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Questions on performances: *In Place of War?*

ABSTRACT

In this article James Thompson discusses In Place of War, a research and practice-based initiative at the University of Manchester that has sought to document and examine theatre and performance projects in sites of contemporary armed conflict. He outlines the genesis of the project from practice-based training programmes in Sri Lanka in 2000, and examines the questions that it sought to answer in the main period of research between 2004 and 2007. The article includes descriptions of theatre projects and performances with which In Place of War has engaged – including DR Congo, Sri Lanka and Sudan. It explores how the differences between these projects raise questions about the relationship between the arts and conflict, memorialization and resistance. The article then provides an overview of the challenges presented by these different practices, and sketches some of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that either have been useful in thinking through the projects, or have been tested by the questions that have arisen during the research process.

I am involved in a research project called *In Place of War*, and many of the comments I make here are also contained in two books from that project (see Thompson, Hughes and Balfour 2009; Thompson 2009). As artists, we often look for ways to respond to contemporary conflicts within the histories of art-making within our own culture. The idea behind *In Place of War* is that, rather than searching for answers historically, we should explore geographically, looking at how artists in contemporary war settings are responding themselves. For me, the work started in Northern Sri Lanka, training artists, community workers and teachers to use theatre with young people affected

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by the war in that region. One of the things that most impressed me was the sheer number of different theatre organizations, visual artists, playwrights and children's theatre workers in that particular war zone. It immediately suggested that, rather than going back into the history of British theatre-making to discover how artists should respond to new wars, we should learn from the wealth of knowledge internationally about how artists are responding to war.

So *In Place of War* is a project that documents exactly how artists internationally have been responding. The process has been undertaken so that they may start to share their experiences with other artists internationally. There are incredible artists working in war zones who very rarely have an opportunity to meet with each other and share their expertise, and one of the aims of this project is to bring those artists together. We arranged seminars and workshops in Manchester, and we are also organizing a series of meetings in different international settings. So we work with artists from Sudan, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, the Republic of Congo, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, Sri Lanka, Colombia – one can almost point at any conflict on a map and there will be inspiring artists and directors in those settings. The documentation work has developed a database of information, material, and interviews and scripts, which is available and publicly accessible; most of the items are in English but other languages are also represented. As part of the process of documenting this work, we have also tried to develop new pieces of practice with a number of artists. We had a case study site in Sri Lanka, and developed a range of more detailed documentation and practice in this setting. And we have also been working locally in Manchester, developing theatre and art projects with people who have survived or escaped from war zones and arrived there. We have, for instance, done a number of projects with Congolese people in Manchester who have been displaced by the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This article provides a general overview of the *In Place of War* project. First, it describes three different projects from three different sites. It then outlines a number of the issues raised by some of these practices. They are presented in brief form here, but I hope they will spark some further discussions and comments. One thing about the *In Place of War* project is that the term 'in place of war' obviously has a double meaning, it means *work from places of war* but also contains the sense of *instead of war*. We are predominantly interested in projects that are seeking to make a difference to the conflict, and that are in some way critical of it. However, we cannot ignore the fact that many projects are done as much *in spite of* the context as *because of* it. One of the big issues, of course, is that the claims by some projects to be critical or counter to a war in a particular context do not stand up to sustained scrutiny. Some of the 'anti-war' theatre projects we examined, when looked at more closely, could be shown to be linked to different war efforts, and at worst might actually have been perpetuating some of the divisions within the communities involved. So this is not necessarily a rosy picture all about beautiful artists doing good work. It could be argued that the majority of cultural projects that exist in war zones help to maintain war, increase divisions, stoke revenge, build nationalism or promote racism. There is no automatic propensity for an arts initiative to be pro-peace, and cultural practice has no essential quality that inevitably makes it heal divisions, promote understanding or stimulate dialogue. It may be that the artists who are really trying to work against war are in the minority.

I am going to outline three projects briefly, one from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), one from Sri Lanka and a final one from Sudan. The first is Centre Lokole based in Bukavu in the South Kivu region of the DRC but serving the whole of the eastern area of the country on the borders of Burundi and Rwanda. Centre Lokole is the Congolese name for the international organization Search for Common Ground. This organization predominately does media and radio work, training journalists and developing human rights initiatives. However, it also has a participatory theatre project that has toured across the whole of the eastern region of the country. It works with artists to create public performances about particular issues, and its current focus is on the repatriation of refugees.

