

*Re-imagining political theatre
for the twenty-first century*

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Abstract

One of key struggles of the globalised twenty-first century is against the disempowerment of the individual imagination. I believe that the challenge for the political theatre director is to stimulate and disturb the imagination of audiences in order to re-awaken critical thought. In so doing, audiences can picture what has been *untold* or become *unimaginable*, and thus, be prompted to action.

By directing a theatrical production of *War Crimes* by Angela Betzien, I attempted to re-envision Brechtian techniques by fusing them with popular cultural forms in order to challenge and reawaken the imagination of audiences. In turn, I also attempted to subvert common assumptions about the form and content of contemporary political theatre.

The accompanying exegesis provides an analysis of my creative practice and my thinking on the currency and relevance of political theatre, particularly for young audiences. I contextualize my practical work through an interrogation of the techniques I applied in my production of *War Crimes* in order to consolidate and affirm the role of political theatre in the twenty-first century.

Declaration

This is to certify that:

- The thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the preface,
- Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
- The thesis is 21,690 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

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Leticia Caceres

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For Maria and Carlos.

Introduction

I am the co-founder of RealTV. RealTV's major body of work is in the field of theatre for young audiences. RealTV has become known for its fusion of provocative political writing with a gestic, heightened performance style and electronic music. We create challenging contemporary theatre for a new generation. For over a decade our principle preoccupation has been to position personal narratives within a broader historical, social and political context. Our storytelling fuses a range of theatrical and popular cultural forms.

In 2008, RealTV was commissioned by Sydney Opera House and Regional Arts Victoria to create a new work, *War Crimes*, for young audiences. RealTV had already produced two award winning works for these organisations, *Children of the Black Skirt* (Betzien 2005), and *Hoods* (Betzien 2007), both of which had enjoyed a long touring season nation wide. They had each been selected for the drama study lists in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia and had been showcased in major national and international festivals.

Our aim with this new commission was to push our work into new territory. We wanted to make a show that would be bolder in terms of content, less restricted by the limitations of touring and braver in terms of form. We wanted this production to resonate on a local and global scale. We wanted it to feel immediate and contemporary without holding back on content and in so doing, stretch the boundaries of theatre for young people in Australia.

American Academic Jake Zipes (2003), in his article *Political Children's Theatre in an Age of Globalization*, describes the challenge for practitioners in the field of theatre for young audiences as being about: "How to attract an audience while at the same time avoiding absorption into the culture industry, where it would be subjected to forces of globalization, which turn everything into a spectacle" (Zipes 2003, p. 9).

Since the nineties, theatre for young audiences has become increasingly sophisticated, though this has proved immensely challenging to achieve. Internationally lauded Australian companies such as Zeal Theatre and Arena Theatre Company, have taken great creative risks to work outside the parameters dictated by school curriculum and programming bodies. 'Gatekeepers' such as producers, touring bodies, presenting organisations and schools have frequently restricted the evolution of theatre for young people in this country precisely because it is more economically viable to sell curriculum based work. Bourke and Hunter (2011) see this as one of the key factors in the

disengagement of young people from the theatre. They argue: “companies are aligning themselves too heavily with curriculum imperatives or overtly instrumentalist goals to maintain key market buyers” (Bourke and Hunter 2011, p. 17).

Work in the field of young audiences has fallen primarily into two camps: sanitised, issue based work, or “spectacular theatre”, which focuses primarily on form, incorporating “multimedia, cross arts form presentation [and] higher technologies” (Gattenhoff 2004, p. 46). RealTV has always avoided the creation of didactic, issue based work and resisted the seduction of high-end technology which so often sedates the audience’s imagination.

As with many of our previous works, *War Crimes* began with pretexts taken from newspaper articles. RealTV has been deeply influenced by the tradition of Living Newspaper, a form of political theatre, which was initiated in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, where theatre makers dramatized the news for the illiterate masses. During the Great Depression it was adapted as a performance style by America’s Federal Theatre Project to expose the abuse of power within the system. They defined the style thus:

“Living Newspaper is the dramatisation of a problem – composed in greater or lesser extent of many news events, all bearing on the subject and interlarded with typical but non-factual representations of the effects of these news events on the people whom the problem is of great importance” (Bradby and McCormik in Casson 2000, p. 116).

Augusto Boal also applied Living Newspaper as part of his Theatre of the Oppressed process, where he would take the daily news as the foundation for a performance and through it examine and expose “the ‘mediation’ of events by the newspapers themselves” (Babbage 2004, p. 143).

RealTV has always drawn from real events to create relevant work which investigates and exposes the broader contextual reality behind the headlines.

In the case of *War Crimes*, it began with two very distinct articles:

1. The vandalism of a war memorial

In 2007, five girls vandalised a war memorial in Bathurst with anti-war slogans on the eve of Anzac Day. Later, they were discovered by police, still covered in white paint, and hiding in nearby bush

land. A 17- year-old girl was arrested and charged, the others were dealt with under the Young Offenders Act (Gibson, 2007).

This incident and others like it attracted a great deal of attention on talk back radio; and provoked a proposal for an increase of penalties, through the War Memorial Legislation Amendment Bill 2007, for vandalising sacred war memorial sites (New South Wales Parliament, 2007). While the bill was not passed, it enflamed debate over the ANZAC legend and sparked a call for a resurgence of pride in this national story.

2. The case of Rajaa Abdul Rasool

In 2002 Rajaa Abdul Rasool was convicted of reckless conduct endangering life after dousing herself in petrol in the deputy principal's office at Maribyrnong Secondary College where her five children, including her eldest daughter Rafif, attended school. On the previous Thursday, Rafif had not returned home from school. Anxious about her daughter's safety, Rajaa had made inquiries of the school and the police about Rafif's whereabouts. Rajaa was unaware her daughter had been placed in a refuge. She had gone to the school and had met with the deputy principal, Ms Clencie, in her office. Rajaa had repeatedly demanded to know Rafif's whereabouts. Although she knew that Rafif was in a refuge, Ms Clencie had regarded this as confidential information and told Rajaa that she did not know where Rafif was. Rajaa pulled a can of petrol out of the plastic bag she was carrying and doused herself in petrol. In response to a call that had been placed to emergency services, an ambulance paramedic arrived and defused the situation. Rajaa was later arrested and interviewed by police.

