

## DISASTER THEATER: PLAY WHEN THINGS GO AWRY

KEES DE GROOT

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the twenty-first century, it seems that there is a trend in theater productions dealing with disrupting events such as wars, ecological catastrophes, public scandals, and political troubles.<sup>1</sup> Ongoing developments in contemporary theater have probably facilitated this trend. One is the emergence of theater collectives who compose their own productions instead of a company with a director having the actors performing plays from a gradually changing repertory. Hence, it becomes possible to relate directly to recent events. Another is the move from performing on the high stage to performing on the same floor as the (first rows of the) audience or on special locations, such as in a farm shed, on a beach, in a church, or in an industrial building. The production *Bevings* (2019-2020), for example, on the earthquakes caused by the gas exploitation in the North-East of the Netherlands, is performed in local theaters, cafés, and community centers.<sup>2</sup> The play was announced as ‘a requiem for the victims’. Nowadays, it is not uncommon for a show to involve the audience or to address topical issues.

From the perspective of the study of ritual, disaster theater might also reflect a rediscovery of ritual or an enhanced ritual creativity. Victor Turner already expressed the hunch that in postmodern times (or, as I would prefer, liquid modern times) theater functions as a functional equivalent of ritual.<sup>3</sup> According to Turner, the postmodern turn includes a return to subjunctivity, the ‘as if’ mode, and a rediscovery of cultural transformative modes, “particularly in some forms of theater”.<sup>4</sup> Several

<sup>1</sup> A first version of this chapter was presented at the KVAS Meeting of the Department of Sociology of Charles University, Nečtiny, 9 November 2019.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.waark.nl/groningstalig-theater> [last accessed 3 January 2020].

<sup>3</sup> K. DE GROOT: *The liquidation of the Church* (London/New York 2018) 161-177.

<sup>4</sup> V. TURNER: *From ritual to theatre. The human seriousness of play* (New York 1982) 86.

theater directors, producers, and actors have indeed explored this ritual dimension and have referred to the ritual – and transcendental – dimension of theater, often in terms reminiscent of religion. The influential director Peter Brook, for example, uses imagery best known from a epistle of Paul (1 Corinthians 12) to explain what theater is ultimately about: “The aim of any show is to unite an audience. This is the very basis of the theatrical experience, its deep meaning: the desire to become one with others, and for a second to hear what it’s like to belong to a single human body.”<sup>5</sup> Brook points to the human longing for unity as a driving force behind theater, subtly suggesting a parallel with religion. In a similar vein, though less eloquently, others have claimed that the theater has replaced the church as the space where people search for meaning.<sup>6</sup>

The advantage of theater, compared to religion, is that it is less contested. Theater might work exactly because it is less associated with a specific ‘we’ than religious rituals, the anthropologist, theologian, psychologist, and actor Roger Grainger writes.<sup>7</sup> Plays presuppose an aesthetic distance: the spectator sits in her chair, shields down, and watches to what is not real, but ‘only play’. And then, as it might happen, the spectator is taken in.

While – at least in the Netherlands – church services have become less successful in including all kinds of people, even on special occasions such as the commemoration of the Dutch victims of war on 4 May, theater steps in with shows and performances on war, violence, and discrimination all over the country, performed directly after the national commemoration (*Theater na de Dam*). This Theater of Remembrance “seeks to broaden and deepen the commemoration via simultaneously presented theater-performances of all sorts”.<sup>8</sup> Here, play becomes serious business.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brook, cited in H. VAN MAANEN: *How to study art world. On the societal function of aesthetic values* (Amsterdam 2009) 193.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., theater director Theu Boermans in H. JANSEN: ‘Een enorme verrijking. Te weten dat kunst de plek van de religie kan innemen’, in *De Volkskrant*, 13 May 2017. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/een-enorme-verrijking-te-weten-dat-kunst-de-plek-van-de-religie-kan-innemen-bfd41c8e/> [last accessed 21 July 2021].

<sup>7</sup> R. GRAINGER: *Ritual and theatre* (London 2014).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theaternadedam.nl/theatre-of-remembrance> [last accessed 3 January 2020].

Theater, however, in principle uses the ‘as if’ mode. It is not part of the real world ‘outside’. Although often implicit or explicit references to reality outside the play are made, the world of the play is a product of imagination. What happens when this imagined reality is embedded firmly in the contemporary external reality?