Since the ceasefire, many tens of thousands of refugees have been returning from Tanzania, and some of the conflicts between the people who stayed and the returnees are quite intense. What this theatre organization does is meet the refugees as they get off the boat arriving across Lake Tanganyika from western Tanzania. At the quayside, Centre Lokole representatives talk to them about the issues back in the camps and their expectations for their return home. They accompany the refugees back to their home villages, and work for a period of time with the existing population, discovering what conflicts exist in the area. Then, at the end of a given period of time, they create a piece of public, participatory theatre for the whole village. The actors perform in public, open-air venues, and the audience members are encouraged to intervene and to present different responses to the questions posed by the piece they are witnessing. It is a communication model that asserts the importance of sharing quality information about possible means of conflict resolution.

While the actual information is, of course, important, one of the most under-appreciated aspects of these public events is the sheer 'public-ness' of them. In the South Kivu area, particularly during wartime, people did not go out and they did not congregate in large numbers. Usually, with this type of 'problem posing' or 'informational' theatre, the commentary concentrates on content – how to resolve conflicts peacefully, how to access information, how to get compensation and so on. My point here is that we need also to remember the significance of form. A thousand people meeting outside to participate in an open discussion of pressing concerns is a sign of 'normality' that in itself can perhaps encourage a desire for it. Centre Lokole creates a vision of a return to public life, which is a vital component of helping to cement an end to violence.

The next group I want to discuss is the Third Eye Local Knowledge and Activist Group (or Third Eye), from Batticaloa in Eastern Sri Lanka. This group is particularly interesting because it started most of its work during the 2002 ceasefire. In Eastern Sri Lanka, which is predominantly a Tamil area, there is a traditional dance drama performance form called *kooththu*. In non-war times, the performance takes place at night, starting at sundown, continuing for twelve hours, and finishing at dawn.

As one can imagine, in the middle of a war zone and during a period of strict curfews, this did not happen very often. So, the conflict actually prevented this form of performance from taking place. Over a period of ten to fifteen years of curfew and ongoing violent conflict, the skills needed to perform the dances almost disappeared.

However, from the beginning of the ceasefire in 2002, Third Eye started training young people in dance and drama performance in the yards and gardens beside people's houses in the area. While the actual 'public-ness'

of the activity was unusual, the group also started re-establishing all-night performances. Again, it is important to emphasize that this was an area where people did not go out at night. However, from 2002, with these new cultural activities and classes, the community became more confident about attending performances.

What Third Eye did with the dance dramas was also important: it used the local elder directors of the *kooththu* as the key authorities on the techniques and the content of the work. The rehearsals and public practices used and validated their expertise – an expertise that had been hidden and maligned during the war. Also, significantly, it used the scripts and the storylines to start small-scale public debates. *Kooththu* performances are based on sections of the Hindu epics, taken from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In the case of Third Eye, the decisions about the excerpts on which to focus were always important. For example, Third Eye started a process whereby young women could be participants. Previously, there were no women involved in any of the *kooththu* groups, but now women – particularly young women – act in a number of the performances, something that has never happened before. The group has also started to make subtle changes to the scripts to challenge the way that they represent low-caste communities. *Kooththu* is performed in predominately low-caste fishing communities, but the stories it tells are highly derogatory to low-caste people. Third Eye started to examine this, and to support the communities in adjusting the scripts when they restarted the rehearsal processes. As well, Third Eye chooses aspects of the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana* where decisions about going to war or the dilemmas about war are part of the narrative. In this community in Eastern Sri Lanka, a low-lying guerrilla war was taking place, with frequent assassinations – particularly of politicians and local leaders. To talk openly about the war, and how wars were fought, was therefore dangerous in this context. This group clearly presented debate about the war through the decisions it made in its presentations. However, this was not what they explicitly claimed to be doing. As the public culture in Sri Lanka is heavily circumscribed, and a civic discussion about the war is difficult, the group created all-night performances that present dilemmas faced by the ancient kings about whether they were going to war, in the context of a ceasefire that was at best fragile. There were plenty of ‘modern kings’ seeking a return to the conflict. Where Centre Lokole stressed the importance of the content of its performances – and I would argue that the form was just as important – Third Eye effectively stressed the form (the reformulation of *kooththu*), but has necessarily had to be less explicit about the content of the work.

