

Kaite O'Reilly

Alternative Dramaturgy

A Memorial of Scattered Bodies

How does one write disability? Is it in the language, the aesthetic, the form, the bodies of the performers, or all of these? What kind of alternative dramaturgy might I, a visually impaired playwright, create when writing a play for Graeae, one of Europe's leading theatre companies of sensory and physically impaired practitioners? I have worked for over ten years with Deaf performers, as dramaturg, playwright and director. How might my knowledge of sign language - "what words look like when in the air" - impact upon the structure, aesthetic and politics of the piece?

When Jenny Sealey, a long-term friend, collaborator and artistic director of Graeae Theatre Company commissioned me to write *peeling* for one Deaf and two disabled¹ women performers, we knew we were embarking on an experiment, a provocative exploration in form and content. As a Deaf director, Jenny had already made groundbreaking work with her distinctive use of sign language in performance. I wanted to push the boundaries further, aiming to incorporate audio-description (for blind or visually impaired audience members) into the body of the text and, perhaps perversely for a hearing playwright, use British Sign Language (BSL) to challenge, in performance, the authority of the spoken word.

My dramaturgical ambitions established, I had yet to find a theme. I knew the work would be political, as my interests lay in the interface between the dominant, non-disabled culture and a subaltern, feminist, disabled one. I also, however, wanted something far-reaching and universal, not just of the 'crip' ghetto. For years I have inadvertently had two separate careers: the mainstream playwright with a discernible profile, and the experimental dramaturg/director within the undervalued, patronised and often invisible disability "sub-culture". The commission from Graeae, one of the few disabled compa-

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1. The capitalisation of "Deaf" and lower case for "disabled" is deliberate and not a typo - informed by preferred modes of address from within those communities in Britain.

nies acknowledged by the British mainstream, was an opportunity to marry the two parts and bring critical attention to disability and Deaf performance aesthetics. The stakes were rising and still the context for the play evaded me. Perhaps it is no surprise that during this period both Jenny and I had vivid, disturbing dreams of our three women performers tethered to giant chairs, dangling precariously above the ground. Eventually, of course, the theme of the play presented itself. I think a writer should respond to the time she lives in and the first draft of *peeling* was written around 9/11 and the emergence of what George W. Bush and other Western politicians coined "the war on terror". The second draft was during the conflict in Afghanistan and the foreshadowing of the 21st century war in Iraq. It seemed to me as we saw the carnage and familiar television footage of children cowering in bombed-out buildings that some things never change. Haven't we been here before? It might as well have been Iraq in the early 1990s, or the West bank, or Kosovo, or former Yugoslavia, or Dresden, and all the way back to the Trojan war.

THE OPENING OF *PEELING*

Chorus:

ALFA: *Raise your head from the dust.*

BEATY: *Lift up the throat.*

ALFA: *Sing.*

CORAL: *Hecuba: This is Troy, but Troy and we are perished.*

BEATY: *Woman: This is the world, for the verse of destruction you sing is known in other lands.*

ALFA: *Are we not hurled down the whole length of disaster?*

CORAL: *Throughout history, no change.*

BEATY: *Troy will be given to the flame to eat.*

CORAL: *Sad birds will sing for our lost young.*

BEATY: *The city will fall.*

ALFA: *A horse with its lurking death will come amongst us.*

CORAL: *Children will reach shivering hands to clutch at their mother's dresses.*

BEATY: *War will stalk from his hiding place.*

CORAL: *We will be enslaved.*

ALFA: *We will die in our blood.*

BEATY: *The same, the same, through the long corridor of time.*

CORAL: *Gone will be the shining pools where we bathed.*

BEATY: *Our children will stand, clinging to the gates, crying through their tears.*

ALFA: *Know nothing. Look for disaster. Lighten your heart. Go stunned with terror.*

CORAL: *I lived, never thinking the baby in my womb was born for butchery...² Suddenly the shared vision of women tied to*

2. Opening to *peeling* by Kaite O'Reilly, Faber & Faber, 2002. Also anthologised in *Graecae plays: redefining disability*, Aurora Metro, 2002.

chairs asserted itself into a coherent, meta-theatrical dramaturgy and design. I had found my 'universal' theme, which also had particular significance to the issues and history of disabled and Deaf individuals.

It was not enough, however, to make a conventional adaptation of Euripides, as the perspectives and theatrical devices I wished to explore demanded further experimentation. I began to interrogate the form, deciding to update each chorus, using structures, language and references that became more and more contemporary as the play went on, in one case echoing the atrocities in "the war on terror" that had taken place on the actual day of performance.

