

The Act of Reading
(and the Fire Next Time)

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Hello?

Hello? Anybody there?

This is Glasgow calling Oz.

Yes, Glasgow. . . . Scotland. (It's chilly up here.)

So you're there? You're reading me?

(Or am I talking to myself?)

They've asked me to call and tell you something about reader. By way of an introduction. A supplementary and redundant introduction, to be sure, given that the letters they've been sending are introductions in themselves, but still . . . To instill some whiff of critical credibility. That's my role in this little play. If you read me.

Writing letters might seem a strange activity for a contemporary performance group. After all, so much of the rhetoric surrounding performance is preoccupied with an escape from textuality, and with a valorisation of the real, the authentically present, the actuality of experience. "This is not just a rehearsed script; I *really am* bleeding myself / exhausting myself / suspending myself on hooks / laying bare my soul [delete as applicable]." Yet, quite apart from textuality being an exceedingly odd thing for rhetoric to dismiss, the rejection of script has at this stage become a tediously well-scripted gesture. And try as we might to be authentically real, un-prescribed by textual preconception, the very concept of the authentic is always already a textual concept—a re-presentation, rather than purely present. Derrida said as much, re-Artaud, back in the swinging sixties, but still, today, we get performance artists claiming, often without a trace of irony, that what they do is not theatre, because theatre is just acting, whereas what they are doing is . . . just . . . *acting*.

reader, on the other hand, know full well that performance, or theatre, or call-it-what-you-will, is always double-exposed—that there is always (1) the actuality of people and objects present in front of an audience, but that there is always also (2) the textuality of absences—of things represented, alluded to, but not really (t)here. Much traditional theatre and much performance art have in common the attempt to deny this double-exposure and pretend either that (a) the fictional people depicted really are present, or that (b) the actual people present really are not fictionalised—that they are present as themselves (whatever that is), and not at all as constructed characterisations of self (as if they could possibly be anything else). By contrast, reader write performances that foreground the inevitable interplay of absent and present in the act of performance, and indeed in the act of reading.

Cut to an example. In reader's performance *Dumb Bunny* (Tramway, Glasgow, 2003), the company place loving emphasis on the process of sensory perception itself, as they gradually populate the bare, black stage area with objects and materials that draw our attention to their very *thingliness*, here and now. The show starts as small, suspended hessian sacks are cranked out across the stage space on pulleys and then punctured, so as to allow a gentle but insistent stream of sand to pour from each one onto the floor. A slight swinging motion is added to this or that sack, setting up a pendulum effect and creating strange, spooling patterns of sand on the floor that gradually grow into hills as the swinging slows to a halt and the sand falls once more onto a single spot. The sense of wonder generated by such simple means continues to develop as the sand—now (unevenly) covering the floor—is complemented by the gradual arrival of a forest of potted plants. Stage and audience alike are then bathed in gorgeously warm, golden light and billowed by a cool breeze, and suddenly our immediate perceptual awareness of these objects gives way to imaginative extrapolation, as if we have all suddenly been transported to some island utopia (though

we're clearly still here, in Tramway). And then, as if to remind us, perversely, of the hopeless limitations of their stage illusion, the performers introduce an army of cardboard cut-out penguins—so very out of place in this faux-tropical locale that they need our protection. Each one is introduced personally to an individual audience member, who is asked to hold it and look after it.

This to-ing and fro-ing between the seen-here and the imagined-there is further enhanced by the company's deft use of monologue and storytelling—which set up all kinds of wonders in the mind's eye. After all, as reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser points out in *The Act of Reading* (1978), perceptual experience is not just a matter of immediate sight, smell, sound and such, but can also be triggered by something as phenomenologically impoverished as black marks on a white page. We read a novelist's words, and our minds do the rest, “filling in the blanks” to create a fully imagined world that is at once triggered by the writer's vision, and yet very much the reader's own. We see, hear, touch, taste and smell objects, places and people that are not actually (t)here, but which are no less real for that.