The next example is the Kwoto Cultural Centre from Khartoum in Sudan. The Kwoto Cultural Centre works with Southern Sudanese communities that have been displaced to Khartoum. The long-term war between the Northern government and the different Southern regions in Sudan has led to a mass displacement to the capital in the north. Khartoum is surrounded by a range of camps of internally displaced people. Those communities come from different areas of the South, and have different cultural traditions. Kwoto has begun to validate the different performance forms that exist in those various communities. It works with what it calls ‘living libraries’ – which simply means the elderly, as they are often the sole repository of many of the cultural traditions and practices from their home areas. These walking ‘libraries’ have been encouraged to start training the young people in their different dance performances. This is not a story-based or narrative-based artistic response to the situation; rather, it is a dance-based response to conflict. Also, because

1. Kwoto is based in camps where there are different cultural communities from
 2. the South working and living together, it has started a process to encour-
 3. age an exchange between the different cultural forms practised. In this way,
 4. people have started to communicate with each other as Southern Sudanese
 5. through the various types of cultural activities that make up their different
 6. cultures. It is important to emphasize that, in the case of Kwoto, the focus is
 7. on the form of cultural practice and not necessarily the 'issues' or 'problems'
 8. that are presented within the performances.

9. These three brief examples have been taken from many different projects
 10. that are represented in full in the *Performance in Place of War* book and on the
 11. project website (see <http://www.inplaceofwar.net>). To end, I want to suggest
 12. five questions or problems that are raised by this work. The first concerns the
 13. relationship between time and place – that is, the time since the war came to
 14. an end and the distance participants have travelled geographically from the
 15. war zone. The relationship between these two will have an effect on the type
 16. of theatre or cultural practice that is produced or possible. The moment when
 17. the bombs are falling in the actual site of conflict stimulates different cultural
 18. responses from the response of those who, having left the place of war, are
 19. now looking back or remembering it. When considering the forms of artistic
 20. responses to war, the relation of time to place helps explain what kind of work
 21. can – and, perhaps more importantly, should – take place. When the bombs
 22. are falling, one does not tend to talk about reconciliation. There are different
 23. moments and different forms of production that we should think about, and
 24. we must not make assumptions about what art's response to war should look
 25. like. Thinking 'time and place' makes us understand that when the bombs
 26. are falling, people do still create theatre, but it makes different demands and
 27. has different effects from that created by, for example, refugees living 'out of
 28. place' and 'away from the time' of war.

29. The next question or issue concerns 'history and memory'. Many people
 30. assume that theatre projects in war zones are automatically concerned with
 31. notions of memory and remembrance. And there is a danger that this assump-
 32. tion can become an edict – or perhaps a rule – that theatre programmes should
 33. or must deal with the memories communities have about their circumstances
 34. or suffering. I would argue that this fails to recognize that some performances
 35. and some performance forms are as much about forgetting things as they are
 36. about remembrance, and commentators from outside war zones should not
 37. assume that forgetting the worst of a situation is somehow negative. It is not
 38. for to me to tell someone else that it is important to remember the past. Who
 39. am I to say that this terrible event is worth remembering when at that moment
 40. (in a particular time and place, going back to a previous point) it might be
 41. more appropriate to forget. Those who support and document, and particu-
 42. larly those who sponsor, need to avoid determining or insisting which cultural
 43. practices are necessary for which group. Another point to make here is that
 44. remembrance, problematically, is often linked to a *competition* of memories, so
 45. that what is created can be a competition of suffering. There is, of course, a
 46. danger that a competition of different remembrances can maintain and exac-
 47. erbate the divisions between people rather than help overcome them. So a
 48. 'theatre project on memory' might have an immediate positive ring to it, but
 49. we must ask: Why remembering not forgetting? What is remembered? and
 50. Whose memories are validated in the process?

51. My third point concerns the assumptions in many war zone cultural
 52. projects about the importance of, and sometimes necessity for, storytelling.