The links between theater’s reality and the reality of disruptive events can be multiple. Sometimes, the performance of a play enhances disruptions. The performance of the opera *La muette de Portici* on 25 August 1830 in Brussels ignited nightly riots. Sixteen years earlier, Belgium and the Netherlands had been united at the congress of Vienna. The riots against William I, the new king, were eventually followed by the declaration of Belgium’s independence. Popular history recalls how the lines on patriotic love in one of the arias evoked Belgian patriotic sentiments among the audience.<sup>9</sup> Other times, theater even intentionally propagates a particular worldview in order to mobilize people to change the status quo, or to make the soil fertile for a revolution.

In this chapter, I will focus on theater after the disaster, and my question is exploratory: how do plays deal with the disastrous reality outside and how does this response to the outside world affect the ritual dimension of the show? The disaster may be presented through the play itself, the players, or the context. First, the play may refer directly to a more or less recent disaster. The disaster may be the play’s topic, it may use material gathered from interviews, video footage, typical gestures, clothes, objects, and so on. Secondly, the players may have been witnesses, or participants, of the disaster, such as survivors who appear in a play on sexual abuse. Thirdly, outside reality may be present through the context of time, place, and people. This is the case when a play is programmed on a specific date, such as on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May in the Netherlands (*Theater na de Dam*), on a specific site (*Bevings*), and/or for a specific audience, such as the community theater projects on the expulsion of inhabitants of the boundary area of Germany and Czech Republic, both before and after World War II.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., the graphic novel J.-L. VERNAL, FRANZ & J. GÉRARD: *1830. De Belgische revolutie* (Brussels 1980) 16.

<sup>10</sup> B. SPALOVÁ: ‘La question des allemands sudètes au théâtre. Représentations artistiques et transformation de la relation au passé allemand’, in *Revue d’études comparatives Est-Ouest* 47/1-2 (2016) 1-28; B. SPALOVÁ: ‘Remembering the German past in the Czech lands. A key moment between communicative and cultural memory’, in *History and Anthropology* 28/1 (2017) 84-109.

I will describe and reflect upon three cases that exemplify three varieties. The first case is in the genre of educational theater and has it all: topic, actors, and (often) the audience as well are related to the disaster. In the second case, an example of documentary theater, the topic and one of the actors is related to the disaster. In the third case only the topic of the show, which is in the genre of storytelling, is related to a disaster.

The first case (*With Eyes Wide Open*) is about veterans who had been involved in genocide and is based on an interview, supplemented with photos, video, and secondary literature. The other two, on sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church (*And Have Not Charity*) and the extinction of species (*Before Us*), are based on field notes taken directly after the performance of the play, interviews, and additional data. Each case study starts with a short sketch of the historical background of the disaster and of the theater production. Then I will describe the performance: the context, the play itself, and the aftermath. The case studies end with a reflection on the status of the case study as case study, on its ritual qualities, and on the relation with reality outside theater.

## 2. *WITH EYES WIDE OPEN*: THEATER WITH SREBRENICA VETERANS

On 11 July 1995, a Dutch UN mission in former Yugoslavia came to an end. Their mandate had been to guard a Bosnian enclave in Easter Bosnia – at that time occupied by Serb troops – that was designated as a ‘safe area’ for the Muslim population. When, however, the Serbian general Mladic announced he would attack the enclave, the UN, presented on the ground by the Dutch battalion, decided not to resist and assisted in separating the male from the female people that had sought refuge. Subsequently, 8,372 Muslim men and boys were systematically killed. The first media reports focused on the Dutch military who had survived a narrow escape from the life-threatening situation in Srebrenica, but as information about the fate of the local population began to spread, a long lasting discussion about the failed responsibility of the military (on various levels in the hierarchy) and politicians (national and international) started.

Two decades later, the Dutch communication specialist Lotte Penning came up with the idea to make an amateur theater production about people with hidden suffering. She contacted the cineaste, actress, and psychologist Prisca van der Mullen, who happened to be working on a documentary in Bosnia. They decided to work together and approached

director Boy Jonkergouw, who had experience with theater productions on vulnerable people. Together they developed a project with war veterans, including them both as actors and as part of the intended audience. As part of the research they had conversations with veterans, partly about their experiences during wartime, but even more about what happened with them afterwards: their feelings of misrecognition, being misrepresented by the media, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide attempts. The goal the team envisaged for the veterans was to have them express their experiences and inner world; as far as the wider audience was concerned, the goal was to gain acknowledgement of the veteran's experiences. Three of the veterans they interviewed were prepared to take part as actors: Stephan Mertens, Raymond Braat, and Antoon van de Wiel. Prisca van der Mullen and Lotte Penning (later replaced by Heleen van Doremalen) played additional roles, mainly as the wives of the veterans.

