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A Victory for Real People: dangers in the discourse of democratisation

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Abstract:

In this essay, I will examine the development of a growing trend of democratisation in British contemporary theatre that seeks to reject the expertise of playwrights, actors or professional ensembles in favour of verbatim material drawn from a range of the public selected for their ordinariness, or conceptual frameworks within which the audience themselves construct and perform the aesthetic content of the work.

This essay seeks to highlight how the discursive and aesthetic framing of real people in this context can, in certain instances, be seen to reflect the construction of ‘real, ordinary people’ in the political discourse surrounding the 2016 EU Referendum in the UK. In both cases, ‘real people’ are understood to be in opposition to those who might be said to hold particular professional expertise and also, commonly, to those of a more privileged socio-economic status: the so-called ‘liberal elite’. With reference to Rimini Protokoll’s *100% Salford*, The National Theatre of Great Britain’s *My Country*, and Kaleider’s *The Money* I will suggest that this particular discourse of democratisation, in both politics and theatre, can too easily conceal the expertise that lies behind the construction of ‘real people’ and their narratives.

‘If the predictions now are right, this will be a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people’, (Nigel Farage, 24 June 2016).

‘Those who still believe Britain has made a mistake in leaving the EU are just patronising members of a liberal metropolitan elite’, (Theresa May in Crace).

‘People in this country have had enough of experts’, (Michael Gove in Mance).

In this essay, I will examine some emerging and unsettling parallels between the construction of ‘real people’ in contemporary theatrical discourse and practice, and that same construction within the political discourse of right-wing politicians in the UK. I locate the propensity for contemporary theatre to replace actors with real people in performance, or to replace playwrights with real people’s testimonies, as a democratisation of theatre practice that emerged as a critique of, and alternative to, the model of dramatic theatre that historically underpinned the state-of-the-nation play and a broad swathe of political drama in the 1970s and 1980s. The trend for democratisation can be perceived across diverse models of theatre practice, most notably, as I will discuss, the theatre of real people, verbatim theatre and participatory performance. There is nothing intrinsic to these forms of practice that logically or inevitably results in the particular construction of ‘real people’ that I am exploring in this essay, but the tendency in that direction is growing and remains, for the most part, unchecked and unremarked by critical scrutiny. This essay thus seeks to highlight precisely how the discursive and aesthetic framing of real people can, in particular contexts, be seen to reflect the construction of ‘real, ordinary people’ in political discourse. In both cases, ‘real people’ are understood in opposition to those who might be said to hold particular professional expertise and also, commonly, to those of a more privileged socio-economic status: the so-called ‘liberal elite’. I will suggest that this particular discourse of democratisation, in both politics and theatre, can too easily conceal the expertise that lies behind the construction of ‘real people’ and their narratives. In this way, such narratives are constituted as ‘authentic’

and are consequently imbued with authority and protection from critical challenge or debate, despite being both subjective and unsubstantiated. The operation of this manoeuvre in theatre practice is more often playful than malign, but I believe that, given the potentially catastrophic consequences of the same manoeuvre in political discourse, the parallels require highlighting and further consideration, at the very least.

The democratisation of contemporary theatre has been driven by a number of concerns. Perhaps most notably, the critique advanced by Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999) of the dramatic model, that highlighted its potential for autocratic authorship and ideological steer; charges to which the state-of-the-nation play that rose to prominence in the 1970s was particularly vulnerable. Plays such as Howard Brenton's *The Churchill Play* (1974), David Edgar's *Destiny* (1976), and David Hare's 1990s trilogy, *Racing Demon* (1990), *Murmuring Judges* (1991) and *The Absence of War* (1993) exemplified a dramatic tradition that privileged an analysis of the state of the nation from a single individual's political perspective, made more limiting by the prevalence of middle-class, white men in the forefront of the playwriting profession. Subsequently, when UK theatre's interest in the politics of the nation became revitalised in the Millennium, the turn to staging real people and telling real people's narratives became increasingly popular due, in part, to the capacity of those forms to celebrate a diverse pluralism of authors, actors and narratives.

