an 'opening [...] you are always opening; opening new rooms in the house , opening new doors, opening new experiences'. At the end of the shared meal I ask my family members to join hands, one hand on top of the other, as a small

choreographic ritual for the connecting of past and present in different generations, a brief moment of repair, to embrace and undo and un-fear our cultural trauma.

Figure 12: Photograph © Thomas Kampe.

Some text in the section on *The Secret Listeners* has been published in the book Pascal and Kampe's *The Secret Listeners* (2012).

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Contributor details

Thomas Kampe (Ph.D.) was born in Kassel, Germany and works as Senior Lecturer for Acting at Bath Spa University, UK. He is a teacher of the Feldenkrais Method[®] which forms a foundation for his teaching, research and artistic practice. Thomas has worked as a performance maker and pedagogue across the globe. Choreographic collaborations have included works with *Liz Aggiss*, *Laura Belem*, *Carol Brown*, *Hilde Holger*, *Rosemary Lee*, and

an extensive exchange with theatre-director *Julia Pascal* over two decades. His most recent publications on Somatics and criticality include the chapter 'The art of making choices: The Feldenkrais Method as a soma-critique' (Triarchy Press, 2015), and 'Eros and inquiry – The Feldenkrais method as a complex resource' (TDPT 2015). He is currently working with Carol Brown on re-embodiment of the *Bodenwieser Method*, a seminal Central European Modernist Dance practice, through somatic-informed processes.

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Note

¹ <http://secretlisteners.pascal-theatre.com/audience-feedback/>.