The title of the play (*Met open ogen*) refers to the Dutch equivalent of the saying 'We have been taken in with eyes wide open'. The poster showed an eye with blue helmets in the iris.<sup>11</sup> The play was performed from 2017-2019, mostly for networks of veterans, but also in schools, at a university, a center for mental health care, and a conference on mental health. The performance included the reenactment of war scenes the veterans had experienced themselves – supplemented with historical video footage – and their failure to protect the local population, personified by a Muslim woman. More elaborate were the scenes about their lives after the mission, such as a conversation with a medical examiner, a talk between the wives of the veterans, inner dialogues, and a scene in which one of the veterans is about to take an overdose. The latter incident actually took place during the process of making the play.<sup>12</sup>

Usually, the performance was followed by talks with the audience. Viewers took this opportunity to give positive feedback to the veterans, ask them about their lives and about the theater project. The setting also evoked stories being told by members of the audience.

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/pg/hetmagazijntheaterproducties/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=516660131845084&ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/hetmagazijntheaterproducties/photos/?tab=album&album_id=516660131845084&ref=page_internal) [last accessed 6 January 2020];

<https://vimeo.com/289840900/817384d229> [last accessed 6 January 2020]. In 2020/2021, a production followed called *25 jaar Srebrenica / Gevaarlijke namen* (*25 years Srebrenica / Dangerous Names*), in which one of the veterans and the daughter of one of the men who were murdered participated. See [www.boyjonkergouw.nl](http://www.boyjonkergouw.nl) [last accessed 21 January 2021].

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Lotte Pennings on 28 October 2019 in Tilburg.



Figure 30.1: *Met open ogen* (photograph: Annelies Verhelst).

The theater production *With Eyes Wide Open* is instrumental in heightening the awareness of the fate of the veterans. It seeks to correct a narrative of offenders and puts forward a narrative in which the soldiers are victims of a situation beyond their control: they were sacrificed. In this sense, the production has a political goal: it proposes an alternative for what is perceived as the dominant discourse, in particular in the years directly after the genocide. It also borders on therapeutic theater, since the subordinate goal was to offer a means of expressing their emotions and to enhance the healing process by turning the negative emotions into something useful: theatrical material.

As such, the production engages in the collective memorialization of – not so much the fate of the victims of the genocide or the acts of those who committed or assisted with it but – the veterans as victims: first of international politics and, secondly, of media, doctors, and people surrounding them.<sup>13</sup> The production bears characteristics of a memorial: a stylized sequence of action units expressing and shaping a narrative about a publicly significant event in the past that can be, and has been, repeated over time.

<sup>13</sup> M. HOONDEERT: “Playing Srebrenica”. Theatre plays in the Netherlands regarding Srebrenica’, in Y. ESKI (ed.): *Genocide and victimology* (London/New York 2021) 138-150.

The ties with reality outside the theater are strong and multiple: the stories, the actors, the uniforms, the usage of authentic news and media footage, props such as sandbags, and often also the audience are taken from or part of the world of the military. The viewer is confronted with differing perspectives: of the Muslim woman, the partners, the doctor and the three different veterans (a medic, a logistics officer, and a soldier). The room for imagination, however, is limited. The narrative of the play reflects the veteran's perspective; the obvious goal is to assist their coping process and raise compassion and solidarity with them.

### 3. *AND HAVE NOT CHARITY*: THEATER WITH A SURVIVOR AND A PRIEST

During the twentieth century, substantial numbers of children, mainly boys, have been sexually harassed and assaulted by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church or in settings related to this church. After journalistic investigations – in the Netherlands, since 2010 – the Dutch church province commissioned an independent committee to investigate the reports of abuse, resulting in the Deetman Report, named after Wim Deetman, himself a Protestant, a former minister, President of the House of Representatives, and mayor of The Hague, who presided over the committee.<sup>14</sup>

One of the boys who had experienced abuse, namely by the director of his church choir and the chaplain of his scouting club, was Remy Jacobs. He became a priest, left the office, and started to work as a spiritual caregiver for the elderly in Rotterdam. In 2013, he approached writer, producer, and actress Marjolein van Heemstra, known for her theater productions on controversial political issues. Van Heemstra responded positively and together they made and performed the play, starting with Jacobs's ambivalent attitude towards the church as someone who had suffered from its practices and ethical stance on homosexuality and at the same time feels love for this church.