The pluralism that is so central to the democratisation of theatre can also be understood as a response to the binary ideological lens of Marxism through which most state-of-the-nation plays were constructed. In their seminal text, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe proposed that the Marxist understanding of the democratic vision was fundamentally flawed due to its insistence on 'dividing the totality of the social body into two antagonistic camps' (135). By filtering all questions of oppression, injustice and inequality through the totalising lens of a

class-based dichotomy (the workers and the bourgeoisie) Marxism had failed to account for the complexity of a society that could no longer be meaningfully split into two clear, opposing factions as has been the case in pre-Revolutionary times, and in so doing so had failed to adequately address the wider field of oppression, injustice and inequality that was not neatly aligned with the economic antagonisms between classes. Laclau and Mouffe concluded that

The rejection of privileged points of rupture and the confluence of struggles into a unified political space, and the acceptance, on the contrary, of the plurality and indeterminacy of the social, seem to us the two fundamental bases from which a new political imaginary can be constructed (136).

The nation, in theatre and beyond it, was increasingly to be configured as a more complex, social terrain than that identified by historical Marxism, on which multiple, overlapping and sometimes contradictory antagonistic relationships could be identified and challenged, including those of gender, sexuality and race as well as relationships of economic or class oppression. Thus, the radical potential in the turn to theatres of real people, verbatim and participatory performance, lies in the capacity of such forms to replace the theological playwright with a multiplicity of subjects telling their own stories of subject-hood. In this way, theatre is able to better reflect the diversity of communities and concerns that can no longer be accommodated within a singular view of a singular nation. Notwithstanding such radical potential, this essay will now interrogate the political risks involved in the increasingly prevalent construction of ‘real people’ and their narratives, on the contemporary stage.

Discourses of Real, Ordinary People

Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford define the ‘real people’ who populate the model of theatre that their study explores by the following criteria: that they

have a verifiable physical existence ... usually have not received institutional theatre training and have little or no prior stage experience ... who present aspects of their own selves... rather than those of fictional or devised characters ...are distinguished by the self-representational and either fully or partially self-devised nature of their presentations. (5)

This would seem to suggest that the signifier ‘real’ in this sense is defined by two key oppositions: people that are not fictional characters, and people that are not theatre professionals. Yet there is an additional characteristic that is less foregrounded in the study, which is that ‘real people’ are required to be predominantly from different – to be explicit, less privileged - socio-economic backgrounds than those to which the theatre audiences and practitioners are perceived to belong. While the nature of the anticipated audience is not explicitly dealt with by Garde and Mumford, the specific distinctions between the real people and their assumed audience are detailed and telling:

A significant contributor to a sense of the unfamiliar in the production we explore is the staging of people who may be perceived by those involved as different, foreign or insufficiently known. This is because of, first, their occupational, socio-economic, and ethnic background, and second, their status as ‘theatre strangers’ – that is, as non-professional performers who do not usually perform their everyday activities in the theatre and thus represent a kind of ‘foreign body’

on stage.... Sources of the former's unfamiliarity include personal idiosyncrasy and social-class differences that can be expressed through elements of verbal and non-verbal expression, body language, elements of costume and clothing, as well as the actions performed as part of a show. A major source of the latter's unfamiliarity is their transgression of dominant theatre conventions. (90)

Here, it becomes apparent that 'real people' are not only 'not fictional' and 'not theatre professionals' but they are also defined by their 'social-class differences' from an anticipated, predominantly middle-class audience, as detailed above. By not explicitly speaking the name of class in an analysis of the aesthetic of theatres of real people, however much it might be inferred, the capacity for such theatre to operate politically, I would argue, becomes significantly constrained. In the work produced by Matthias Lilienthal that Garde and Mumford's study focuses on, there is the danger of exoticisation, exemplified in Lilienthal's own 'hysterical yearning for reality ... [hysterische Sehnsucht nach Realität]' (53). The aesthetic value underprivileged lives hold in their consumption within a more-privileged audience experience echoes a dark practice of voyeurism that has a long history from the Victorian tours of the slums, to present day tourist incursions into the native traditions of poverty-stricken parts of the global south for the tourists' own education and entertainment.