In the subsequent trial it was revealed that Rajaa, an Iraqi refugee, was suffering from post-traumatic stress due to her past experiences. Several of Rajaa's brothers-in-law had been executed by Saddam Hussein's regime and her husband had been brutally tortured. Rajaa had carried Rafif as a three year old across the mountains into Iran and to a refugee camp in Pakistan where the family had remained for several years before admission to Australia (Porter, 2008).

As pretexts, these articles articulated a need to investigate our nation's relationship to war and to the ANZAC mythology. They provoked powerful questions about what is sacred to us as a nation. They also promoted questions about the experience of refugees, particularly those whose country Australia has invaded, and how their first-hand encounter with war impacted on their day-to-day life in this country. We hoped that the idea of merging these two articles would highlight the complexities of living in contemporary Australia and encourage critical thinking about our national values.

In late 2008, as we commenced the research and development process for *War Crimes*, I was asked by the Torch Project to run a three week community cultural development project with Mooroopna Secondary College, just 4 kilometres west of Shepparton. Mooroopna Secondary College has been identified as one of the most disadvantaged schools in the State of Victoria (Perkins 2010). As a last ditch attempt to connect with some of their most difficult students, teachers approached the Torch Project to provide a theatre based program. The objective was to try to provide these highly disenfranchised students with an opportunity for self-expression, and hopefully to open up a dialogue between them and the school through theatre. The students were identified as very much 'at risk'. Many were on the brink of dropping out of the education system.

When my RealTV colleague (actor Jodie Le Vesconte) and I arrived on our first day, the teacher liaison explained how eighty percent of the school attended their breakfast program because they did not receive enough food at home. He also warned us that we would be working with the toughest kids in the school. I had envisioned a group of gruff young boys. Upon meeting the group I was shocked to learn that the toughest kids in this school were in fact all young women. They were terrifying and intimidating. Our first couple of workshops were mostly spent trying to stop them pinching, punching, screaming, taunting and generally harassing each other (and sometimes us).

Over the three weeks I collaborated with these young women I learnt a great deal about their difficulties and frustrations, their struggles to define themselves as a group, as individuals, as young women. One of the girls confessed to me that she resented the way the school refused to listen to her, and that she felt largely ignored. Over time, it became evident that these young women wanted to be validated but the only way they knew how to get attention was through anti-social behaviour. They were very angry. They had been told so often that they were 'nothing but trouble' that they became just that, 'trouble'.

Not everything about their lives was negative. I also came to understand what engaged them. They loved hip-hop and often imitated American Rap stars' slang and physical mannerisms; they loved to dance and use their bodies in 'sexy' ways. They loved dressing up like boys and taking on male identities, sometimes extending these identities to the public realm, and they loved learning about the plight of other young women around the world who were also excluded and marginalized because of their sex. They understood this injustice and connected with these stories in a profound way. Their behaviour (both positive and negative) spoke volumes about their exclusion from, and rejection of, the mainstream.

By the end of our three weeks, we became quite close to the group and we began to see a change. They were more respectful towards each other; they began to collaborate and create; and they started

to find the theatrical language to tell their school who they were and who they wanted to be. However, regardless of this change and our efforts, three of the participants were unable to perform in the final show because they had been caught harassing a young female teacher, and had been suspended (one expelled).

Our collaboration with the Mooroopna girls provided the kernels for the characters of *War Crimes* and for the popular cultural forms that the writer Angela Betzien and I would employ to articulate the themes of our pretexts. We wanted to make a work that would be gritty, edgy and dangerous. A work that contained the vivacious energy of the Mooroopna girls, that was heightened, theatrical, contemporary and political.

Could it be done?

On the first of August two thousand and eleven, *War Crimes* written by Angela Betzien premiered through Regional Arts Victoria's Arts2Go program, touring to metro and regional schools across the state of Victoria. It also enjoyed a three night general public season at the Victorian Collage of Arts. The cast included, Candy Bowers (Lara/Samira), Jodie Le Vesconte (Ricky), Naomi Rukavina (Jordan), Jacinta Yelland (Ishtar) and Melanie Zenetti (Jade). Music and sound design was created by our long-time collaborator, Pete Goodwin. The set was designed by Tanja Beer and lighting by Lisa Mibus (VCA season only). *War Crimes* has been published by Currency Press and was listed on the 2011 VCE play list. It was also short listed for a Patrick White Award, the NSW Premier's Award, and won the 2012 Queensland Literary Award for best stage play.

The complex process of developing and staging *War Crimes* for young audiences prompted an analysis of my creative practice as a director making political theatre for young audiences in the globalized age. This analysis in turn prompted me to investigate how theatre operates as an agent for change within a globalized context and to analyse how other practitioners over the last twenty years have used theatre to challenge the dominant culture and provoke critical thinking in audiences, particularly young audiences. My objective through this exegesis is to investigate how the contemporary political director creates theatre that provokes young audiences to understand the complexities of the globalised world and empower the imagination for change.

My enquiry is limited to the following key areas of history, politics and performance making:

- Political Theatre in the twenty-first century – globalisation, cosmopolitanism, theatricality.
- Dramaturgy of RealTV – Epic dramaturgy for the global age.
- Forms of Representation – Brechtian techniques for staging work for young audiences.

CHAPTER 1

Literature Review

Contemporary theatre makers who have defined themselves as 'political theatre makers' have had to closely scrutinize their practice and redefine themselves both politically and artistically to achieve profile and relevance in the postmodern and global age.

Baz Kershaw (1999, p. 16) details how the condition of the postmodern movement has resulted in a decline of left wing progressive ideologies and produced a promiscuity of the political. Since the 1960's politics has permeated all cultural life from identity to sexuality (Kershaw 1999, p. 16). According to Kershaw (1999), this climate is cause for celebration, providing a liberating sense from old and potentially oppressive schools of thought. However, this climate also threatens to throw us into a dark cloud of "ideological relativity" (1999, p. 17). So vehement is the postmodernist rejection of any rational, totalizing explanation of the world that even claiming that perhaps democracy might be the best system for all can be easily branded as totalitarian in this climate (Kershaw 1999, p. 7). This seems to have completely dismantled what was once considered 'political theatre' as a distinct category and has broadened the scope of what constitutes performance engaged in discourses of power (Kershaw 1999, p. 63).