The poster of the tour depicted the two actors: Marjolein van Heemstra in plain cloths and Remy Jacobs in a surplice.<sup>15</sup> The title (*Als ik de*

<sup>14</sup> W. DEETMAN, N. DRAIJER, P. KALBFLEISCH, H. MERCKELBACH, M. MONTEIRO & G. DE VRIES: *Seksueel misbruik van minderjarigen in de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk* (Amsterdam 2011).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.marjolijnvanheemstra.nl/speelt/als-ik-de-liefde-niet-heb> [last accessed 3 January 2020]; [https://issuu.com/rotheater/docs/programma\\_als\\_ik\\_de\\_liefde\\_niet\\_heb](https://issuu.com/rotheater/docs/programma_als_ik_de_liefde_niet_heb) [last accessed 3 January 2020].

*liefde niet heb*) refers to a bible verse: “(...) and have not charity [, I am nothing]” (1 Corinthians 13:2). I watched the show in a small venue in Rotterdam (*RO Theater*) on 26 September 2014.<sup>16</sup>

The play opens with a dramatized recollection of the origin of this show. While Remy (Jacobs) watches in silence, his face hidden under a lion mask, Marjolein (van Heemstra) reads aloud the email he had sent to her. His ‘little story’ has to get its place back in the ‘grand story’, she reads, preferably in church. Since this didn’t work out, the present goal is to have a ‘pop up mass’ in theater.



Figure 30.2: Remy Jacobs in *Als ik de liefde niet heb*  
(photograph: Leo van Velzen).

The play is driven by the conflict between Remy’s delicate position as someone who believes in love and Marjolein’s indignation and lack of understanding of his biography: becoming a priest himself and maintaining his faith in love’s greatness despite the reality of rapists, white-washing bystanders, and ecclesial representatives who didn’t want to blow the whistle. (During the play, Remy even reveals that one of his

<sup>16</sup> K. DE GROOT: ‘Misbruik in het theater’, in *gOdschrift*, 2 October 2014. Retrieved from <http://godschrift.nl/artikel/misbruik-theater> [last accessed 19 January 2021].



fellow choir boys had been found dead at the churchyard, strangled, most likely by the same priest who had abused him.) While Remy testifies how as a boy he was impressed by the calix and sings and prays, Marjolein takes the role of the skeptical critic, until her own position – she is obviously pregnant – is taken into account. After all, having a child presupposes a belief in love.

At the heart of the play is a line by the Spanish mystic San Juan de la Cruz: “In order to arrive at that which you do not possess, you must go by a way of dispossession”, which is here interpreted as “in order to arrive at love, you have to pass the lack of love”.<sup>17</sup> This incites the two to reenact the history of the disaster. Marjolein offers the imagination of Remy’s story by recalling a fantasy novel she read as a child: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. Together they enact the scene of the lion king Aslan who sacrifices himself for children he doesn’t even know. Through this ‘play in a play’, with Remy taking off, putting on, and taking off his mask again, the identification and detachment with his role as a sacrificial figure is played out.

After the show, the atmosphere and talks in the theater café in home base Rotterdam suggest a high degree of familiarity between actors and audience on this particular evening. In the following months, the production went on tour and was widely praised by the critics. The original plan was to perform it for the Pope as well, but this didn’t work out as planned. Instead, a church service in the Wallonian Church in Rotterdam (5 November 2016) was held.<sup>18</sup>

*And Have Not Charity* is about a personal story that reflects a broader history. The tension in the story (within a person who is both a victim and a representative of the church, between love and hate) is used in the dramaturgy of the production. Through the use of poetic language, tranquility, singing, and solemn gestures, the theme of sacrifice and the memorial of the victims of abuse, especially the dead boy, the play acquires ritual significance. This accords with the play presenting itself as ‘a mass’. At the same time the production is an example of documentary theater, a theatrical research project into an ambivalent attitude

<sup>17</sup> Original: “Para venir a lo que no posees has de ir por donde no posees” (from: *Subida al Monte Carlo*), translated by Lynda Nicholson in: G. BRENAN: *St. John of the Cross. His life and poetry* (Cambridge 1973).

