Michael Balfour

Performing War:

'Military Theatre' and the Possibilities of Resistance

In Celtic (and Norse) history there are stories about how warrior armies celebrated their victories back at camp. Often based on hillside encampments, the soldiers and fighters would gravitate to one or other side of the hill to celebrate and rest. On one side of the camp, Bards - professional poets called Scops - would sing the praises of heroic accomplishments of the kings and noblemen. The stories were constructed into epic poems of mythical struggles and military honour. On another side of the hill-camp, another groups of Bards, called Skolds, composed vicious satires on the shortcomings of the royals and aristocracy in battle. The poems and songs would poke fun at the 'warriors' and highlight the failings and timidity of the supposedly fierce fighters. The word skald has been preserved in modern English and has become 'scold'.

The Skolds and the Scops represent two ways in which artists have responded to war in the past: the artist as morale-booster who constructs mythological propaganda, and the artist who undermines or resists the false heroics of war. These dual characteristics are also present in more recent examples of theatre and war, and in particular the Second World War (Macleod, 1946; Jelavich, 1993; Berghaus, 1996; Balfour, 2001). The theatre from this period is often categorised as either 'spiritual resistance' to the inhumane conditions of war, for example Jewish Ghettos and Concentration Camps (Jelavich, 1993; Gilbert, 2005), or as theatre as a politically and socially malleable medium, as conducive to supporting the structures and ideologies of power as to resisting them (Berghaus, 1996; Schnapp, 1996; Balfour, 2001). These latter practices are seen as being exploited by, or incorporated into, the ideological 'effort' – in short the propaganda of the Scop.

However, the temptation to categorise performance practice as either 'resistance' or 'propaganda' needs to be considered with caution. The location of practice within either of these two categories is a deeply political and partisan act: one person's propaganda is another's theatre of resistance, and vice versa. Performance practice in a war zone occupies, borrowing from Levi, a 'grey zone', one in which it may be neither good nor evil, neither free of ideology, nor completely evacuated of humanising properties (Levi, 1998: 23).

I want to focus on an example of contemporary practice to illustrate my discussion. I hope it provides a useful counterpoint to the issue of applying definitions of 'resistance' and 'propaganda' too readily to practice. The example is an interview undertaken in Kosovo in June 2006, with a Commander from the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army), who, at the height of the 1999 conflict, directed a production which was watched by an audience of over 20,000 soldiers and local villagers on a hillside only a few miles from the front line.

The interview took place in an old Communist-style hotel café. Commander Latif Zhriqi was dressed in army uniform, green khaki trousers and top, and underneath a black polo neck jumper. At over 6ft he was tall and well built. He had greying hair and a commanding face. He held my stare with a fixed intensity, chain-smoking throughout the interview. The only time he would pause was when recalling an event, as if the memories were in the near- distance. His voice was deeply lacquered, passionate, but also crisp and to the point. When he described events, he did so in a detailed and unemotional way, always exactingly precise about dates, times and places.

The performance, *He is Alive*, was part of a cultural programme called *Songs for the Martyrs*. It was fifteen minutes long and was developed from a scripted scenario with improvised dialogue. The main character was Dibran Fylli, a notorious 'warrior' who died early on in the conflict, and the play showed atrocities committed by Serbian forces and how the KLA were protecting civilians.

Zhriqi defined his practice as 'military theatre', because the show was about raising morale for the soldiers, reminding them of the cause and 'giving them something to fight for' (Zhriqi, 2006). For the local villagers it was 'to help them forget and to say we are protecting you' (ibid). The performance was also important, he said, because, 'we wanted to show to outsiders, particularly the US and EU, that the army were not terrorists, but that we had art. It helped to document that the KLA were not a rabble, but an organised force with intellectuals who had their own theatre' (ibid).