This takes many forms, but can be summarized as a tendency to base projects on narrative forms that tell stories of suffering, or 'real events', in the belief that telling a story validates that experience, or in some way makes dealing with it easier. Theoretically, the 'story imperative' is based on a human rights perspective, where the telling of a community's story is understood to validate people's experience and to enable it to be heard, and also a therapeutic tradition based on understandings of trauma, where an expressed story is said to heal the teller. While my position is that of course there are many important projects involving narrative, we need to understand that many notions of the 'healing power of stories' originate in some very particular North American and European traditions. These are appropriate for some communities, but in many contexts the revelation of a story has no simple relationship to a process of overcoming suffering. Developing cultural projects in war-affected communities from a fixed assumption of the importance of storytelling can in fact lead to a process where other cultural forms of dealing with suffering are overlooked. In particular, the dominance of western conceptions of trauma, and in particular Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, can create an insistence that people must tell their stories in order to survive, where there are many cultures in which explicit telling is understood to bring harm to the teller. There are many different cultural forms of mourning for dealing with loss and overcoming terrible events, and we need to be careful not to insist on knowing which are appropriate.

The fourth point I call 'Romeo-and-Julietism'. This is the assumption that every piece of cultural performance in a conflict zone must be about bringing two communities together, and that through that performance reconciliation will be made possible. Again, I think this is often an assumption that is easier to insist on from the outside than to make real. I have had Palestinian colleagues who say that they could get a million dollars if they agreed to do a production together with an Israeli group – and in their case literally for productions of *Romeo and Juliet*. What this does is create somewhat artificial cross-cultural work, which is in danger of being meaningless on the ground. A Palestinian Romeo may never meet an Israeli Juliet in the complex realities of borders and checkpoints between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and onstage romance might be political wishful thinking that misrepresents the possibilities for peace, to the detriment of the people worst affected by the situation. In addition, over-easy reconciliation narratives have a tendency to make simplistic assumptions about which divisions are most important in people's lives. Assuming certain divisions can help maintain them, even when the intention is the opposite. It should not be for me to designate which divisions within a particular community are the most important for representation. And perhaps working in single community projects could be as effective and as important – there is nothing automatically wrong with designing a project only for the Juliets. In Northern Ireland, for instance, if you want to do a Catholic/Protestant or a Loyalist/Republican play, you might find somewhat easier access to financial support than if you suggest working solely in a Republican or Loyalist community. Of course, there are divisions within these communities that it is vital to address – between young and old, rural and urban and so forth – and perhaps in addressing these issues, the solidity of the expected divisions that sustained the conflict might be challenged.

My final point is about beauty and aesthetics. We are very nervous about 'aestheticizing' war and making art or the beautiful from other people's

suffering. One of the most astounding things for me, in working in different war zones and working with artists living in war zones, is their demand that they should have a right to create things that are beautiful. They will articulate beauty not as trivial, not as something extra, not as something that is dangerous or a privilege, but as something vital. Art-making might have many rationales that I have already touched upon here – for healing, for memorializing, for asserting rights – but the desire for beauty can be just as frequent a demand. The different comments from artists who explain the aesthetic dimension of their practice as important can be divided into two categories. First, beautiful things are explained as a place of safety in a place of danger. I know of a lot of projects – particularly with young children – that are creating safe places where children can have a diversion, celebrate and have fun. Many artists articulate young people's right to continue to experience enjoyment in these difficult places and times. The second reason is that they have the right to beauty because things that are beautiful are in juxtaposition to the ugliness of the surrounding war: they compare and are thus an implicit critique of the context. In other settings, they may be a trivial escape, or an irrelevance, but the war forces that comparison – acts of joy, celebration or creation of the beautiful can be an assertive rejection of the brutality of violence.

My conclusion, with regard to all five points discussed above, is that they have emerged from discussions with artists in many different war zones. In thinking through the type of work that is seen beyond these sites, or is supported by agencies working in the global North, we should respect their expertise and acknowledge it more directly. The central point is that we make assumptions about what type, style or form of cultural practice might be important, and these assumptions often miss the knowledge and insights that exist within these settings – and frequently we propose projects that might be far from appropriate. Artists in international war zones face these questions daily, and continue to surprise with regard to the complexity, intelligence and beauty of their responses. We need to listen and observe more intently.

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