<sup>18</sup> <http://bottejellem.nl/als-ik-de-liefde-niet-heb/> [last accessed 1 January 2020]; <https://soundcloud.com/user-752382789/als-ik-de-liefde-niet-heb> [last accessed 1 January 2020].

towards not just the church, but towards social systems in general, the love that is present in it and that people have for it, and the lack of love. It is possible that for the audience the sensational quality of the story that is told prevails, but the play also invites the attentive reading of the black pages of one's own biography and to perceive reality through other lenses than those colored by the master narratives of good versus bad or the individual versus the system.

The disastrous reality outside is very much present through the character of Remy, playing out his own experience, through dramatizing the process of the making of the play, and through sharing biographical and historical information. This external reality and the imagined reality of the play are present at the same time.

#### 4. *BEFORE US*: THEATER ABOUT EXTINCTION

During the first decades of the third millennium, reports on the effects of global warming, pollution, and the growth of the human population on the climate, the sea level, and biodiversity started to be perceived as alarming. This incited the Australian actor and storyteller Stuart Bowden to make a show on the theme of the apocalypse.<sup>19</sup> In it he portrayed the last man on earth and explored the loneliness this would imply. In his next production, entitled *Before Us*, he took up this theme again, but from a different angle.<sup>20</sup> Bowden himself distinguishes three meanings of the title: past, present, and future. First, it refers to the individuals, both the character on stage and the visitors, before they are united into a community, an 'us'. Secondly, it is what is laid out before our eyes. And thirdly, it is about what is ahead of us. In his view, the vulnerable state of our world enhances the need to take care of one another. The intention for the show was "to create an event that was special and memorable". The character of the show tries to find a way to be remembered and appeals to the audience's willingness to play, to not conforming to so-called respectful behavior. In this respect, there is a parallel with the youth theater shows the actor stages.

I witness the show in an alternative theater (*Det andre teatret*) in Oslo on Saturday night, 23 March 2015. The show starts at 7 p.m.; visitors bring in beer, popcorn, bottles of wine, and glasses. There's a sofa on

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Stuart Bowden at *Den andre cafeen*, Oslo, 26 March 2015.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.stuartbowden.co/before-us> [last accessed 6 January 2002].

the left side of the stage. As we enter, we hear repetitive music from a keyboard with a few high vocal sounds once in a while. Then, suddenly, the actor appears: a man with a full hipster beard and big glasses, dressed in a long green bodywarmer with a zipper from top to bottom on front. His upper arms are stuck under his dress, his underarms stick out, a mug in his right hand. The hairy legs are wearing short fluorescent green socks. He looks at the audience with a rigid look and struts center stage.

He (or rather she, because the character, named ‘I’, appears to be female) tells how impressive this show will be. We will get into all kinds of moods and “at the end we will all be holding hands and lying on the floor and our hearts will stop beating so we’ll be dead. The staff would find us and they wouldn’t have to clean up ’cause there won’t be bloodshed”. The coming shows would have to be canceled since here in this theater “it all ended”. The serious presentation conflicts with the appearance of the character; the extravagant outfit and body language incite sympathy and a willingness to get involved.

The character tells her story and defines the setting of the play. This is where she lives: under a rock in the middle of a forest. She names and comments on the décor as if entertaining a visitor to one’s house and asks herself the questions a visitor might ask. At night, she gets out, she tells us, because she’s nocturnal. She’s the last of her species. She did meet guys twice, but she didn’t want to get involved.

She tells about her last few days, including going to bed. Two nightly visions play a central role. One is of her mother, whom she sees when she’s looking in the mirror. Her own face changes into that of her deceased mother who sings: “I’m not dead. I’ll live forever. I’ll live every single day in you, in you, in you.” This line is repeated in different keys, accompanied by loops on the keyboards. The second vision is of her father. In the forest, when she’s out there contemplating about ending her life, he appears to her and sings: “Don’t throw your live away, ’cause you meant the world to us.”

The endgame starts when she discovers a place where a party is going on. (The audience is defined as the visitors of the party.) Here, she gains confidence: if the species is going to be extinct anyway, why not take the risk of ending it now, but in a dramatic way. She always wanted to fly; let’s try it and if it does not work, “then I’ll fall dead on the rocks”.