The obscured value of socio-economic under-privilege in Garde and Mumford's invocation of 'real people' also concerns me given the regular iteration of the same phrase, and the same socio-economic characteristics, in the current right-wing rhetoric of populist demagogues such as Nigel Farage, and that of many Conservative ministers. Farage's binary use of 'real' in his infamous post-Referendum victory speech did not, of course, position 48% of those who voted as fictional, but as the privileged 'other', or 'liberal elite' to the 'real,

ordinary people' who were assumed to inhabit a working or lower middle-class demographic that remained most often unspoken but implied. In his public lecture, 'Nationalism, referendums and political choice in England and Scotland: The rise of identity politics and the decline of Labour', delivered at the University of Glasgow in 2017, Professor Robert Ford 'outed' the unspoken characteristics of those also known as real and ordinary in a categorisation which was a complex mix of class and the identity discourses that often question old Marxist allegiances. Recent demographic shifts, Ford argued, have sown divisions in society that are now producing new fault lines in a differently divided nation state between the young and the old, the graduates and the school leavers and the immigrants and descendants of immigrants, and those with long-standing indigenous family histories. The 'real, ordinary people' hailed by Farage, Ford characterises as the 'left-behinds'; those in which the older generations are preponderant; generations in which the graduate contingent is much lower, and the generational memory of family migration much less common. In Ford's categorisation, the real, ordinary people are, for the most part, the old industrial working class, with long-standing indigenous histories and low levels of educational, cultural and economic capital who rightly perceive that they are a constituency in decline, their political power waning as the demographics of increased migration, new generations of mixed-heritage citizens and rising levels of graduates among the general population point to a future in which the constituency defined by Ford as 'confident cosmopolitans' will inevitably become the dominant electoral force.

The unspoken correlation of 'real people' and low socio-economic status is, of course, important to be kept unspoken in right wing and mainstream political rhetoric precisely because those speaking it do not wish to highlight the degree to which their own privilege sets them apart from the 'real, ordinary people' with whom they are claiming kinship. By excluding economic discourse, and keeping the emphasis on a parochial, nationalist,

patriarchal, conservative and heteronormative ‘ordinariness’, signified by a pint in the pub, or sexist ‘locker room’ banter, Farage and U.S. President Donald Trump, who operates precisely the same tactics, can maintain the fiction that they are real and ordinary too, just like those who vote for them, when understood in opposition to the liberal social values and cosmopolitanism of the so-called elite.

Historically, the inclusion of marginalised, or under-privileged voices on the stage has been recognised as a strategy by which precisely such manoeuvres and manipulations from dominant ideological narratives can be exposed and challenged. From the theatres of Erwin Piscator, who regularly incorporated amateur performers into his documentary practice (Garde and Mumford, 26) to the autobiographical performances of feminist and gay rights traditions, the working class or otherwise marginalised identity of the performer was explicit and vital to the political potential of the practice. Whether it was the body and experience of the worker in Piscator’s Marxist framework, or the body and experience of the female under patriarchy or the homosexual under heteronormativity, the performer spoke from a politicised identity that had a specific and significant role of expertise to play in the ideological discourse of the performance. However, in contemporary manifestations of this democratising tradition, the political authority of the performer is too often incapacitated and the ‘real people’ are too often reduced to de-contextualised figures speaking subjective and individualised perspectives that attain authority merely from being framed as ‘real’, as I will now detail.

Authorising the Authentic

The performance of Rimini Protokoll’s *100% Salford* (7 May 2016) that I attended at the Lowry, in Salford, Greater Manchester was one of many international iterations of the company’s *100% City* project that grew out of the original *100% Berlin*, presented at the

Hebbel Theatre in Berlin as part of the theatre's 100th birthday celebrations in February, 2008. The show's format involves the participation of 100 local residents, each selected to represent 1% of certain statistics about the city in which the project takes place. Once all the participants are on stage, they are asked to stand on a range of projected lighting areas, such as each of the different districts of Salford, or the demographics of the city according to age or ethnicity. Following the statistical mapping, where each participant is a representative of a factual figure, a series of statements are offered to the participants, and two locations are highlighted under the headings of 'Me' or 'Not Me', to which the performers move to in response to each question. The questions range from the habitual, for example, 'Those who have been to a football match', to subjective and politically-charged positions such as 'Those who think adoption should only be allowed for heterosexual couples'. The lights then go out, and with each participant only locatable by an anonymous spot light, the questions get more personal: 'Who has had an affair', 'Who has a crush on someone else in the cast', 'Who watches porn'.

This structure thus operates a seamless slippage from the authority afforded by the statistical representation of accurate demographic aspects of a city in the first section of the piece, into the greater part of the show in which the numbers, balances and percentages on the stage are not representative of some greater actuality, but consist of individual and subjective statements, preferences and opinions, that are nevertheless imbued with a sense of statistical authority carried over from the earlier sections of the piece. The more the individuals on stage became less representative of objective facts and more authorial of subjective opinions, the more their empowerment as individual performers arguably increases. However, this is not a progressive political empowerment but merely, as Jon Dovey observes in his turn of the century analysis of reality TV, a performance 'of the ordinariness of their own extraordinary subjectivity' that is ultimately 'part and parcel of neo liberal economics' (4).