Under globalization, performance has also been embraced in new spheres of life. Kershaw (1999) describes affluent modern, multi-party democracies that embrace the ideology of late capitalism as *performative societies*. He argues that through carefully managed performances of power, globalization is asserted. Performative societies rely fully on various types of 'performance' for the maintenance of their political process and structures. Companies, lawyers, employees and students are expected to 'perform' and deliver results, no matter how mundane, as the 'players' of an economic, industrial or civil 'stage' (Kershaw, 1999, p. 13).

In *Theatre and Globalization*, Rebellato (2009, p. 9) states:

"some claim globalization is best understood as itself having taken on a theatrical form, with the global system writing the script, directing everyone's entrances and exits, and casting some people in the leading roles and the rest as spear carriers".

The media plays a central role in delivering the performed, slick sound bites of politicians and the carefully managed staging of world events. Citizens inevitably absorb highly commodified imagery set to serve global capitalism. Scottish Playwright David Greig (in Nicholson 2009, p. 48) argues that “the carefully constructed images and narratives through which the world’s news is presented shield people from empathetic responses to those who are experiencing injustice”. Playwright Howard Barker (1997, p. 20) aptly describes our condition as “a culture frantic with images, fevered with pictures and products, visually sick”.

According to Nicholson (2009, p. 45) in *Theatre and Education*, young people living in performative societies are constantly absorbing the imagery they see and are inevitably influenced “by a highly commodified culture industry”. This generation, defined as “screenagers”, born into a culture mediated by television and computer” (Rushkoff in Jordan 2001, p. 71) are a highly visual and technically sophisticated audience, adept at absorbing rapid, highly codified information. Former Artistic Director of Arena Theatre Company, Rose Myers (in Jordan 2001,p. 71), defines young audiences as having “a higher sophistication to media literacy, [they have] more fluid tools of deconstruction and symbolic comprehension gained from intense exposure to image and information saturation and rapid editing”. This is all well and good, but according to Nicholson (2009), the twenty-first century has placed young people in an increasingly complex landscape with competing emotional attachments, belief and value systems. Nicholson (2009, p. 44) argues:

“their access to instant social networks, multiple sources of information, and mediated images means that growing up with a confident sense of selfhood and citizenship, always a troubling process, is fraught with uncertainties”.

In this skeptical, politically promiscuous, highly performative and technologically saturated globalized world, is political theatre, particularly theatre for young audiences, past its use-by date?

Kershaw (1999, p. 61) argues that political performance must reposition itself between past avant-garde traditions and present cultural conditions. He warns against a total rejection of the past, and encourages practitioners to draw from the past with a hint of scepticism and irony.

Modernism and political theatre

German Director Erwin Piscator, was one of the first to define political theatre in the early part of the twentieth century. Piscator advocated a theatre that championed the cause of the proletariat in the battle against the bourgeoisie (Kershaw 1999, p. 67). His vision, underpinned by Marxism, was to produce theatre that would promote revolution and the overthrow of capitalism. Since this time, various prominent writers, directors and actors have also pursued this objective, including German director and writer Bertolt Brecht and Brazilian director Augusto Boal. For many socialist aligned political theatre makers of the mid to late twentieth century “the pictures of the world painted by Marxist and socialist political theories, were fundamentally accurate, revealing truths about ‘reality’” (Kershaw 1999, p. 67). This modernist notion proposed that political art could transgress “the limits of current social realities in order to judge them from a position that was somehow beyond them” (Kershaw 1999, p. 70). This would in turn produce an “illusion that art could show how things really were” (Kershaw 1999, p. 70).

Definitions of ‘political’ in the postmodern age

Kershaw (1999) argues that since the rise of globalization, the notion of ‘political’ has been defused by a plethora of new theory which has thrown all the certainties of the past into question. This condition has demanded a fresh look at the way politics in performance is defined. Kershaw (1999, p. 68) identifies the key characteristics of what is ‘radical’ performance in the postmodern age as follows:

1. The way the performance promotes democracy through a stress on pluralism.
2. The way the richness of signification in performance may subvert the disciplinary forces of its context.
3. The way it sets itself in deep opposition to the dominant formations and discourses of its particular society.

He also cites the tentative definitions by two other contemporary theatre scholars.

Dorrian Lambley (in Kershaw 1999, p. 68) locates the radical in “the poetic in the theatre”, defined as “a visible gap between signifier and signified as the source of its potential credible language of opposition”. In other words, through the use of ambiguity, metaphor, symbol and gesture, or simply:

theatricality, political theatre makers can prompt the audience to reconsider the notion of a 'fixed' world and question its structures and values.

Philip Auslander (in Kershaw 1999, p. 68) describes the politics of postmodern performance as having two ambitions:

1. To expose the processes of cultural control;
2. to discover traces of non-hegemonic discourses within the dominant without claiming to transcend its terms.

What these definitions seem to articulate is that performance work of a political nature in the postmodern age sets itself clearly in opposition to the dominant paradigm, not through a transgressive approach (proposing that through a political ideology one can transcend this world and show visions that are more "real" or "true" or "universal" (Auslander in Kershaw 1999, p. 70)), but rather, by operating within the dominant, and providing through the poetics of theatricality, the means of resistance. Kershaw (1999, p. 70) sets the challenge: "to be most effective, such a politics would need to subvert the building blocks of the dominant, to undermine the main strategies that it uses to maintain itself". The test then becomes accepting that one is a part of the dominant structure/system, whilst finding a way to avoid replicating dominant values.