These sections echoed theatrical styles of different periods, beginning, above, with my homage to Euripides in a reworking of the traditional Ancient Greek chorus, through approaches inspired by the Modernist adaptations of Anouilh and Jean Paul Sartre, to a post-modern, multi-vocal dramaturgy.

Chorus:

CORAL: In certain towns they chose to leave the dead where they fell and kept them so as remembrance - a memorial of scattered bodies - family members... neighbours... the school master... midwife...

BEATY: I had gone away that day, walking through the bush to the medical centre. I went alone. My little brother cried to join me, but I was a grown girl, on serious business. What use would he be to me? I made him stay home. When I returned, our soldiers stopped me from going to my village. They said there had been a massacre. A rival tribe. There was one survivor. People were hanging from the trees. Others lay in a pile of bodies in the

schoolhouse, where they had been taken to be slaughtered. My brother was in the schoolhouse. He was curled, on his knees, covered by the body of my Mother who had tried to save him. They had been butchered.

The survivor was me.

We are clearly no longer in Ancient Greece. The language and form are contemporary, the details familiar, the tone intimate. There is no safe distancing for the audience through the lens of an ancient conflict, no sense of a period piece safely anchored in the past, that other country. First person narratives about surviving genocide in Rwanda in the early 1990s inspired this monologue, whilst other details in the chorus came from my own experience, working as a volunteer relief aid worker in former Yugoslavia during the war and post-war reconstruction, 1993-99:

Chorus:

ALFA: They rounded up all the men and male children and brought them to the stadium. The grass now grows over them.

CORAL: They bombed the people in the bread queue, then shot those trying to comfort the dying.

BEATY: They killed all the boys a moment before their fathers, so the men could see their hopes destroyed...

ALFA: They rounded up all the disabled people and took them to the camps...

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Graeae Theatre Company, *peeling*.
Photo: Patrick Baldwin

ence itself: there was a reversal in status and privilege in the auditorium. Suddenly the hearing, non-signing audience experienced a common occurrence for the Deaf individual - being left out, not understanding, no longer being the dominant language user. For the Deaf or signing audience member, this was an immensely significant moment, not just because the power relationship in the auditorium had changed, but because the monologue Deaf performer Caroline Parker signed was from what has recently been coined the "Deaf Holocaust" - a largely unacknowledged genocide which occurred during the Second World War: a generation of disabled and Deaf people either exterminated or used as slave labour in the Nazi work camps,

having first been sterilised, to kill off the line. These stories from the Deaf community have only fully emerged in the last decade or so - shame and fear having previously silenced their telling. Consequently, for a Deaf audience member, this section of the play had the potential to be an experience that was both profound and political.

Whilst the unspoken history of the Deaf Holocaust was being signed, the hearing and non-signing audience were treated to a recitation of different breads: "*Cholla, panini, hovis*, Irish soda bread, sour dough balls..." Split dialogue on stage and a split experience in the auditorium, the dynamic being a Deaf woman telling of unacknowledged atrocities whilst simultaneously, a hearing character, apparently oblivious or uninterested in the story being told by the Deaf character, amuses herself by banally listing bread aloud. In this montaged moment, I hoped to interrogate dominant and subaltern languages, histories and cultures - the dominant, unusually, being pedestrian in this case, the subaltern serious and of grave content. How can it be that the hearing world was oblivious or uninterested in the "Deaf Holocaust" for so long?

At the end of the speech, the Deaf character signs and says in English: "I'm not going to translate it for you. It's not a secret language; it's in the public domain. Go learn it yourself," which brought a small cheer in the house most nights.

However, it is not my intention to keep Deaf history from a hearing, non-signing audience. This 'secret' history was retold multi-vocally, to great effect, as the final chorus at the climax of the play, allying itself in context with previous documented war atrocities. Everyone got the same information, just not at the same time. The spoken text was fragmented, in direct translation from BSL, keeping that syntax and not English sentence structure.

The effect is splintered and urgent, echoing the effects of war, the linguistic fragmentation of severe post-traumatic disorder and suiting the fragmentary, post-modern style.

My decision to keep the BSL syntax and use accepted words for signs that have no literal translation ("phho; schtum") acknowledges and gives status to BSL.