Unlike the historical models of Piscator, or the autobiographical work of the feminist and gay rights movements, here there is no discernible potential to situate personal despair, illness, daily habits or subjective opinion within a systemic ideological context or to expose each participant's confessions or opinions to critical evaluation or debate. The degree to which events in each individual's life were perceived as the achievements or misfortune of the individual alone was reflected in the audience's, often inappropriate, applause for testimonies of illness, recovery and even contemplations of suicide, that constituted the final section of the production. Everything here was the fault or success only of the individual concerned, and every opinion was implicitly authorised and validated by virtue of the constructed authenticity of personal disclosure alone.

This reflects not only the trajectory of reality TV, as observed by Dovey, but the subsequent explosion of social media platforms to support the proliferation of what might be termed hyper-ordinary personal narratives and performances of opinion and disclosure on the public stage of the internet. The democratisation of information and communication online, just I am proposing in the context of theatre practice, is double edged. On the one hand, it enables a multiplicity of voices and perspectives to challenge and counter the dominant hegemonic authority much more easily and pervasively than was historically the case. On the other, it can confer questionable authority on individual, subjective and inaccurate opinions, that if circulated sufficiently, can too easily be constituted as fact.

In this context, I'd now like to turn to the National Theatre's *My Country: A Work in Progress* (2017), an example of verbatim theatre which, I will argue, uncritically replicates the dangers of a mediatised democracy, in particular the growing political reliance on the voices of 'real people' through vox pop extracts that are then framed as evidence and so, in turn, begin to constitute the public opinion they are purported to reflect. One way in which *My Country* can be read, perhaps unsurprisingly given the strong and well-voiced Remain

stance of director Rufus Norris, is precisely as the tragedy of what happens when public opinion is authorised in this way; when the voices of the experts of the everyday – to use Rimini Protokoll’s terminology – are foregrounded over those of the experts of matters of state, and given the authority to decide the future state of their nation. Yet I will argue that the production missed its opportunity to critique the mechanisms through which the victory for Leave was arguably orchestrated, and indeed perpetuated the political limitations of certain pluralist verbatim forms and the vox pops tradition.

My Country includes original poetic text written by Carol Ann Duffy but is largely composed of interviews conducted after the referendum success of the Leave campaign. The regions personified by six of the seven actors cover a reasonable cross section of the UK – Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, East Midlands, South West and North East; and the testimonies spoken are drawn from a wide range of ages and ethnic backgrounds. Yet the predominant narrative, it felt to me on watching it, was still one told by the ‘real, ordinary people’ who were likely to be furthest removed from the watching audience – in my case Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre (12 May 2017). The voices of the businessman, teacher and doctor were present, but marginal, as were the arguments for Remain, although these were at least also spoken by those from areas of economic deprivation. Much more dominant throughout, however, were the familiar voices and familiar perspectives from the Brexit and post-Brexit vox pops that dominated the air waves of the BBC and other mainstream media: stories of immigrants jumping benefits queues, the cultural dominance of migrant communities, the betrayal of traditional industry, the difficulty of making ends meet, and the distrust of elites and politicians. Like the attempts to balance vox pops, the rejoinders were there, but the character of the ‘left-behind’ Leave voter was dominant throughout, the familiar, predictable narrative repeated so many times it began to take on the guise of the truth to constitute the public opinion it was purported to reflect. The danger of this practice,

in both pluralist verbatim and vox pops, is that, just as was the case in *100% Salford*, the constructed authenticity of the ‘real’ and the ‘ordinary’ affords an entirely spurious authority to the subjective opinions that are made public. Crucially, in all cases, such opinions are furthermore severed from any ideological context, and protected, by virtue of their authenticity and non-expert status, from critical challenge or debate.