The other challenge for the political theatre maker is to work within a post-modern paradigm. As discussed above, post-modernism resists any claim to a sole political allegiance or 'truth'. Rather, it stresses the importance of pluralism. Post-modernism has been problematic for the political theatre maker because it runs the risk of leaving the work open to ethical relativism and to undermine the very democratic principal it is trying to promote. However, it is this very notion of democracy, which is key to operating within a post-modern framework. According to Kershaw (1999, p. 86) "with the demise of the old meta-narratives, any hope for a progressive prognosis for performance practice will lie in its attempts to grapple with the ultra-vexed global issues of inequality, injustice and servitude". It is for this reason that Kershaw proposes that contemporary political theatre makers find the middle ground between what the modernist political theatre makers of the twentieth century were proposing through experimentation and exploration of form, and infuse it with a post-modernist's pluralistic and democratic spirit.

Post – Brecht?

The notion that theatre can make a difference to society was the driving force behind the work of many of our political theatre precursors, particularly Bertolt Brecht. According to Kelleher (2009, p. 11) “this is a dream that continues to inform the anxieties and uncertainties of our own time, when the business of resistant politics, given the all consuming globalization of political and cultural economies, can seem more intractable than ever”.

I will be dealing in some detail with Brecht’s ideas on political theatre later in this thesis, when I cover the practice of the direction of *War Crimes*, and the effect of the performance upon its audience. I wish to look briefly here at the effect of Brecht’s theories upon the theorists and practitioners who followed in his wake. How relevant is Brecht, as discussed by later writers, for the globalized world?

Literal interpretations of Brecht in a globalized world will, of course, produce little or no effect. According to Heiner Muller (in Wright 1989, p. 11) “Brecht cannot be merely reproduced *a la lettre*, to use his work uncritically is a betrayal”. Therefore, if Brechtian theory is to continue to have relevance and function, practitioners must “go beyond the literal interpretation of his ideology and style” (Munk 1967, p. 21).

Brecht’s experiment proposed an epic theatre that was anti-illusionist and anti-bourgeoisie. The overall objective of epic theatre was to make visible an ideology, which he argued was deliberately hidden in realism and naturalism, through a series of alienation techniques or *Vermfremdungseffekt* (‘the V effect’). Through a process of alienation, Brecht (in Reinelt in Case 1990, p. 150) proposed:

“the means to reveal material relations as the basis of social reality, to foreground and examine ideologically determined beliefs and unconscious habitual perceptions, and to make visible those signs inscribed on the body which distinguish social behaviour in relation to class, gender and history”.

Brecht (in Diamond 1988, p. 84) defined ‘the V effect’ as “turning an object from something ordinary and immediately accessible to something peculiar, striking and unexpected”. Through ‘the V effect’, the actor alienates rather than impersonates, she ‘quotes’ or demonstrates her character’s behaviour. By staying outside the character’s feelings, the audience will stay more critically attuned and will be better able to judge and form opinions on the ‘fable’ (Diamond 1988, p. 84).

According to Geraldine Harris (1999, p. 10), both “feminism and post-modernism for the most part produce their critiques ‘demonstratively’” in order to show how the hierarchical nature of binary oppositions in western culture shape all the dominant social and political structures. Brecht’s epic theatre techniques have therefore served many of the strands of feminist theatre and post-modern theatre in this demonstrative purpose.

Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud 9* is a key example of how ‘the V effect’ has been adapted by socialist feminist theatre makers. Caryl Churchill famously applied ‘the V effect’ in the form of cross-gender playing, thus readapting ‘the V effect’ to show gender, class and sexuality as a construct. Diamond (1988, p. 85) explains “When gender is ‘alienated’ or foregrounded, the spectator is enabled to see a sign system as a sign system”.

‘Gestus’, an acting technique developed by Brecht, has also been taken up by many feminist theatre makers in the post-modern age. Gestus has been defined as “at once a gesture and a gist, attitude and point: one aspect of the relationship between two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed” (Willett in Varney 2007, p. 116).

Effectively, gests are highly selective gestures which reflect the social attitudes of characters and hold the dramatic essence of each scene for the audience. Gestus, “rather than simply being an aesthetic concept is a sociological one, in that it allows historical determinants to be concretely manifested in the physical elaboration of the motivated actions that move the character from beat to beat” (Strehler in Zarilli 1995, p. 233). Through gestus, the actor is commenting on the character’s social relations with others, rather than simply operating as if gestures, actions and social relations are ‘natural’. Diamond (1988) explains that a gestic feminist criticism ‘alienates’ or foregrounds those moments in which social attitudes about gender are made visible. It highlights sex-gender configurations as they conceal or disrupt a coercive or patriarchal ideology (Diamond 1988, p. 91).

The final component of Brecht’s alienation techniques is ‘historicization’. Historicization acts as contextualization. “Brecht understood social relations, particularly class relations as part of a moving dialectic” (Diamond 1988, p. 86). Therefore, Brecht’s historicization allows for the ‘distinguishing marks’ of the past to be acknowledged, and thus foregrounds the shaping of the audience’s present perspective. Brecht’s historicization rejects the presumed ideological neutrality of any historical reflection (Diamond 1988, p. 87). So the actor *demonstrates* the character as a function of particular socio-historical relation, as an agent of particular choices. When we see this in action on the stage, we are ‘looking back’ on the character in history as she makes decisions and choices. This has greatly impacted on much feminist dramaturgy, which rejects a linear structure of classical realism. These feminist playwrights have opted for structures that use jumps in time, flashbacks, memory and

fantasy sequences, in order to broaden the social-historical context and to better historicize the sex-gender and identity experience of women.

Epic techniques permit the personal or individual experience of characters to be understood within a social, historical and political context, allowing for the presentation of a broader scope of society and the interplay between the social, economic and sexual relations (Reinelt in Case 1990, p. 152).

An argument for 'rough' theatre in a technologically driven world

Brecht's proposal for an anti-illusionist theatre has also been actively embraced by various contemporary political theatre makers as a counter-action to globalization. Brecht's notion that spectacle was linked to the values of the dominant class has never been more evident than in the global age, particularly through the phenomenon of mega musicals, also known as McTheatre (Rebellato 2009, p. 40).

In terms of theatre for young audiences, Australia has seen an increased interest in the use of media and technology in theatre. Gattenoff (2004, p. 46) explains: "technology and globalization are key drivers of change in the development of performance works. Young people who are embracing these drivers are fast becoming a part of the masters of the avant-garde".