She mimes climbing up on a big tree to the very top, looking down, and then discovers people whom she identifies as the visitors of the party. “You, the people of the party, are all there!” Enthusiastically, she



Figure 30.3: Stuart Bowden in *Before Us* (photograph: Ilona Sawicka).

concludes: “You all followed me to watch me die!” She repeats what is at the same time a stage direction for us: “You *are* all standing around me.” A large part of the audience gets on the stage; we lie down and join hands. She describes the attitudes of the audience: some are giggling, some are confused. We hear her mother’s tune and sing along repetitiously: “I’ll live forever. I’ll live everyday single day in you, in you, in you” – the melody of the prologue. Looking up, we close our eyes and hear the character say that she lets go, and discovers she’s not flying but falling. Then we are asked to open our eyes again “to see how beautifully I die”. She zips open her green dress, which appears to have a white lining. Beneath is a shiny white outfit with three white ropes dangling from it. She walks slowly up the stand and exits, while we are singing again. The lights go out and the actor returns for applause. Visitors collect their belongings and talk in excitement as they gather in the café were the actor joins the public after a short while.

The show is about the end of the last representative of a species. More than focusing on a global perspective, however, it zooms in on the tragic situation of the individual failing to build a relationship, letting go of his life, and in this letting go receiving new life. The themes are existential: loneliness, death, hope, insecurity. The genre is storytelling: the

character tells the story of her life directly to the audience, instructs them, and plays out a series of scenes. The style is surreal; the reality of the extinction of species is not spelled out. The show focuses on the consequences on an individual level.

The audience is involved in singing, moving to the stage, holding hands, and thus joining in what one might consider the prayer accompanying the final self-sacrifice of the character. Earlier in the show, the play contains ritual moments in play, such as the blessings the character receives in visions from her father and mother. The whole show is a commemoration of the last one of an undefined species on earth: that is, of a creature that is ultimately alone. Even more, the show succeeds in establishing a sense of community in the present and some sort of awe for someone who transcends the boundary between life and death.

The external reality of the extinction of species is only present in the imagined setting of the story. The reality of the play, including audience participation, prevails. The theme of death is dealt with in a playful way. I witnessed a character coming to life by preparing herself to die, uniting visitors of a theater into a momentary community, through a dramatic ritual act.

## 5. EVALUATION

Broadly speaking, theater and rite differ in their positions on the dimension of involvement. In theater, the apparent code is that this is not real, and at the same time those involved act as if this were real for a while. In rites, the apparent code is that this reflects a deep, eternal reality, although the acts, persons, and objects involved are taken from everyday reality. The aesthetic distance characteristic for theater is missing in the rite. The rite works if we are taken in, without reservation, completely and not just for the time being, but with repercussions in daily life.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, this is a gradual difference: rites may allow for bystander positions and theater fans may fail to distinguish between the actors and the characters they play. A typical trend in contemporary theater, reality theater, further blurs the distinction with rites.<sup>22</sup> Reality theater draws direct links between theater and outside reality. Theater presupposes a

<sup>21</sup> GRAINGER: *Ritual and theatre* 64.

<sup>22</sup> J. SALDAÑA: *Ethnodrama. An anthology of reality theatre* (Walnut Creek 2005).

magic circle,<sup>23</sup> or empty space,<sup>24</sup> that distinguished the reality of the play from the reality of the outside world, be it on stage or on location. A line is drawn, or we pretend that a line is drawn. Behind the line, the actors present the world of the imagination. Before the line, the spectators watch them from their position in the everyday world. Reality theater – and this is what happens in disaster theater – opens up channels through which the outside reality permeates the world that is acted out before the audience. But is it true that the two worlds otherwise remain separate? I will first have a closer look on the phenomenon of disaster theater as reality theater and then describe how the study of this particular variety brings us back to the stuff theater is made of in the first place.

The popularity of reality theater can be viewed through different lenses. It has its own peculiarities, both when viewed as a theatrical variety, a ritual act, and a societal phenomenon. Through the lens of theater, this variety aligns with a focus on experience, rather than reproduction; involving the audience, rather than suggesting a transparent ‘fourth wall’ through which the audience observes another reality; and exploiting the here and now of the performance, for this is what distinguishes watching a play from watching a movie. In plays such as *With Eyes Wide Open* and *And Have Not Charity* the outside world not only enters the play through the topic, but is also present in ‘the immediate’, the local circumstances that help to represent the play world. Actors, audience, material culture, and the place where the play is performed refer directly to a particular disaster in the real world.