Zhriqi also wanted to create the possibility in the audience's mind that the martyr – Dibran Fylli - still existed, 'because as long as it was possible that he was alive they were safe' (ibid). The actor portraying him was made to look exactly like Dibran Fylli. The audience couldn't believe that a year after his death, he was standing in front of them. Zhriqi said that the effect of this on the morale of the civilians at the time was huge, and this was reinforced by an elaborate performance off stage after the play had finished:

> The audience wanted to meet the character after the show. But I created a strict protocol that the main character couldn't be talked to. So we took the character to a waiting car and immediately he drove away. We wanted to maintain the myth of if he was or was not alive. In one village a man asked me, "is he alive?". I told him, "yes, he was", thinking that alive is also a form of symbolism. It wasn't official but the effect of the myth was to create hope (ibid).

Like other forms of war propaganda practice, the dramaturgy of Zhriqi's 'military theatre' was seemingly directed at agitating the audience towards distrust and hate of 'the other' and to project a particular ethnic supremacy, usually through the presentation of Nationalised martyrs. The poverty of the aesthetic bears little relation to the impact on its audience. This is about rousing and reinforcing the rationale to kill, which may have been blunted by the bleak chaos and grim conditions of war. This type of theatre is about 'renewing the energy' of soldiers, and galvanising them to carry on with their bloody business (ibid). Zhriqi's practice has clear associations with numerous other examples of ideological agit-prop during wartime. From the Scop on the side of the hill, to the theatre of the Second World War, there are precedents for theatre that attempts to raise morale through jingoistic myth-creation and narratives of martyrdom (Berghaus, 1996; Balfour, 2001). For example, Macleod, on the effect of the Second World War Russian theatre troops on the soldiers:

> you will go, and be enthralled by a group of actors impersonating yourself in this state of mind…You will be profoundly moved, even to tears; yet it will not be useless emotionalism. (Through the play) you are made aware that there are millions like you, suffering like you and resolute like you. And the play ends with yourself on stage, shouting (...) in the only possible climax to your own spiritual experience during it: '(…) I so want to live, to live a long time. To live until the moment when I see the last of the men that have done this, see them dead with my own eyes. The very last; and dead. Dead just here, under my feet!' (Macleod, J. 2001:168)

Like the performances created by the Russian Theatre brigades at the front, the military theatre in Kosovo served an ideological purpose, was aesthetically pragmatic, and basic in its form and intention. As Brandt writes about his own experiences during the Second World War, 'there is no cause to praise these theatrical activities beyond their merits. They served the needs of the moment and that was enough. They were effective morale boosters for participants and spectators alike – for as long as the effects lasted' (Brandt, 2001, p123). Contemporary wars are no different in exploiting theatrical techniques to motivate troops, recruit new soldiers, or to bolster support among the local population. In most of the case study sites, IPOW has found variations on this format, albeit using different forms and styles of performance (for example, Thompson, 2006).

However, there was something in the interview with Zhriqi, in between the 'telling' and 'listening', that did not present itself in the transcripts. The smoothness of his script was occasionally disturbed by a vivid memory, where he would pause and look away to the corner of the room, before continuing again with his story, sometimes revealing the memory, sometimes not. At other points forgotten aspects of the story would take him by surprise, so that it was in the act of telling, that he was able to remember.

Gerald Hartman, Director of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, emphasised the importance of these moments of disturbance in the re-telling of war stories: 'it's the moments of spontaneity that are so important, when the survivor says, "I had not

remembered this till now…now I recall such and such" – that's the release of memory' (Balfour and Comay, 2002, 496).

The release of memory is also a recognised sign of how traumatic experiences are processed. At one point in the interview, Zhriqi recalled a particular moment when he had promised to do a show in a refugee camp with some kids, and had not been able to get back in time because the fighting at the front was especially fierce. In the process of telling this story, he broke down. He could not speak for several minutes. He attempted to explain, but the memory would not convert itself into language. After pouring himself some water, and lighting another cigarette, he managed to continue the story and the interview.