The Review of Theatre for Young People (2003) commissioned by the Australia Council describes the trends in youth practice as an "escalated use of multimedia forms, cross arts form presentation, higher technologies, different materials and effects for spectacular theatre" (Australia Council and NSW Ministry of Arts, p. 53).

Certainly the marriage of theatre and technology is a thrilling component of post-modern theatre and there are excellent examples of politically engaged work that has successfully fused these forms (Nigel Jamieson's *Honour Bound* is one example). However, when technology is merely used for the purposes of producing 'spectacular theatre' the spectacle's ability to expose, rather than hide the dominant agencies that have control over these technologies is compromised. The concern is that when used uncritically, it becomes a part of techno-capitalism, promoting the spectacle that inevitably places the audiences in the role of consumer.

Jack Zipes (2003) argues that plays that place their focus on exhibiting grandiose stage effects, rather than exploring the human condition, conceal the connection of spectacular works to neo-liberalist doctrines. Therefore, Zipes, like Brecht, advocates a political theatre which is anti-spectacular. According to Zipes (2003, p. 13), the anti-spectacular creates the “fissures in the totalizing tendencies of global capitalism”.

Playwright David Greig (in Nicholson 2009) also proposes a political theatre that is ‘rough’, ‘immediate and ‘unfinished’. In an era of globalisation, Greig argues (in Nicholson 2009, p. 49), rough theatre offers a place to open up “the multiple possibilities of the imagination”. With its emphasis on ‘liveness’ it ignites the social imaginary and allows “audiences and theatre-makers to empathise and reflect, to question and unfix packaged, second hand and commodified images of the world” (Greig in Nicholson 2009, p. 49).

Imagination in the age of globalization

“Everything is possessed except the imagination” (Barker 1997, p. 23).

Theatre practitioners, such as David Greig, Edward Bond and Howard Barker, firmly make a case that the responsibility of theatre in the global age is to empower the imagination. Scottish playwright David Greig (in Nicholson 2009, p. 48) states, “if the battleground is the imagination, then the theatre is a very appropriate weapon in the armoury of resistance”. According to Greig (in Nicholson 2009, p. 48) theatre can ask audiences to imagine what has been *untold* or what has become *unimaginable*, thus opening up “the infinite possibilities of the imagination and the capacity for seeing the world anew” (in Nicholson 2009, p. 49). English Playwright Edward Bond (Nicholson 2009, p. 11), firmly believes that “theatre changes reality” and thus has a vital role to play in “encouraging people to imagine a future that is free from social injustice”.

Barker (1997) argues passionately for the power of the imagination. He believes it is not only a privilege but also the responsibility of the artist to exercise and push the audience’s imagination to the extreme. For Barker (1997, pp. 35-36) it is when an artist dares to be imaginative that a work becomes truly dissident:

“An artist uses imagination to speculate about life as it is lived, and proposes, consciously or unconsciously life as it might be lived. The more daringly he dreams, therefore, the more subversive he becomes”.

In order to understand how the imagination can elicit empathy and help us to see the world anew, Nicholson (2009) references philosopher Ricoeur on the subject of imagination. According to Ricoeur, the imagination has two very distinct functions. The first function is to ‘reserve and order’ specific ideologies or narratives by perpetuating images and stories that represent the dominant tradition of a culture or society (in Nicholson 2009, p. 49). The second, and more applicable function when considering political theatre, is that the imagination can also have a “disruptive function” that will “help us to re-think the nature of our social life” (Nicholson 2009, p. 50). It is this function that theatre makers must appeal to in order to disturb the imagination.

According to Ricoeur (in Nicholson 2009), the power of the disruptive imagination is that it can be utopian because it encourages different visions and understandings of the world, and thus subverts the notion that there is a dominant or “inevitably a shared, ‘common sense’ ideological position around which everyone can or should unite” (Nicholson 2009, p. 50). In order for social change to take place, in Ricoeur’s view, the two contrasting functions of the imagination must come together.

If this is the case, then theatre has the capacity to unite the two functions in a creative way. Firstly, it can raise questions about the current ideological order, its symbols and meanings, its traditions, myths and histories. Secondly, it can expose how these ideological structures are constructed in performative ways by the dominant powers in order to sustain the current world order. By unifying these two functions, theatre can lead to new visions and a new understanding of the world we live in.

Peter Brosius (in Munk 2001, p. 75), artistic director of the Minneapolis Children’s Theatre claims:

“we make theatre to help our audiences see the world is knowable, malleable and demands critical thinking. We make theatre so that young people will realize that there is tremendous power in their imagination. If we embrace that power, they can change the world”.

Theatre for resistance in the twenty-first century

“Always, no matter how: an other world” (Castellucci in Kelleher 2009, p. 72).

Through the application of key Brechtian techniques reconceived for the post-modern age, the necessary interruptions can take shape and thus make visible the invisible (Kelleher 2009, p. 75). According to Kelleher (2009, p. 68), theatre of political engagement must not only:

“represent things that are done (and are shown to be done) but what can be thought and said to be done. “It is, after all, in the cracks between action and the theorization of action (which means seeing things through as much as thinking them through) that uncommon values can be revealed in common activities, exposing the causes and contradictions of otherwise seemingly natural processes”.

A critical way to do so is to show the activities and voices of those not often seen or heard. Theatre can bring to light the invisibles, unclouded, direct and unadorned, to lay their claim on us. Theatre has a capacity through its “untimeliness and tangled temporalities” (Kelleher 2009, p. 65) or as Brecht described it, its ‘historicization’, to produce the necessary act of alienation required to see again, as if for the first time, what otherwise would have gone on being ‘natural’ or ‘given’. Therefore, ‘defamiliarisation’ is what is most critical to the politics of performance.

Even as the political theatre maker comes to terms with theatre’s incapacity to completely divorce itself from the same conventions and certain values that are exploited and used as a means of domination (as Kershaw (1999) points out in his book *The Radical in Performance*) what theatre can do is to “imagine other worlds” or “paradoxical worlds” (Kelleher 2009, p. 72). Through these brief, fictional, paradoxical worlds, theatre can provide the necessary contradictions to *this* world. Via a re-analysis and re-interpretation of Brecht’s project, the twenty-first century political theatre maker does not propose a future, as its modernist predecessors may have, but rather, re-engages the audience’s imagination in order to question and think about what kind of future world *they* want to live in. For young audiences, Nicholson (2009, p. 58) asserts, theatre can assist by interpreting performative societies and offer imaginary insights into an other world which once ‘seen’, cannot be ‘unseen’.