Just so, in *Dumb Bunny*, the waterfalls of words that issue from the performers conjure up entire, virtual worlds, which sit alongside the actuality of the sand, plant and cardboard stage-world like parallel dimensions. Eilidh, for example, tells a tale about dumb lemmings jumping off cliffs to their deaths. To illustrate this, she uses an ever-expanding collection of small, brown, furry beanbags, which she holds aloft, and crudely animates so as to make them scamper, collide, and—eventually—plunge headlong to the floor (she drops them). Meanwhile, she explains to us that the myth of suicidal lemmings is indeed a myth, that they don't do this naturally, and that to film them doing this for their “natural history” documentaries, Disney had to herd a bunch of them off a cliff in terror. As Eilidh's tale opens out, we “see” the cliff, we “see” the lemmings, we “see” the boats bearing cameramen down below,

capturing the death plunge (all in the vivid technicolour of the mind's eye), while all the while we also *see* Eilidh playing amiably with furry beanbags. The weird, playful disjuncture between the seen and the imagined, the “real” and the “read,” is what makes the moment. Each of us has made our own movie, from Eilidh's deft, daft storyboarding.

There is, of course, a strong sense of child's play here—a kind of knowing innocence. reader's juxtaposition of the perceptually raw and the perceptually cooked, this generation of a richly double-coded theatre experience, has something of a conjurer's magic about it. (The conjurer knows that we know there isn't really a rabbit in the hat, but also that we want to be made to believe that there is.) But magic is not only for children, and there's a darker sorcery at work here too. In conjuring the natural world, reader also remind us of its absence. In reminding us insistently of our closeness to, and yet also our acculturated distance from, the wild places and creatures they imagine, *Dumb Bunny* is perhaps less a celebration of possible ecological utopias than a requiem for the already lost. By emphasising a disjuncture between the seen and unseen, the present and the absent, reader also usher us toward an act of mourning for a state of nature which we never knew. (Just as, in truth, we never knew our own childhoods, *as* childhoods, until they were already gone. To imagine that we can look now, with a “child-like” gaze, is itself a pretence, an acting out . . .)

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But what has all this to do with writing letters to Australia? Well, nothing and everything. The present project reads, to me, as an extension of questions already implicit in reader's performance work. There's something disarmingly childish, of course, about the very idea: finding a faraway pen-pal in a foreign land. And in the act of handwriting, in this era of instant e-mailing, there's an almost Luddite resistance to the disembodiment of electronic communication—a

suggestion that the transported paper itself carries the magic of an embodied presence. “On this page, the writer’s hand actually rested, and wrote these words, and now I hold it between my hands, and read them.” It’s the same impulse that prompts a fondness for crackly vinyl in the age of the compact disc. (“Fuck digital, go analogue.”) And is there an ecological impulse here, too? An urge to write only what the human hand is physically capable of writing before fatigue sets in, rather than to indulge in the endless, unchecked hyperproduction of cybertext—copied and pasted and multiply-mailed. It’s a futile, romantic gesture, perhaps, but one that, nonetheless, conjures a certain, performative resonance.

And there again . . . there are calculated ironies here too. For behind the romance lurks a fear—a desire less for embodied presence than for the absent to *remain absent*. Did those of us with pen-pals ever really want to *meet* our faraway friends? Wasn’t the whole point of pen-pals their reassuring faraway-ness? Wasn’t it better to have an imaginary friend, rather than yet another real one that you couldn’t entirely trust not to go telling tales at school? And even if your pen-pal turned out to be a scribbled soulmate, and you decided that you *just had* to meet, wasn’t there also the fear that the actual person, in the flesh, would turn out to be a crashing disappointment? That the real wouldn’t match up to the representation?

Can we ever really know, or reach, each other? (Let alone the animal other.) If I write a letter to you, does a piece of me go with it? Do my words carry with them some truth about myself for you to excavate through reading? Do the chances of such magical transference increase if I write by hand, so that you hold in your hand and devour with your eyes the very stuff onto which I inscribed myself? Or is this all merely wishful thinking? Will the person you imaginatively reconstruct through the reading of my words bear any relation whatever to the person I *imagine myself* to be? And if I subsequently hurl myself across the

globe to confront you “in the flesh” (as it were), will you be any the wiser for being able to look in my eyes, or watch me speak, or laugh, or gesticulate?

