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Tony Jackson

Left: *Starfish*, 2010 © Sheila Burnett  
Below: *Breathing Country*, 2009 © Robert Workman



## “So are you really a theatre company then?”

By Tony Jackson

This question was asked by a member of the student audience following Y Touring’s performance of *Breathing Country* at Manchester University (March 2010). Posed by someone possibly unfamiliar with this kind of participatory theatre practice, and seemingly intrigued and perplexed in equal measure, it nicely captures I think the ‘in-between’ territory that Y Touring and other similar companies occupy. The programme had begun with a context-setting introduction followed by a short drama that played out some of the key issues in fictional but highly credible form, and culminated in a workshop, in which the actors answered questions in role, and a debate involving the whole audience about the use of electronic media in the NHS. The transitions from one approach to another, from classroom to theatre to Q&A were managed expertly and seamlessly, but certainly departed from the commonly held assumptions that theatre is essentially to do with fiction and entertainment watched by an audience in polite silence. A degree of puzzlement not just at the interactive form but at the ability of a remarkably well-informed company to respond convincingly to questions (in and out of role), is unsurprising. But did it also betray a

worry about the relationship between fact and fiction - that the performed scenes were somehow diminished because lacking in the factual status of other parts of the programme? – or that the facts themselves had now become suspect because they might merely be pegs on which to hang the drama? – or was it simply that the switching backwards and forwards between factual investigation and performed fictional drama was surprising enough to require more time to process?

The student’s question has prompted me to consider some of the challenges faced by performers working in such ‘in between’ educational settings who deploy both recognisably theatrical and more open, fluid, non-theatrical ways of working with young audiences. Actors in such settings are often faced with a multiple set of requirements – not only must they perform characters in a staged narrative and sustain audience interest, and indeed entertain in the process, but they must also at another level inform, educate and, frequently, challenge preconceptions their audience may have; and further, in those workshop elements of the

programme pivotal to Y Touring's work, they have to engage directly with the audience in dialogue about the issues raised, which in turn requires of them detailed knowledge of the subject-matter and its wider social implications. They must moreover deal with young audiences, many of whom have little experience of conventional theatre let alone of the deployment of theatrical means for direct educational purposes.

The following discussion draws on the work not only of Y Touring but of the broader range of theatre companies working in related areas, and especially in the increasingly innovative realm of museum and heritage education (where my own recent research has focused).

**“What is shared with TIE in general and Y Touring in particular is the dedication to using drama to highlight and illuminate issues of relevance to contemporary audiences and to an interactive process that will generate, directly or indirectly, debate.”**

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The philosophy and practice of Y Touring will be well known already to visitors to this website, but it is I think worth noting here the important debt that Y Touring owes to the theatre-in-education (TIE) movement that began in the mid-1960s and has been hugely influential in the various educationally-driven uses of performance that still flourish (often now clustered under the label of ‘applied theatre’), a broad movement in which Y Touring has played a leading part. A distinct but closely related strand of work is the use of theatre in the heritage sector – in museums, galleries and historic sites – which has burgeoned over the past two decades. What is often termed, rather inadequately, ‘museum theatre’ is generally presented by professional actors and/or interpreters in museums and at historic sites and may range from performances of short plays/monologues based on historical events or on-site exhibitions, to interactive events using ‘first person’ interpretation or role-play; it may be designed for the curriculum needs of visiting schoolchildren or the wider learning and enjoyment of family groups or independent visitors – or all three. And it has been used to further the development of ‘the museum as forum’, fostering debate about museum collections, their origins and their contemporary relevance. Again, it operates in an ‘in between’ setting, its potential not always understood or adequately exploited. Its actors are not only faced with similar challenges to those of the TIE company in school, but must also deal with an extraordinary variety of audiences, often

unpredictable in number, age, social background and extent of prior knowledge, many of whom have no intention of being audiences until the very moment that a performance begins. What is shared with TIE in general and Y Touring in particular is the dedication to using drama to highlight and illuminate issues of relevance to contemporary audiences and to an interactive process that will generate, directly or indirectly, debate.