In so doing, theatre of political engagement in the globalized and mediatized world can – as expressed by contemporary philosopher Giorgio Abamben (in Kelleher 2009, p. 75) in *The Man without Content* (1999) – “give back to man, who has lost his ability to appropriate his historical space,

the concrete space of his action and knowledge". This is why theatre must disturb our imagination, in preparation for social action.

CHAPTER 2

Political theatre in the twenty-first century – globalization, cosmopolitanism, theatrical practice

The starting point for my work and for this exegesis is my belief that the political theatre of the nineteenth and twentieth century is no longer equipped to confront and address the realities of the twenty-first century audience. In this chapter I touch upon what I see as the defining political issues of a globalized twenty-first century world. I will not, of course, delve into the breadth of the phenomenon that is global capitalism. Rather I will attempt to present what I understand are its key features and, from the perspective of a theatre maker, I will outline how I believe theatre can be utilised as a weapon in the struggle for resistance to its power.

The ethics of global – capitalism

Globalization can be characterized as a political phenomenon (through global institutions like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court); as a cultural phenomenon (through the exchange of cultural traditions, art and philosophy between nations); and as a contemporary state of consciousness (through a greater awareness of and access to the world, facilitated through the media, communication and travel). However, globalization has been primarily linked to notions of market and capital, as the world becomes ever more interdependent and connected by commerce. The focus of globalization is not to turn the world into a global village, but rather, a global market, or as Wayne Ellwood (in Rebellato 2009, p. 7) describes “the integration of the global economy...the dismantling of trade barriers and the expanding political and economic power of multi-national corporations”. Though all the aforementioned phenomena are evident offshoots of our new interconnectedness, I will be discussing globalization within its economic framework and concentrating on its redefinition of and negative impact upon political and social life across the world.

Defined simply, globalization is “the rise of global capitalism operating under neoliberal policy conditions” (Rebellato 2009, p. 12). The national markets of the nineteenth century have been

converted into global markets where corporations fight for new consumers and natural resources beyond their borders. In the pursuit of profit, transnational corporations act with complete disregard for the environment, displaced communities, and national boundaries; and blatantly undermine governments so they cannot protect their own people. Globalization has produced disparity between the rich and the poor on a scale never seen before in history (Rebellato 2009, pp. 37-38).

Jack Zipes (2000, p. 11) argues that at a social level globalization has replaced social forms of community with a consumer ideology, and that it strives to establish forms of work and play that homogenize behaviour and prevent the development of political consciousness. Thus, the globalized social order drives us towards activities that are underpinned by commerce. We need only to shop; we can remain oblivious to who may have made our sneakers, or the conditions under which our jeans were stitched, or where the profits go to, or to what use these profits are turned. As Peter Brosius (in Munk 2003, p. 61) describes it, for young people “the mall is their community centre”.

But occasionally a terrorist attack, a sinking boat loaded with refugees, major political upheavals, or a natural disaster brings to light the human and environmental price of a world dictated by global capitalism.

Of course there are many forces opposing globalisation. Some exist as direct resistance to government and corporations. For example, the sit-in by ‘We are the 99%’ outside Wall Street in 2011, the clash at the G8 Economic Summit in Seattle in 1999 outside the World Trade Centre, the revolt against the G8 Summit in Genoa in 2001 (Rebellato 2009, p. 49). Some are indirect forms of resistance, driven by street artists, cultural jammers, guerrilla gardeners and theatre makers. Marx and Engels (in Babbage 2004, p. 39) wrote that even though the arts could not directly change the course of history, they could certainly play an active part in the process of change. Theatre has a role to play in the resistance movement by creating the cultural space for audiences to engage with the complexities of our interconnectedness under a global economy. Theatre has the tools for demonstrating that the world can be knowable, malleable and alterable; and theatre can instil confidence in the potential to change it. Theatre can encapsulate for our imagination the complex ethical, political and moral questions about how to live in regard of one another in the global village. It can help us to grasp “the everywhere and everyone” (Rebellato 2009, p. 85). Theatre has the capacity to challenge the ideology and values of globalization and to promote a more democratic and pluralistic ethos. This ethos is proposed through cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism

The movement known as cosmopolitanism strives to:

1. Enrich and deepen the global ethical community;
2. Strengthen international laws based on cosmopolitan principles;
3. Advocate for nations to give up some of their sovereignty in the name of participating fully in the cosmopolitan community (Rebellato 2009, p. 60).

Often cosmopolitanism has been associated with universalism, which implies a 'universal' truth operating in all cultures and regions, imposed by imperialist powers with profit driven motives. It is precisely this 'universal' concept that was used as a means to imperialize so many nations and to destroy so many indigenous cultures.

It is not cosmopolitanism or even universalism, that is the problem, but rather uniformity, which forces everyone to abide by one dominant view.

The roots of cosmopolitanism

Eighteenth century philosopher, Emmanuel Kant was one of the first advocates of cosmopolitanism, articulating its principles in his essays and books; most notably his essay *Towards Perpetual Peace*, in which he defines a program for "the containment of global aggression and the promotion of universal respect for human dignity" (Nussbaum in Bohman (ed) and Lutz-Bachmann (ed) 1997, p. 25).

According to Kant, cosmopolitanism is grounded in moral philosophy. Kant argued that when humans are confronted with situations, we are able to take the right action, not because we weigh up the outcomes, but because we have the capacity in our minds to rationalize. Human beings are ultimately agents of free will; we have the capacity to resist external pressures (bribery, threats, etcetera) and internal ones (greed, cowardice, etcetera). This is evident in our capacity to act without needing to purely satisfy our desires. What this means is that our free will is essentially free of self-interest (Kant summarized in Rebellato 2009, pp. 68-9).

Kant proposed that the way we may take action falls into two categories:

1. Hypothetical imperatives: if you want X, you should do Y.
2. Categorical imperatives: you should do Y regardless of your projects or desires.