In one sense, *My Country* can be read as the tragedy of what can happen when public opinion is authorised in this way, as seen from the perspective of the personified figure of Britannia who is chairing the proceedings, speaking here in the words of poet Carol Ann Duffy:

I am your memory, your dialects, your cathedrals,
your mosques and markets, schools and pubs,
your woods, mountains, rivers ...
your motorways and railway lines, your hospitals,
your cenotaphs with paper poppies fading in the rain. (38)

Although the published script doesn’t signal so clearly where the politics of the production lies, the performance choices were explicit that the result of ‘Leave’ that was announced towards the end of the performance, was a catastrophe: the lights dimmed, the music was sorrowful, and Britannia was a physically broken figure, leaving the section entitled ‘The Vote’ hanging by a long pause that followed her speaking Farage’s words, the tone of victory notably absent: ‘Let June 23 go down in our history as our Independence Day’ (Duffy, 49). In the final two brief sections, the voices of the Regions themselves, who had playfully contested each other throughout, are silent; and to a backdrop of the voices of those interviewed, and the cacophony of the plurality of perspectives on the result, the set is cleared

away by the actors with slow, heavy movements, to a soundtrack of defeat, the light growing dimmer and dimmer as the space slowly empties to leave Britannia alone with her closing lines:

I have loved you all for ever. You children of these changing, feisty, funny, generous islands. The seeds of our circumstances flower into our actions. We cannot stand in judgement on each other's lives. But we should seek and search and strive for good leadership. Are you listening? Do I hear you listening? (Duffy, 58)

Matricide, if not self-harm, the production suggests, is what has been done to Britannia at the hands of its 'feisty, funny, generous' children. This is what happens, the production implicitly suggests, when the well-known words of Michael Gove, voiced by Britannia in the play, are heeded: 'I think the people in this country have had enough of experts. I'm not asking the people to trust us. I'm asking them to trust themselves.' (Duffy, 31) But the experts in the political context had not, of course, exited stage left (or even right), leaving democracy in the hands of 'real, ordinary people'. The experts were there, behind the scenes and, at a distance like Barthes' theological author, were busily writing the narrative that was required and the script that would be seized upon, to persuade the people to vote in a particular way. This is not to say that those who voted Leave were strategically manipulated while those who voted Remain were somehow above such naivety. It was simply that Farage's expert authorship had far outshone the narrative told by the experts of neoliberal economic rationality as I will now detail.

Drawing on E. E. Schattschneider, Rob Ford explained in his public lecture, how political organisation is 'the mobilisation of bias (69). That is to say that out of the vast number of arguments and opinions out there in the electorate, only a small number are

selected by politicians and their media support structures (or should that, in the UK, be the other way around?) to be what Schattschneider terms ‘organised into’ the public debate (69). Ford identified three key issues that were ‘organised in’ to the Brexit debate: identity, sovereignty and immigration – the very issues that spoke to some of the most heated divisions between the opinions of the left behinds and the opinions of the confident cosmopolitans. What Farage succeeded in doing, Ford argued, was to shape the very terms of the argument in such a way that threatened to exclude the economic concerns that might have formed an area of common ground between the two constituencies. As Schattschneider concludes: ‘the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power’ (66), and Farage wielded his instrument like an expert.

The terms of debate for the Brexit argument were posed by the media uptake of Farage’s mobilisation of bias. Vox pops were selected to substantiate the issues that had been ‘organised in’, which were then framed as evidence of public opinion, which the media then reported as the issues of most importance to the public. The missed opportunity of *My Country* was its chance to critique the vox pop culture it rather chose to replicate, and it was telling that Rufus Norris in a post-show discussion, also felt that not asking the interviewees where they felt their information or opinions originated, had been an oversight. Without this kind of contextual background analysis, the voices of the people are once again summoned to speak within the terms of an argument that has been mobilised in, to consolidate, yet again, the narrative that these are the issues of most importance to the people, obscuring the hand of the expert storyteller behind the scenes. What both the mainstream media and Rufus Norris’s production, were guilty of, I would argue, is the shaping of the terms of the argument, precisely so that it produced the very evidence that this was the argument that mattered. The shaping, the expert hand of the politician, the journalist, the director, remains invisible, so that what is presented, is presented as the voices of ‘real, ordinary people’, rather than pre-

conceived characters speaking from limited options offered within a highly-constructed and ideologically-loaded script.

Performing the Real

If the narratives of the ‘real people’ discussed so far have proved less ‘authentic’ than they might at first have appeared, in this final section I will turn to Kaleider’s *The Money* (2013), an example of participatory performance in which there is an explicit absence of professional intervention, and in which the ‘real people’ have significantly more autonomy than in the models discussed above. The ‘real people’ who comprised the performer participants of *The Money* were not defined by their lack of theatre expertise, or their opposition to an assumed liberal elite. Most of those who took part in the performance I attended at Edinburgh City Chambers during the 2016 fringe festival, were most likely theatre or related professionals or, at the very least, seasoned experimental theatre devotees.