In discussing the ways in which extreme trauma and atrocity construct forms of witnessing through the necessary negotiation of the 'unknowability' inherent in such experiences, Felman and Laub write: 'as a site which marks, and is marked, by a massive trauma I would suggest, then that the figure of the "concentration" is…a black hole. Concentrating at once life and death, the black hole of the genocide and the gaping hole of silence' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 65). The 'black hole' that Laub describes is a site of remembering and forgetting, in which silence and language are the matter and anti-matter:

> Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it. (van der Kolk, B. A. and van der Hart, O., 1995: 176)

A sign of psychological recovery is therefore connected with the ability to tell the story, so that a person can look back at what happened and contextualise it within their life history, or autobiography, and thereby place it within the 'whole of their personality' (ibid: 176). The politics of representation and interpretation, playing witness to the survivor, is complicated by the difficult challenges testimony poses to the philosophical consideration of atrocity.

Giorgio Agamben, in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, situates the Muselman (that inmate who was so starved and otherwise destroyed that he or she no longer exhibited basic elements of consciousness despite continuing a physical existence of sort) as the physical marker of a 'grey zone' between the human and the nonhuman and between life and death. The significance of the Muselman for Agamben, is his or her position as 'the impossible witness, the site of the lacuna of testimony that is that of witnessing for somebody who cannot bear witness for themselves' (Cubilie, 2005: 2). In gathering material from 'impossible' witnesses, Holocaust researchers have had to hear 'the silences that bound the speech as well as the speaking itself' to understand the most crucial element of testimonies.

It was these moments of silence in Zhriqi's interview, when his narrative was disturbed by a memory or an image which could not find an utterance, which suggested the possibility

that there was something more to the practice than just an example of agit-prop propaganda. When Zhriqi was asked what had made him do a show, his response was flavoured with idealistic nationalism, about the 'cause', and to show that 'we were intellectuals not terrorists'. This was a partial answer. Zhriqi framed the production as a representation of the 'cause', a performance for external media and observers, but it was also a process that perhaps provided a concrete symbol of what the 'cause' was about. The 'idea' of the performance, the rehearsal and the production, provided an invaluable counterpoint to the barbarism at the front. The belief in the cause was what had made him become a Commander, but in the chaos and death of the war, the theatre show seemed to provide him with an internal rationale for continuing, for renewing his believe that there was something tangible to be gained from the war, that the notion of a 'shared culture' was concrete and real.

The process seemed to provide Zhriqi and the actors with some degree of control, even temporarily, over the chaos and atrocity of the conflict. The 'distraction' of the show seemed to help to reframe an aspect of his own identity and to remind him of himself – that he could be something other than a KLA soldier. Even in the creation of a crude propaganda theatre, the creative process of thinking about, rehearsing, writing, devising and directing appeared to provide a resource for the soldier-actors; a psychological and emotional counterbalance to the task of fighting and killing, of witnessing and being a part of the atrocities of the conflict.

The suggestion is that this type of practice might contain characteristics of the Scop and the Skold simultaneously, in other words the production while obviously highly propagandistic, may also have contained humanising properties derived from the actual process of making the performance. Zhriqi offered accounts of soldiers walking back 10 km from the front line, doing a full rehearsal, and then at the end walking back again to the front. Zhriqi:

> To this day I do not know how we did this. How could we find the energy – without food – living off whatever we could find – after days and days of fighting and seeing my friends die around me – where did this force to do theatre come from? I don't know. All I know is the theatre put us in another world. It renewed our energy (2006).

The act and the interpretation of testimony are deeply political. On one level, Zhriqi's story demonstrates an act of resilience, in which art can be seen as a possible strategy for surviving extremely traumatic experiences, through serving as an effective, if temporary, creative distraction. On another level, the ability of the art form to distract, to help soldiers renew their energies before going back into battle, or to reinforce the ideological values for mass extermination (Jelavich, 1996; Zehle, 2005) speaks of the medium's duplicity and deadly promiscuity.

There was little in Zhriqi's testimony about the atrocities he encountered and must have been a part of. This was perhaps because of the nature of the interview (with a theatre

academic), and perhaps because when he did talk of violence it was framed within his role as 'rebel' army commander defending a defenceless people. The rhetoric of heroism and martyrdom obscured analyses, and generated generalised anecdotes that were often hard to penetrate.