One way of trying to get a handle on what actors working in this broad and varied field do, is to see how far acting theory might be used as a template for what in so many respects goes beyond the call of the conventional skill of the actor. The American academic Bert O. States developed in the mid-1980s a useful theorisation of the modes in which the actor operates. According to his phenomenological approach, he argues that theatre can usefully be understood as ‘an act of speech’; and that this idea “allows us to see how an actor’s relationship to the audience may shift ‘keys’ during a performance.” (States 1983) The actor has, he says, “three pronominal modes in which he may speak to the audience”. These modes can be summarised as:

- the **representational** – here the emphasis is on the pronoun ‘he’ or ‘she’, the character being played, and on the actor’s function as a vehicle of signification, that is, on his/her ability to communicate and sustain the world of the play and to ‘be’ that character ;
- the **collaborative** – here the emphasis is on ‘you’, the audience, that is, the actor’s direct interaction or communication with the audience (States is thinking primarily of such examples as Shakespearean direct address, comic asides or Brechtian epic acting – he does not mention the more open forms of interaction characteristic of so much of Y Touring’s work); and
- the **self-expressive** – here the emphasis is on the ‘I’, the actor, that is, the actor as actor, where the performance itself becomes the primary focus of attention, with the audience more conscious of the skill, inventiveness and virtuosity of the performer than of the character she may be playing; this is “See what I can do” (as States puts it) rather than “Let me convince you that I am the character I play”.

As States goes on to explain, these are not exclusive categories; indeed it is possible for an actor to operate in all three modes at different points within the one performance and sometimes in more than one mode at any one time. My argument is that in TIE (in which I include Y Touring) and museum theatre, such simultaneity of mode is not just a common occurrence but actually fundamental to this kind of performance. So how far and in what ways might States’ formulation of those three ‘pronominal modes’ of

performance apply to the work of the Y Touring actor-teacher or the museum performer? And in what ways can these modes can be said to operate – and intersect – from moment to moment? I will refer to two very different but, on one level at least, closely related examples of professional practice – to Y Touring’s *Breathing Country* (2009-10) and to a production devised for performance at the Manchester Museum, one which I observed closely for research purposes: *This Accursed Thing* (2007-8) which dealt with the abolition of the slave trade, and was first presented as part of the series of commemorative events in 2007 that marked the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Abolition Act in Parliament.

First, the mode that is most commonly associated with conventional theatre: **The Representational Mode**. This is the acting mode that we perhaps most take for granted – the actor in role as a ‘character’, inhabiting a world depicted by the playwright in a well-crafted script, in which the people on stage, the objects they handle and the actions they pursue are all signifiers for a world ‘out there’ (the ‘real’ world of mid-20th cent. America in Arthur Miller’s plays, say, or of Shakespeare’s historical re-imagining of events in Tudor history). In relation to museum theatre, we might suggest that – in situ – in the setting of the sprawling kitchen of an historic 17th cent manor house, that world may be a relatively easy one to conjure up: the ‘set’ and the heavy texture and drape of the (more or less) authentic costumes are constant and powerful reminders of that world. In a school hall or museum gallery, however, it’s much more difficult, especially so in museums. Costumes will be paramount for historical pieces but the stage set rarely corresponds to the world being depicted, while the objects that might serve as signifiers are often in glass cases or behind roped-off barriers. In the plays devised for Y Touring, set in the immediate present, or an imagined future, one that young audiences will recognise as their own, the costumes and sets will tend towards the everyday, with attire used to signify status, profession or age, while objects and furniture will likewise provide the briefest of signifiers of location and occupational necessity. In *Breathing Country*, the scenes set in the family home or the researcher’s office are deftly and rapidly conjured into being by the presence, and use, of an easy-chair or a desk. Given the need for portability and for quick get-ins and get-outs, especially when touring schools, screens and drapes generally frame the action and attention to small detail, characteristic of full-frontal naturalism, is shunned.

But creating a plausible illusion of that world, by whatever means, is one vital way of drawing the audience into a world and a narrative

recognisable enough for them to connect with and then, hopefully, take something from – insights, ideas, understandings about unfamiliar subject-matter, a curiosity to discover more, making fresh links with their own lives – and of engaging them in debate. And, in the circumstances of the school hall, the onus is on the actor, not the set, to sustain that plausibility.

**“Finding a dramatic vehicle with which to say something useful and purposeful about such a sensitive and controversial subject carried both opportunity and immense risk.”**

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In *This Accursed Thing*, the challenge of representation, especially of a world in which the slave trade flourished, was huge. A promenade performance at the Manchester Museum<sup>1</sup>, it lasted about an hour, two actors played six characters, and each scene was played in a different location in the museum. Before the performance began, a short introduction was given by the two actors out-of-role, and, at the end, a 15 minute de-briefing took place at which the audience were able to ask questions of the actors again out of role – about the performance, the research, and of course the subject-matter of slavery and the slave trade. Finding a dramatic vehicle with which to say something useful and purposeful about such a sensitive and controversial subject carried both opportunity and immense risk. It required both in-depth research and immense care in how the factual knowledge was translated into drama – avoiding the twin-barbed charge of ‘dumbing-down’ on the one hand and appearing to condone the views of advocates of slavery on the other. As well as the use of period costume and props, the introductory briefing provided an essential framing for the drama, indicating the factual basis for the characters, actions and dialogue that were to follow, and making it crystal clear that the words spoken, some of which would now seem offensive, were based on those used at the time. The pre-show induction was also necessitated by the commitment to producing an interactive drama that would promote genuine dialogue. In fact, the generation of debate was as important an aim here as it has been for most Y Touring programmes, despite the otherwise marked differences in approach.