What the ‘realness’ of the participants in this instance signifies, I will argue, pertains precisely to Lehmann’s categorisation of two key aspects of postdramatic performance. Firstly, it signals an otherness to the characters of fictional drama, and secondly, it signals a spontaneity and unpredictability which cannot be found in the rehearsed and repeated show which only represents a present here and now reality, rather than an unfolding one. Here the people and the action are ‘real’ in the sense that they are unrehearsed, improvised, spontaneous, unplanned. Each participant can respond in the moment, an autonomous individual freed from the structures of script, rehearsal, or professional obligation to ‘do it right’. Given this, and the context of the civic debating chamber in which the performance was set, this autonomy might also indicate that each individual spectator also reflects the man or woman on the street; the vox pops interviewee, the individual voter, the authentic and autonomous political voice, as opposed to the institutional parliamentary representative who

is bound by the structures and scripts of their political party and professional career trajectory. The real people in *The Money*, I will argue, are thus framed as non-professionals in two senses: they are not paid for their participation as performers in the piece, and simultaneously they are posited as autonomous and singular individuals as opposed to the political class of representatives who, in our democratic system, make the political decisions as to how to spend the money on our behalf.

The format of *The Money* was deceptively simple. Audience members could choose to attend as a benefactor, in which case they paid £10 and were led to seats around the main table of the chambers; or they could, as I did, choose to pay a little more to spectate, and were led to an outer ring of seating from which they could watch the proceedings without the capacity to intervene. The total ticket money from the benefactors is placed on the table, and a list of instructions is provided. The clock had been set, and the benefactors had 90 minutes to decide where the money would go, and which person would be responsible for getting it there. This decision had to be unanimous. If the contract hadn't been signed by everyone at the table before the time was up then the money would roll on to the next game. A gong was provided that could be used for two purposes: a benefactor could bang the gong in order to permanently exit the performance; and a spectator could bang the gong and, on the payment of an additional ten pounds, join the benefactors at the table to participate in the debate.

For the first thirty minutes, the debate that ensued was unremarkable. Suggestions bounced back and forwards between donations to various charities and good causes and alternative proposals for more direct charitable action, such as buying cups of tea or food for the many homeless people begging on the streets of Edinburgh. But after the third or fourth attempt by one of the benefactors to persuade the others of the worthiness of their particular cause, one of the spectators who had paid to merely observe the decisions being made on how the money should be spent, jumped to his feet, banged the gong, paid his ten pounds, and

took a seat at the table protesting that he couldn't take any more of this without intervening. This is art, he declared, this is a theatre show, this is the Edinburgh festival, and we had to do better than this. He demanded why, if the people sitting around the table had wanted to donate their £10 ticket price to a charity, had they not simply done that? He then proposed that what needed to be done was to take the money and make art with it, perhaps by burning it in the council chambers, or maybe even in the street in front of the homeless people who were begging. This was the first moment in the piece when I asked myself the question – how real is this real person? Is this an actor in role who is placed in the audience with the task of intervening in precisely this event, or is this a 'real' spectator offering a real, unplanned intervention. Either way, his undoubtedly calculated intervention had the required effect, and for the following fifty minutes or so the debate raged around questions of art versus charity and direct action versus institutional intervention, as more spectators were galvanised to invest an additional ten pounds and join in the debate.

With only ten minutes remaining, any consensus on how the money should be spent seemed to be unlikely. A woman left the spectating audience, but then returned after five minutes, having been to the cashpoint for the £10 she required to become a benefactor and participate. She proposed that the money should go to a theatre show at the festival that she was involved with that had a charitable link with young people with learning disabilities. Despite the plethora of similar suggestions that had been circulating without resolution or uptake throughout the show, this one was seized upon almost unanimously, doubtlessly as a consequence of the five minutes that now remained, which rendered the possibility of agreeing on anything else highly unlikely.