As a number of writers note (Agamen, 1999; Felman and Laub, 1992), the gap between a testimony and historical fact reinforces Levi's concern that 'reality can be distorted not only in memory but in the very act of its taking place' (Levi, 1988: 19). In the case of Holocaust research, the survivors' attempts to talk about traumatic events long after they occurred meant that problems generally associated with conveying memory were magnified. In addition, the complex process of re-adaptation to post war society inevitably affected their constructions of events. Researchers found that the potential factors that informed their narratives included 'guilt about survival; shame for acts committed that may have been essential to survival but which in hindsight violated the ethics of "civilised" existence; or a trauma so severe that crucial aspects of experience could not be recalled' (Gilbert, 2005). In Laub's often-referenced example of the woman who testifies that she witnessed four crematoria chimneys dynamited by the underground at Auschwitz, rather than the historically accurate single chimney that was destroyed, Laub reads the woman as testifying 'to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 62). The woman remembers the four chimneys blowing up, and the people she helped by giving them stolen objects from her job, but does not remember her job in Auschwitz as removing the belongings of people who had been murdered in the gas chambers. Laub argues that the silence that bounds her memory of the job is integral to an understanding of her testimony. 'Trauma, that which is outside the frame, offstage, structures not just her memory and witness and our understanding of it but also our ethical relationship to her as a survivor and to the witness she bears' (Cubilie, 2005: 12). The crucial point here is that testimony cannot be taken at face value, but should be approached with care, sensitivity and a dynamic between reader and text – and, as such, between author, text, and reader.

Testimony, and its interpretation, also need to be contextualised within the frame of the 'multiplicity of force relations' and a complex notion of the individual not as Subject as Agent, but as 'variable functions of numerous discourses, located in specific historical contexts, constituted within relations of power many tentacles of which are invisible' (Ahmed, 2006: 73). The Subject here emerges in the manner of a social 'text':

The social text, then, has no one individual author in control, nor does it write itself. It rather operates as a weave whose demarcations are not accessible to the subjects implicated within it – even while those very subjects are interpellated in such a way that they continuously reproduce the social text (Angermuller, Bartels, Stopinska, Wieman, 2005: 8).

It does not follow that agency is seen as redundant, but that subjectivity is 'precarious, contradictory and in progress, constantly being reconstituted within relations of power, acting as well as being acted upon' (Ahmed, 2006:72). It is important to underline here

that the researcher documenting art, as well as the artist responding to war, are equally implicated and entangled in this matrix of relations.

The historiography of the Holocaust illuminates the ways in which the 'telling' and the 'hearing' of events is constricted and shaped by the historical contexts in which they are made (Weinshaimer, 1985). A number of recent Holocaust studies have attempted to critique some of the myths surrounding the discourses of 'spiritual resistance', in particular the tacit assumption of solidarity between Nazism's victims (Langer, 1991, 1995; Gilbert, 2005). For example, much of the Holocaust discourse avoids discussion of inequalities within inmate communities and the enormous range of social differentiation that existed in the camps. Levi identified this in Holocaust historiography as 'the tendency, indeed the need, to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides' (Levi, 1988: 23). He stressed that:

> The network of human relationships inside the Lagers was not simple: it could not be reduced to the two blocks of victims and persecutors...it did not conform to any model, the enemy was all around but also inside, the 'we' lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us. (Levi, 1988: 25)

The rhetoric of 'spiritual resistance' arguably has good intentions – above all to counteract depictions of victims as passive, attribute some retrospective dignity to their actions, and impute meaning to their suffering. However it has the tendency to descend into sentimentality and mythicisation. It also contributes to a politicalisation of memory that can be utilised, not to honour the realities of survivors' experience, but to re-frame history for contemporary purposes:

From the late 1940s, Holocaust discourse – particularly in Israel – has placed clear emphasis on active heroism and resistance. This is most obvious in the choice of Yom ha'shoah v'ha'gvura (Day of Holocaust and Heroism) as the name for Israel's official memorial day, and the decision to commemorate it on the anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising (Gilbert, 2005: 5).

The motivation underlying the 'spiritual resistance' argument is not difficult to recognise. It creates hopeful stories that can contextualise suffering and create meaning out of bleak nothingness. The redemptive discourse 'not only affords the victims a certain retrospective moral victory, but also restores ...a certain measure of closure and meaning to the events' (ibid: 5).