Will you ever be able to hold me?

(And is that your loss, or mine?)

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You’ll want to hold on to reader, when you meet them. Let me introduce you. Because one thing you need to understand about this group is just how personable they are in performance. Just how instantly likable, warm, disarmingly natural. Eilidh, endearingly goofy, seems almost too enthusiastic about being here. Robert, seemingly a little more organised, tries very hard to make us feel welcome and make sure we know what’s going on. Lalage joins in gamely, but slightly more guardedly, and seems reticent about letting us know—what? how smart she really is? (in case that becomes an obstacle). All three seem utterly themselves, with no sense of pretence, and even as I write this I want to insist that yes, those people on the stage are very much the people I’ve met off it. But at the same time . . . not. For I realise, with a certain unease, that even now I hardly know these people. Their *personability* (i.e. their ability to seem like actual persons, rather than acted personas) is something I am *reading in* here. And for every “blank” that you or I might “fill in,” in order to feel like we’ve “got to know” these people, reader insist on opening up another. Utterly genuine as they always seem, the gaps and fissures which haunt their performances invite us to ask whether their disarming smiles are as disarmed as they appear.

Again, cut to an example. In the first instalment of *Songs from the Burning Bed* (CCA, Glasgow, 2004), Robert informs us that there is a man is stationed on the roof of the CCA, and that he has a message from him that he intends to read to us. I, for one, instantly picture a

sniper, bedded down, dictating words while scoping his target. Robert reads, from a scrappy piece of paper (a recurring reader gesture), the words of a man we imagine to be up there but whom we know is (probably) not. And I wonder uneasily whether these words, displaced from Robert by the act of reading, are nonetheless in some way his; whether the invisible man is an imaginary avatar for an unseen side of Robert? “Hello from upstairs,” he reads, “I can see rock and roll adolescent hoodlums storm the streets of all nations. They rush into the Louvre and throw acid in the Mona Lisa’s face. They open zoos, insane asylums, prisons, burst water mains with air hammers, chop the floor out of passenger plane lavatories, shoot out lighthouses, file elevator cables to one thin wire, turn sewers into the water supply. . .” The images continue to proliferate (some of them stolen from William Burroughs, it transpires), and I’m thinking: such a sweet, unassuming man, this Robert . . . yet such wild, terroristic fantasies.

A similar gesture occurs in *Warm Welcome Cold Climate* (CCA, Glasgow, 2003), in which Robert is literally the only reader present. Eilidh, Lalage, and their sometime collaborator James are all elsewhere, strewn across the globe, and Robert brings these absent players into his “live” performance via telephone relay. We have no way to verify, of course, that James is in London, outside Buckingham Palace, that Eilidh is in Berlin, outside the Reichstag, or that Lalage is in the heart of downtown Toronto. Apparently they really were, though they could have been in the next room, and reader know we know this . . . so Lalage taps a donut on the receiver, by way of evidence. (A real, Torontan donut. Just feel the sound of its texture.) What convinces us of their whereabouts, if we are convinced, is the verisimilitude with which each caller describes her or his whereabouts: we can *see* Buckingham Palace in front of us . . . And what disturbs us, therefore, is the ease with which each caller slides from utterly plausible reportage, and toward dark fantasies that—in the current global climate—hardly seem fantastic at all. Eilidh describes Berlin plunged into darkness; streams of Germans making

their way out of the city in eerie, terrified silence. And Lalage explains, almost casually, that she has explosives strapped to her, and is just waiting her moment to blow some unsuspecting Canadians as high as the tip of the CN Tower.