Then the question I had been silently pondering on was raised by one of the benefactors: was this intervention as authentic and spontaneous as it appeared to be? The suggestion was mooted that the woman may have attended a previous show, and had

strategically decided precisely on this course of action to secure funding for the show with which she was involved. But with only five minutes remaining, it seemed as if, authentic or not, her intervention was to meet with success. But the man who had been the first to move from witness to participant, the man who had proposed burning the money, wasn't finished yet. He refused to sign, despite all the attempts of the other benefactors which included an offer from one benefactor to literally pay him out of his own pocket if he would sign. Finally, the contractual agreement was signed by everyone but this one benefactor, and the contract was left in front of him, on the table, while all the other benefactors waited in threatening silence as the final seconds were counted down. With around ten seconds to go, the man rose to his feet, banged the gong and exited the performance, thus enabling the conditions of the game to be upheld, and the money to be donated as – now unanimously - agreed.

I began this analysis of *The Money* by proposing that the 'realness' of the participants in this show, and others operating within comparable frameworks, signified two things: an otherness to the characters of fictional drama and a spontaneity and unpredictability which cannot be found in the rehearsed and repeated show. In both senses, this conceptualisation of 'real people' can be read in opposition to dramatic conventions of theatre, and yet my overriding sense of the piece was that dramatic conventions were far from absent, and may have been precisely what the format of the piece was constructed to produce. The role of the villain was clear both to the man who withheld his signature, and the other participants; the tension rising in the last few minutes, the dramatic exit at the last possible moment for the required denouement, all was perfectly contrived to fit into a conventional dramatic fiction which had – nevertheless – real consequences as to how the money was spent. Likewise, the intervention of the woman to save the day appeared similarly well-timed and executed for both dramatic and strategic effect. Moreover, similar, although not identical, patterns emerged in many, although not all, anecdotal accounts of academic colleagues' experiences

of different iterations of the piece. The fact that these particular characters did not appear in every show would suggest that they weren't actors playing roles; the fact that characters like these appeared in many might suggest that the 'real people' taking part were consciously or unconsciously playing familiar characters in fictions drawn from classic dramatic frameworks.

What I am thus going to propose in conclusion, is that this propensity to play roles, to take particular stances in public debate, such as someone who is ethical and wants money to go to charity or the homeless, or someone who is a rebel and wants to go against the majority view, might offer an interesting perspective on the political counterpart of these real people, the vox pop man or woman in the street. If the budgetary decisions made by the participants of *The Money* can be understood as in some way aligned to the spending preferences of the autonomous individual as opposed to the professional politician who more often represents them and chooses on their behalf, then the abrogation of responsibility for rational, discursive, evidence-based arguments by many of the participants in these playful theatre productions might be symptomatic of the dangerous valorisation in current political discourse of the authority given to the authenticity of contingent, subjective and sometimes flippant, theatrical gestures of the man or woman on the street over expert, rational, evidence-based dialogue that is bound by professional considerations and reputations that rest on good practice and the best possible results. In both *The Money* and the vox pops, the individual declaring their preference, is never called to account for the validity or consequences of their position. And yet that position is afforded authority merely through its claim to an authenticity that is contrasted with a now-delegitimated expertise.

In their recent book, *Democracy for Realists*, Christopher H Achen and Larry M Bartels argue that the vast majority of people do not vote for policies in democratic structures - whether direct or representational – but, for the most part, in relation to their own

constructed sense of identity and hard-wired ideological legacies of community and belonging. Thus the ‘real’ people who vote, are not voting as a result of the outcome of rational debate, or accurate information they have verified, but to sustain their own pre-conceived identitarian role. In his lecture, Rob Ford highlighted how predictably you could map someone’s views on any one of a whole range of topics, onto another seemingly unrelated one. For example, someone’s views on gay marriage would enable you to predict with reasonable accuracy their views on immigration, on climate change, on Brexit. Because these were not necessarily distinct positions that had been arrived at through accrued knowledge or rational debate, but most often via attachment to a particular identity to which a whole package of opinions and biases were tethered.

Thus, the performance of identity underpins the authority of ‘the real’; and the performance of identity is shaped by those biases that are ‘organised in’ by the political and media establishment. Analogously, the performance of dramatic personae in postdramatic spaces designed for ‘real’ debate, draws on adopted roles in accordance with the conventions of an internalised, and long familiar script. None of the participants, in either instance, are holding views that can usefully be described as ‘authentic’, or adopting self-written identities that can be somehow untethered from the ideological scripts from which those views and identities are patched together. And those ideological scripts are written by experts, whether or not the experts care to show their hand.

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