Through the lens of ritual and religion, disaster theater demonstrates how theater can take up ritual functions of commemoration, healing, and building *communitas*. *And Have Not Charity* is clearly a theatrical show, while it also presents itself as a pop-up church. In a theatrical setting, a representative and victim of the Roman Catholic Church is coming to terms with his ambivalent attitude towards this particular institution that is also a community he loves and belongs to. *With Eyes Wide Open* is performed by, and often before, members of a specific ‘we’, thus closely resembling the traditional ritual reenactment of war scenes, known from anthropological studies. Interestingly, both cases present themselves primarily as shows, not as rites. At the same time, the latter

<sup>23</sup> J. HUIZINGA: *Homo ludens. A study of the play-element in culture* (Boston 1955).

<sup>24</sup> P. BROOK: *The empty space* (New York 1996).

case is a memorialization of a historical event guided by political and therapeutic motives. In this way, I would suggest, a functional equivalent of mourning rituals appears, namely one that allows for some (aesthetic) distance. After all, the shows start with spectators watching actors – and then they might end up as participants in some kind of ritual. The both theatrical and ritual quality of these shows might explain the success of initiatives such as the Theater of Remembrance referred to at the outset. Plays are, at least potentially, less marked by a particular political or religious stance and may appeal to those who feel attracted to a mode of remembrance that is more innovative, or more attuned to their specific preferences or situation.

Through the lens of the broader society, it is striking that disaster theater confronts the audience with the harsh reality of life outside the theater building. If the conventional view on the theatrical experience – namely, that it requires the suspension of belief in everyday life – were true, one would expect disappointed spectators. Considering the success of several touring disaster plays this is apparently not the case. Brook is right: theater doesn't make us forget the world, but invites us to engage with it in a playful manner. It is the interaction between the mundane and the imagination that makes out the theatrical experience.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the mundane doesn't present itself to us unmediated. In an age where the narratives that are circulated by media industries give shape to how we think about the world, reality itself is for a large part dramatized.<sup>26</sup> Important parts of our lives are 'lived in' the stories we hear and see through all kinds of tools in communication such as TV and Twitter. In this respect, reality theater might even be a reaction against the theater of contemporary reality. When reality has become theater, we will look for reality in theater. Where mass media present dramatized realities of heroes and villain and histories of success and fall, theater might be a place for the complex, multifaceted, confusing reality, in which standard scripts are broken down.

Taking this one step further, I would propose that theater does not necessarily need direct links with disasters in the outside world in order to succeed. When the theater production is performed on the site of the disaster, on a remembrance day, or for an audience of survivors and their next of kin, a tension may arise with the subjunctive reality that is created in the magic circle of the play. Is there then still room for an 'empty

<sup>25</sup> Cf. P. COHEN: 'Peter Brook and the "two worlds" of theatre', in *New Theatre Quarterly* 7/26 (1991) 147-159.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Lynn Schofield Clark's definition of mediatization cited in K. LUNDBY: 'Introduction', in K. LUNDBY (ed.): *Mediatization of communication* (Berlin/Boston 2014) 18.

space' in which new worlds can be imagined, or is the context already filled with existing interpretations? Here, the art of playing with the circumstances is required. When the theatrical reality conforms to an existing political or cultural construction of reality, the 'as if' character of theater is minimized.

In my view, the three cases described in this chapter reflect an increasing degree of innovation in telling new stories. The last case, *Before us*, suggests that the ritual quality of a performance can do without explicit links with external reality. Theater, certainly playful performances in the tradition of youth theater such as this one, can create *communitas* and a sense of awe. In fact, what happens in these shows is probably not far off from what the King's Men brought to The Globe, while performing Shakespeare's tragedies amidst a crowd of people.<sup>27</sup> They presented an imaginary world of failure and despair, indirectly related to the circumstances of those days and appealing to the experiences of failure and despair of the surrounding audience. Theater does not need to incorporate explicitly the reality outside in order to address the impact disrupting events have on the human soul.

<sup>27</sup> Trial lecture Perry McPartland at University of Agder, Kristiansand, 15 January 2021. Cf. P. MCPARTLAND: *Shakespeare and Metatheatrical Representation* (PhD Dissertation: University of Agder 2020), available at <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/2711194> [last accessed 20 January 2021].