Hypothetical imperatives are what drive globalization because corporations make decisions based on profit. Cosmopolitanism is based on categorical imperatives, which are based on moral, self-less interests (Rebellatto 2009, p. 70).

Categorical imperatives

Categorical imperatives are founded on “the absolute equality of consideration of every person in the world” (Rebellatto 2009, p. 71). In making a moral judgment, we invoke the global community of all persons. Our ethical judgments, therefore, play themselves out at a global level.

The categorical imperative is a priori; that is, its commands are logically prior to our experience of the world, which means it has an authority prior to the hypothetical imperatives of global capital (Rebellatto 2009, p. 71).

Therefore, even though globalization has an unprecedented capacity to penetrate and imperialize the world, our ethical judgment is always present and able to resist its hegemonic forces.

Theatre and cosmopolitanism

Theatre has a very important role to play in promoting cosmopolitanism and its principles because theatre has the capacity to “rehearse our ethical nature” (Rebellatto 2009, p. 71).

One of the major concerns raised in regard to cosmopolitanism is the human struggle to meaningfully imagine the population of the world. Our imaginations cannot visualize and comprehend the human mass on a global scale.

Theatre and performance has the tools to address this complexity and speak on a broader scale. These tools can feed the cosmopolitan imagination and grasp in new ways the enormity of the world. Some leading examples are the works of companies like Stan's Café and Theatre de Complicite (UK), Taller de Investigacion de Imagen (Bolivia). Closer to home, I would argue Nigel Jamieson's work *Honour Bound*, Barry Kosky's *The Women of Troy* and Brink Theatre's *When the Rain Stops Falling* are superb examples of how theatre can help us imagine our global community and our moral responsibility. Theatre makers who are working on the principles of cosmopolitanism help to rebalance site and imagination on a grand scale.

For me, theatre gains its contemporary political relevance in the context of cosmopolitanism.

Identification

One way the theatre promotes the principles of cosmopolitanism is by means of identification. If audience members can identify with the characters on stage – for example, in the case of *War Crimes*, with characters representing the kind of people who are rarely seen on the stage - they are perhaps better prepared to identify with them outside the theatre as well (Rebellato 2009, p. 72).

With *War Crimes*, my intention was to provide the audience with a sense of familiarity with the central characters (the girls) through a style of performance to which a young audience could relate. Yet this identification is 'alienated' in the epic sense. Identification in *War Crimes* is multi-layered. The actors are adults who are representing, or 'standing in' for the teenage girls. Though they were dressed as people we would see on the streets, and although they sounded like someone we might encounter in a playground, the actors themselves were clearly not teenage girls, nor teenage boys, or soldiers. By 'standing in' and conjuring up these characters through the virtuosity of their performance they were at once asking for identification but also calling into question their construction. The particular lexicon of the Australian vernacular of young people, the physicality and gestures of the characters and the scripted references to the real world resonated with the reality of the world we live in. The foundation for identification lies in both "the fidelity with which [the actor] engages with the task of [their] performance" (Kelleher 2009, p. 29) and the ability of the actors to carry in that performance the grains of the real world. The political effect of this identification lies in the tension between 'being' the character and exposing how a character is socially and politically constructed within an historical continuum, raising questions about the human condition in contemporary times.

Metaphor and symbol

In order to create a theatre that “questions the principles of our political reality” (Hubner 1992, p. Viii) on a global scale, a greater use of metaphor and poetry must be employed.

In terms of the *War Crimes* narrative, metaphor became a key component in the inter-referentiality of the two distinct character journeys of the central protagonists (Jade and Samira). Jade’s rape became a metaphor for Samira’s trauma, and vice-versa, and this served to draw comparisons between what initially seemed like two vastly different worlds and experiences. Through the use of metaphor the audience was asked to reflect on the play’s themes of power, prejudice, and dignity in a broader context and, in so doing, to bridge cultural and geographical boundaries between diverse realities.

Rebellato (2009, p. 77) argues that, “by *conjuring* characters and *endowing* objects and set pieces with meaning, actors create powerful metaphors for the audience” (italics are mine). It is through this emphasis on conjuring that the audience’s imagination is triggered and begins to grasp images and concepts beyond the literal. In *War Crimes*, the set design consisted of seven wooden boxes of various sizes, which when manipulated and reconfigured by the actors into different architectural shapes, transformed into a cave on the beach, a war memorial or a dance floor in a seedy nightclub. By not using literal set design and staging, I was inviting the audience to imagine spaces being created and therefore embrace the metaphorical language of theatre. Thus, the fictional town of Cummergunja comes to life through the use of metaphor, and more importantly, the symbolism of the play comes to the foreground, depicting a hidden version of contemporary Australia.

Similarly, with costuming, in one scene an actor playing a young Australian woman who is antagonistic and racist towards Muslims, transformed into a Muslim woman in the next scene through a simple gesture of putting on a hijab and changing her vocal delivery. The characters are conjured through sparse means in the minds of the audience, and act as symbols for two very different women. This theatrical transformation also serves to demonstrate that both women exist as potentialities within each of us.

Metaphor and symbol in *War Crimes* drove the theatricality of the work in terms of narrative and staging. They foregrounded the need for audiences to engage imaginatively with the work, and promoted the notion that “what *is* is not what *must be*” (Rebellato 2009, p. 79).

Theatricality and unity

In the gap between the play and the performance lies cosmopolitan politics (Rebellato 2009, p. 78). This gap is best defined as 'theatricality'. Theatricality becomes a critical space that allows the imagination to take action. Nicholson (2009, pp. 50-51) references Ferral's definition of the function of theatricality:

"[Theatricality] creates a disjuncture where our ordinary perception sees only unity between signs and their meanings. It replaces uniformity with duality. It perceives the friction of tensions between the various worlds it observes, and obliges us to see differently".

Daniel Keene (2007, p. 4) describes it as:

"[...] the space where a negotiation takes place, between everyday perceptions and imagination, between what is obvious and what is hidden; between what has been forgotten and what persists, in the memory, between fear and recognition [...] where a truth could be told that was not the accepted truth".