**The Collaborative Mode.** Across the spectrum of applied theatre, from ‘forum theatre’ and Y Touring-style ‘Theatre of Debate’ to ‘museum theatre’, this is the mode that is generally to the fore. There will of course be widely different kinds of performer-audience relationship and different demands made on the audience by the



performers, but blurring the clear dividing lines between 'stage' and 'auditorium' is invariably central to the purpose of the exercise. The actor shifts into collaborative mode most overtly when the audience is addressed directly and invited to contribute actively to the investigation of the issues dramatised.

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The out-of-role induction and de-briefing sequences that introduced and closed the performance of *This Accursed Thing* were designed to free up the drama sufficiently to allow for moments of interaction and genuine challenge within the performance, accompanied by the tacit permission given to the audience to opt in and out at any point. Audience involvement was designed to be incremental as the drama progressed through the galleries, through history and through the intellectual and emotional challenges proffered by the narrative. In part the induction sequence was also about finding ways of trying to equalise the power relations at work, reducing vulnerability and so enabling people to engage voluntarily and in their own way, without at the same time feeling patronised. Expectations matter greatly, and will often condition the responsiveness of the audience.

Y Touring are equally very clear about the 'rules of engagement'. *Breathing Country* began with a sustained introductory sequence, establishing a relaxed but focused atmosphere in which the

workshop leader-cum-scene setter was able to introduce the subject-matter, its potential relevance to the audience and the modus operandi of the following play and culminating workshop. But the question in the title of this essay perhaps also implies that, irrespective of the explicitness of that introduction, the student's doubts and confusions remained unresolved. Was there a need for a fuller induction to the programme and its interweaving of drama, fact and debate? Based on research findings elsewhere<sup>2</sup>, the answer is probably not: an even more explicit induction – making yet more explicit the rules and the way drama was going to feed into the process – would not have eliminated all puzzlement. Drama often is, perhaps should be, unsettling. It may be fiction but it also can illuminate and reveal in ways that other media cannot, and in the process is likely to leave question marks over the precise relationship between the fiction witnessed and the real-world implications that the workshop and ensuing debate address. There is also much to be said for work that confounds expectations, where surprise is a strong part of the very enjoyment and/or educational impact, and for the 'wow factor' which by definition should not be explained in advance.

In *This Accursed Thing*, probably the most challenging and unsettling sequence – for actors and audience alike – came during and immediately after a scene between a black African slave trader and his white (British) counterpart, here to do a deal over the next batch of slaves to be brought to the trading post. The audience begin as witnesses but then find themselves faced by a disconcerting confrontation. The white slave trader turns to them, sees their critical looks and challenges

From Left to Right:

*Cracked*, 1997  
© Robert Workman

*Breathing Country*,  
2009  
© Robert Workman



them to tell him what he's doing wrong. Some engage immediately, others (for whatever reasons) avoid his eyes and hope this is only a rhetorical question; for many there is a sense that to remain silent is either to offer tacit consent, to be complicit in the trade, or at the very least to accept its validity in the context of its time. Young children sometimes jumped in without hesitation to accuse the trader of unfairness; older children and many adults became increasingly frustrated at the trader's apparent ability to find a justification for his trade whatever the objection. For some, it was only in the relative safety of the final question and answer session at the very end, with the actors now out of role, that they felt empowered to express their reasoned analyses of the evils of the trade or, for others, their anger at its existence.

**"Of course, the need to challenge, to unsettle, surprise, stimulate, has to be balanced against the counter-productive risks of embarrassing, confusing, de-motivating, angering and ultimately disempowering the visitor who has not yet agreed to 'buy in' to the process."**

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Of course, the need to challenge, to unsettle, surprise, stimulate, has to be balanced against the counter-productive risks of embarrassing, confusing, de-motivating, angering and ultimately disempowering the visitor who has not yet agreed to 'buy in' to the process. That in a nutshell is one of the main challenges for the performer: how to unsettle and take your audience with you.

The final mode States discusses is one that is least talked about in TIE and museum theatre, but which is just as vital to the successful implementation of theatre that aims at a powerful and lasting impact. **The Self-Expressive Mode** refers to the kind of performance in which the virtuosity of the actor predominates, and where the audience tend to be most conscious of the actor as actor. In museum theatre, no matter how close you intend to stay to the period and the narrative articulation of the subject-matter, in the end the success of the performance will hang first and foremost on the skill and persuasiveness of the performer – often operating in challenging and distracting environments and needing every ounce of performative skill to arouse the onlookers' curiosity, engage their attention and concentration and sustain interest through to the end. The world being created and the theme being explored will not be supported by the atmospherics possible in a hushed auditorium. In the museum the actor is often on his own, is

intensely vulnerable and relies on a wealth of experience, a well-researched and richly dramatised script, an in-depth knowledge of the background to the narrative, a teacher's ears and eyes and a politician's – or stand-up comedian's – ability to handle heckles and banter. Her closeness to her audience allows for no hiding-place, no masking of any loss of focus – she must be in the moment throughout, on top of her role and alert to audience response second by second.