Final Chorus:

The following is signed in BSL by ALFA, voiced, in BSL syntax by CORAL and BEATY:

*Happen war past.
Chimney smoke queue move
forward fire ash dead.
Building operation experiment queue:
blind limp Deaf
take throw operation cut
sterilise pain you go work.
War. Peace. Survivors go go go
life progress some work
some die some meet join marriage.
But children phho.
People forward prod children why not?
Children phho can't you?
Don't want? Stupid.
Children phho children children children
prod prod prod prod
schtum.
Memory past war nerves door soldiers
bang bang door open -
gun - you tell never - schtum.
Alone? No. Many. House house house person
person person
behind curtains look stuck
think war speak release? No
schtum
Stuck stuck stuck.
All schtum.*

Academics Susan Crutchfield and Marcy

Epstein, in their introduction to *Points of Contact: Disability, Art and Culture*, maintain that "Dominant culture assumes an able body... Disability is about lives; there is an art to living and showing disability; and disability is political." This echoes for me the old feminist slogan: "The personal is political."

When writing *peeling*, I hoped to address several issues which, the more I researched them, seemed increasingly connected: war, genocide, fertility and disability politics in the age of eugenics and the human genome. Although we may like to think that Hitler's "Final Solution" for Deaf and other sensory impaired people is well in the past, my research proved otherwise. I discovered many cases, several recently in courts around Europe, where physically impaired and learning disabled young women have been sterilised without their consent.

It seems shocking and impossible that there has been a group of people who have consistently been denied their Civil Rights in late 20th century Western Europe. However, this is exactly what the Disability movement grew out of: inequality, the disempowerment of an estimated one person in every six of the population and the necessity for change.

Eugenics is a hot topic within Disability Studies and the wider world, what with the growing understanding of and possible exploitation of the human genome - the potential creation of 'perfect' designer babies and the end to all disabilities, conditions, congenital illnesses and impairments through the screening and termination of 'infected', imperfect and by extension unwanted embryos (a world without the contribution of Einstein, Marie Curie, Beethoven and Steven Hawking, to name a few, springs to mind...).

I wanted to explore some of these

issues in the parallel strand to the Chorus in *peeling*, the personal stories of the actor-characters, bickering and waiting for their cue 'off-stage'. I wanted to create female protagonists who were modern, complex, sexual women, who made difficult decisions about their fertility and potential offspring.

BEATY: *I couldn't be a fucking Mother. I gave her away - freely, by choice, voluntarily, after what's considered fair and balanced professional advice. I had the baby and she was taken away from me, because - guess what? - I'm what's ill-advisedly called "a handicap", a "special person with special needs" who isn't going to be around on this planet for very long and that's not the best criteria for bringing up a baby. Is it? And because I'm a freaky damaged sick chick and because I have an interesting and increasingly rare genetic conjunction, and because I was led to believe I wouldn't see past twenty, it's best to tie the tubes - no, better still - slice them, as we don't want the 'special' egg meeting with the sperm again, do we? We don't want this freaky evolution to continue, do we? I mean 'special' is scary, expensive, a drain on limited welfare resources and you want to be a good citizen, don't you? You want to be responsible and caring, you want the best for yourself and your child... so be a good girl and sign along the dotted line, freely, willingly, of your own accord.*

So I did.

And they took the baby and sterilised me.

And everything was my choice.

Finally, by setting the play in the context of the increasingly youth-loving, beauty-essential-not-an-option profession of acting, I hoped to confront some of these issues, along with the notion of what is 'normal'. As

the play evolved, the women undressed, from the swathes of silver and blood red silks of their over-sized dresses to vests and underwear, finally cowering within the exposed metal frames of their huge crinolines, echoing the metal skeletons of bombed out buildings. Here were bodies seldom seen in the dominant culture on display, just ordinary, normal bodies - normal for them - so different from the prescribed Western image of femaleness: pre-pubescent "lollipop ladies" whose heads seem super-sized to their undernourished bodies.

In writing *peeling*, I peeled away the layers, discovering how a play could be shaped and brought into being, informed by intention, telling hard truths and exploring alternative dramaturgies and aesthetics. The script was a synthesis of form and content, spoken and signed languages, made manifest through the performers' physical being. Stories became embodied in the actual flesh of the performers and in the eloquent hands of the signers, corporeal, alive, personal and very political.

KAITE O'REILLY (Britain) is primarily a writer and dramaturg. She is the Arts and Humanities Research Council Creative Fellow at Exeter University's School of Performance Arts (2003-06), her research through practice: Alternative dramaturgies informed by a Deaf and disability perspective. Kaite wrote Graeae Theatre Company's production *peeling*, directed by Jenny Sealey and performed in the first British production in 2002 by Caroline Parker, Lisa Hammond and Sophie Partridge.