The critics of redemptive discourse are not suggesting that art had no affirmative effects within ghetto communities, they are problematising the ways in which the discourse masks a more complex understanding of how the arts functioned in their specific contexts, by reducing it to generalised and abstract concepts of heroism and resistance.

The difficulty in challenging the 'spiritual resistance' discourse is that it implicitly or explicitly is constructed to defend the victims and the way in which they are remembered. It is created in order to promote heroism, myths and martyrs that are able to transgress the tragic circumstances, and survive against the odds. It is precisely because it honours the victims in this way that it tacitly silences opposition: 'if one asserts that victims should not be constructed heroically, one risks being accused of violating their memory' (Gilbert, 2005: 11).

In the context of other histories of war theatre, it is possible to trace fragments of distraction and redemption in Zhriqi's practice, as it is to trace elements of distorted propaganda and ideological agit-prop designed to reinforce a soldiers resolve to kill. This calls attention to the need to situate practice in a 'grey zone' in which it may be regarded as neither good nor evil, neither free of ideology, nor completely evacuated of humanising properties. This requires a willingness to engage openly with the witness's text and to acknowledge the aporias of the text as sites of witnessing that are bounded by but not always articulated within language.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz; The Witness in the Archive*, trans Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

Ahmed, Syed Jamil. 'Negotiating theatre (in place/instead) of war', *Research in Drama Education* 11. 2 (Feb, 2006): 59-75.

Angermuller, Johannes, and Bartels, Anke, and Stopinska, Agata and Wieman, Dirk. 'Violence of Discourses – Discourses of Violence: An Introduction', in *Violence of Discourses–Discourses of Violence* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005).

Balfour, Ian and Comay, Rebecca. 'The Ethics of Witness. An interview with Geoffrey Hartmann' in *Lost in the Archives*, ed. Rebecca Comay (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002), 492-509.

Balfour, Michael. *Theatre and War: Performance in Extremis, 1933-1945* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2001).

Berghaus, Gunter. *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925-1945* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 1996).

Brandt, George 'Thespis Behind the Wire – A Personal Recollection' in *Theatre and War: Performance in Extremis, 1933-1945*, ed. Michael Balfour (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2001).

Cubilie, Anne. *Women Witnessing Terror* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). Felman, Shoshona and Laub, Dori. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Gilbert, Shirli. *Music in the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Jelavich, Peter. *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Langer, Lawrence. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

Langer, Lawrence. *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1988).

Macleod, Joseph. *Actors Across the Volga* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1946).

Macleod, Joseph. 'Brigades at the Front' in *Theatre and War: Performance in Extremis, 1933-1945*, ed. Michael Balfour (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2001).

Schnapp, Jeffrey T. *18 BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996).

Thompson, James. 'Performance of pain, performance of beauty', *Research in Drama Education*, 11.1 (Feb, 2006): 47-58.

van der Kolk, B. A. and van der Hart, O. 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma' in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158-82.

Weinsheimer, Joel. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

Zehle, Soenke. 'Media Intervention: Too Late for Rwanda, Still Needed at Home' in *Violence of Discourses – Discourses of Violence* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), 107-116.

Zhriqi, L. and Balfour, Michael. Interview, trans. Jeton Neziraj (Prishtina, 6 June 2006).

Michael Balfour *is Professor of Applied and Social Theatre in the School of Education, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland. His research focuses on the social applications of theatre in a range of diverse contexts and communities, including theatre in prisons, performance and war, theatre as spectacle, community-based site-specific work, and theatre in education. He is currently co-director of a major Arts and Humanities Research Council project,* In Place of War (www.inplaceofwar.net)*, exploring the relationship between performance and war. He has also worked extensively in prisons in UK and Europe, developing a range of cultural programs exploring issues of social justice, violence, and offending behaviour. His publications include* Drama as Social Intervention *(Captus Press),* Theatre in Prisons *(Intellect) and* Theatre and War: Performance in Extremis, 1933-1945 *(Berghahn Books)*.

Editorial Note