The slave trader sequence mentioned earlier offers a useful illustration of all three modes in operation, both sequentially and, for a time, simultaneously. During the debate initiated by the white slave trader, the actor operates mostly but not exclusively in collaborative (ie interactive) mode, while in the slave trading scene that precedes it he is mostly in representational mode: the scene represents the kind of trade deals that would have been done and locates it precisely in 1807, just after the Abolition Act came into force – demonstrating that impact on the ground was minimal. But the representational mode also underpins and colours what happens in the interactive sequence that follows – the course of history can't be changed and the trader can never be persuaded to stop trading no matter how interactive the dialogue, nor how persuasive the audience's objections. The nature of that dialogue is inevitably conditioned by the audience's awareness of the doubleness of the action they witness. But also, at another level, the actor's ability to sustain that 'world' draws hugely from the self-expressive or virtuoso mode – that of the actor as actor. Many audience members commented afterwards on their frustration at, accompanied by reluctant admiration for, the character's (actor's) ability to have seemingly plausible answers for every objection they raised.

In Y Touring's *Breathing Country*, the clearest example of the simultaneity of these modes comes when the narrative section of the play ends (on a note of crisis as it's revealed that the memory stick containing vital, confidential and highly personal patient records has been lost) and the audience are invited to investigate further the issues raised, first by questioning the characters directly. As Marlene Winfield has explained<sup>3</sup>, each of the four cast members had to answer questions in role from the audience and be sufficiently prepared for 'all the directions the debate might take'. It was, for the purposes of the exercise, vital that the actors remained wholly and believably in role, answering from the necessarily limited perspective of their own character – sharing their insights, confusions and beliefs with their questioners, but equally resisting any temptation to yield too readily to advice from the audience. In collaborative mode, they have to

listen with care and explain with clarity – but not cave in! Only by grasping the validity and plausibility of the distinctively different positions offered by the teenage girl, her boyfriend, her father and the researcher, will the student audience be able to appreciate fully the complexity and importance of the issues at stake. But of course such ability, to retain character and yet to respond to often challenging questions in ways that help move the debate forward, requires considerable virtuosity. The concluding workshop – all too often tacked on in lesser TIE productions as a gesture towards ‘participation’ – was key to the effectiveness of the debate that ensued. And it required of the actors an ability to operate in all three modes, often at one and the same time: to be both in, and sometimes beyond, the kind of theatre to which our student questioner seemed to allude.

### Conclusion

Given the open, fluid and (in Michael Kirby’s words, 1969) ‘non-matrixed’ performance conditions found in the average school hall, museum gallery or historic site, the challenges for actors in this field, the skills required of them, and indeed the institutional obligations upon them, are immense. And they all converge, in my view, in the ability not only to operate effectively in each of States’ three modes but to sustain a performance in which, often, all three must be in play simultaneously. It is what any actor needs to be able to do plus a commitment to detailed research into the subject-matter, and to working with unpredictability; he or she must know how to ‘read’ and engage their audience (when to listen and watch as well as when to provoke) and know when and how to reassert the unyielding reality of the world they represent – as a corrective to easy mis- or pre-conceptions or as a stimulus to understanding that world more complexly. At its worst, acting in such settings can be an embarrassment, especially when undertaken in the mistaken belief that this is a diluted form of ‘real theatre’. At its best it constitutes an acting skill of enormous impressiveness, and one that too often gets unrecognised and under-estimated. Y Touring has above all demonstrated a commitment to a theatre that can generate debate precisely because it stimulates the need for such debate through not despite the theatre. And the company’s constant exploration, over a remarkable 21 years, of ways to renew and progress such theatrical forms, and to open up productive links with the electronic media, stands as something of a beacon in an educational landscape all too lacking in experiment and that willingness to work with uncertainty.

### Footnotes

1. The play was commissioned by the ‘Performance, Learning & Heritage’ research team and developed in partnership with a specialist professional theatre company (Andrew Ashmore & Associates) and the museum curators and education staff. Further discussion can be found in Jackson (2010).
2. See *PLH: Final Report* (2008)
3. See earlier essay in this series, ‘*Breathing Country: a breath of fresh air*’.

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[Some of the above discussion of This Accursed Thing previously appeared in Jackson (2010).]