All a little tasteless, we might think, in an age of suicidal terrorists, collapsing buildings, carpet-bombed countries . . . But perhaps we *are* a little tasteless. Perhaps we nice, affable, sensible westerners *are* the terrorists, as surely as are those “fundamentalist wackos”—not only because we (UK, US, OZ) are participating, if only by our silence, in the mass destruction of people we have never even met (but could have been pen-pals with), but also because—on some level—each of us secretly craves the kind of mayhem that Robert’s sniper describes. Fuck this consumerist paradise. Fuck this nine-to-five. Fuck this world of celebrity gossip. Fuck the fucking lying politicians and the people who voted them in. Fuck us all. We should burn.

What kind of people do we want to be instead?

(Fill in the blanks.)

In the last moments of *Warm Welcome Cold Climate*, standing on a chair in the dark, Robert reads—from a scrappy piece of paper with the help of a tiny flashlight—a text for today in three parts. Each part contradicts the other. Yet each part has “the ring of truth,” as surely as did those telephone calls from our absent friends, in foreign lands:

I. And when the visitor arrives, be they foreign, or friend or strange, we shall not turn them away or close the curtains. We will open our eyes and doors and give them the best we have; the comfiest bed, the finest food and the sweetest wine. It is an ancient European tradition to be hospitable to all in case the stranger on the doorstep is a God in disguise. We wonder whether we are being tested and fear the wrath of this uncertain deity.

II. When the wolf is at the door, we do not let it in. We gather together and listen to it howl. We open our mouths and we howl louder. We howl until the windows smash, until the leaves fall off the trees, until it is the wolf that is hunted.

III. We do not strap bombs to our bodies. We do not fly planes into buildings. We do not stand up. We do not protest. We sit comfortably and talk and drink tea and complain. We do not shout. We do not scream or cry or laugh. We are waiting for others to strap on their bombs. We long for the fire to grow from our insides so we can incinerate all the wolves that come to our door and ask for food.

The image of fire—the idea of it, if not the fact of it—is a habitual visitor in the world of reader. Of course, in Oz, you guys know a thing or two about fire. About the awful (awe- full) necessity of bush fires—to turn over ground, to clear away dead wood, to reignite the whole implacable process of ecological renewal. (Evolution as revolution.) As far as the planet is concerned, of course, we humans are the infestation, the element that unbalances the eco- system, that pumps dry the earth's resources, starts wars over them, kills off entire species through neglect or contrivance, rips holes in the ozone and melts the icecaps. So in the final analysis, reader seem to imply (or am I just reading in?), ecological renewal has to start at home. We have—suggests their piece *So Long* (Dartington, 2001)—to set ourselves ablaze:

I

I am

I am here

I am here

I am stood on a chair

I am on fire

I am here on the chair on fire
I am burning
I am the chair on fire
I am my trousers burning
I am the floor the floor the floor on fire and burning
Melting
I am the walls, the bricks and mortar melting and falling and
revealing the garden
I am the garden on fire the leaves on the twigs on the branches on
the trunk burning hot on fire . . .

Cut. You don't really need to read any more. Maybe you should just burn this page and cut to the chase. Tear it out and set it ablaze. Or maybe it has already leapt spontaneously into flames in front of you, just as the theatre itself seemed quietly to incinerate itself in the performance just quoted. And if it has—if even now you are knocking this book in panic from your lap or table, and frantically reaching for the nearest fire extinguisher or petrol can—then your reading just became a performance.

Which way do you want the story to end?

In the end, then, we're all readers. And the act of reading is an active choice to receive—and also to participate, to imagine, to interpret. It's a kind of gift we make to writers, in fact—just as much as their writing may seem a kind of gift to us. We choose to let their words in. To let them “flame amazement”¹ in our minds, where they may indeed prove incendiary.

I'm about done. Is any of this what I meant to say? Perhaps you've filled in some blanks for yourself, made your own sense of it. Or perhaps it all strikes you as bullshit. . . . That's fine. Even bullshit is flammable.

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene ii, line 198.

Look, I gotta go.

Yeah, I'm running out of change.

There's a lot of things, if I could, I'd rearrange.

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