Likewise, Nicholson (2009, p. 58) argues that theatricality can provide young people with the critical and creative tools to better interpret the performative society in which they live and offer imaginative insights into another world. Theatricality as a tool gives young people confidence in their own critical and interpretative capacity, or, as playwright David Greig (in Nicholson 2009, p. 59) proposes, "it can offer a moment of liberated space through which we can change ourselves".

In order to heighten the theatrical nature of *War Crimes*, I employed an anti-illusionist approach to my production. By relying on the actor's labour to create worlds, conjure characters and construct stage pictures, I am creating a gap for audiences to participate in the construction of the drama, and in turn, to make sense of the theatrical world, its signs and meanings. I believe that it is through this process that actors and audiences become united. Working together, they not only disrupt prescribed signs, but also mutually construct and re-envision truths that are not the accepted truths. In this process, the audience becomes unified with the actors, and with one another. Once unified in the intensity of their attention or in the infectiousness of their common laughter, the theatre audience can have a very sharp sense of being both itself *and* part of a much larger unity (Rebellato 2009, p. 72).

Beauty and complexity

According to Barker (1997, p. 38), beauty can be highly subversive, even “a form of authentic resistance”. Daniel Keene (2007, p. 4) also speaks of a great necessity for beauty:

“Especially now, in a time when we seem to be surrounded by destruction, the urge to make, to add to the world’s store of beauty rather than to reduce it, whether that beauty makes us weep or laugh, seems to me of terrible urgency and importance”.

Beauty according to both Keene and Howard Barker has nothing to do with pandering to a conventional notion of beauty that merely appeases and compliments the audience. Beauty, rather, must be considered as a subversive tool, as a powerful mode of resistance. Keene and Barker describe this subversive beauty found at the limits of imagination, a beauty “that refuses to flatter us” (Keene 2007, p. 4).

Philosopher Immanuel Kant believed that beauty is experienced in art when we encounter a kind of mental expansiveness, profundity, and excitement in two faculties of the mind: the sensory (through the imagination) and reason (our understanding, where we bank the concepts we carry with us) (Rebellato 2009, p. 84). When both these faculties are engaged by an artwork in a kind of free play without needing to determine a finite meaning of what we are experiencing, a mental enrichment is produced. The more artistically satisfying the theatre is, the more inexhaustible this significance feels. When we experience a work of art that is loaded with metaphor, beauty and grace, an audience is better able to grasp a broader collection of experiences that may encompass the expanse of our humanity, crossing borders, races, genders, and reaching our common humanity. It manifests itself in a form of democracy and encourages a sense of hope through the promotion of humanitarian values and solidarity. This in turn subverts the values of globalization. This is why I strongly pursue a highly theatrical form to explore a politics that takes shape in the interplay between the two faculties of the brain. It is in beauty as complexity that we can grasp “the breath and intensity of the cosmopolitan community” (Rebellato 2009, p. 85) and we are confronted with our moral responsibility to one another, and our need for solidarity, resistance and action.

“The theatre can still be a place of important political struggles and events of far wider scope than the number of seats in the auditorium would indicate. Beware of underestimating the theatre! The theatre is both a Shakespearean mirror of the world and also a lens that focuses the rays of many suns. And a lens can start a fire” (Hubner 1992, p. 6).

CHAPTER 3

The dramaturgy of RealTV – epic and cosmopolitan dramaturgy for the global age

Playwright Mark Ravenhill (in Rebellato 2009, p. 72) proposes: “the structures of conventional naturalistic playwriting are no longer adequate to the new realities of a globalised world”. Twenty-first century political playwrights must rely less on realist modes of dramaturgy and shift towards a much more metaphorical and epic approach in order to better scrutinize and reveal the oppressive agendas of global capitalism and its implications for the global community.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how RealTV’s dramaturgical approach has operated within an epic framework in order to raise issues of global and local political concern. I will also detail the way it has embraced a cosmopolitan approach to create the platform for broader resonance and significance.

Fact and fiction in RealTV play texts

Although as an artistic team we “forage the news and current affairs for ideas for [our] plays” (Betzien 2007, p. 42) and have devoted years into researching the socio-political details and facts of these stories, RealTV’s theatre is always heightened fiction, as opposed to literal documentation. Betzien (in Strube 2005, p. 68) explains: “I would never proclaim that [my work] is the ‘truth’, but it is certainly an artistic reaction to documentary evidence that I’ve absorbed”.

Playwright Daniel Keene (2007, p. 9) states: “theatre expresses more than the current state of affairs [...] To think of the theatre only as a kind of litmus paper dipped in the soup of society is too crude and too narrow a view”.

If theatre is simply regurgitating what can easily be accessed in newspapers it becomes nothing more than “journalistic panto” (Keene 2007, p. 9). According to Keene (2007, p. 9), it is this kind of political theatre that has missed the mark and resulted in “the deadly plays that have been boring audiences

stupid for a long time, or stroking the vanity of those it apes, eliciting the hollow laughter of identification without the shock of recognition”.

What I believe Keene is referring to by the “shock of recognition” is the way theatre, through a careful interplay and manipulation of structure, form and empathy, can expose the dynamic and historical relationship between society’s structures and the value system which underpins them and shapes us. Keene is arguing for an alternative to the traditional cathartic/climactic narrative structure of realism. He is essentially calling for a contemporary epic theatre.

Epic dramaturgy

Brecht argued that the more literal or realistic the depiction of the theatrical world, the easier it would be for the spectators to lose themselves in the drama. If the dramatic world is taken as real, then the audience is discouraged to consider how characters and events are constructed and how they might have been otherwise (Babbage 2004, p. 44). This form of art insidiously promotes the dominant mythology that the world is fixed and unalterable. Anti-illusionist devices disrupt continued empathetic engagement, preventing what Brecht (in Babbage 2004, p. 43) described as a “cathartic purging of the spectators’ emotions by a process of self identification with the characters”.

Epic dramaturgy aims to explicitly challenge the dominant values of institutions of power (what Karl Marx referred to as “the superstructures” (Babbage 2004, p. 39)). Epic narratives articulate the social forces that drive dramatic action, that is, the contradictions of economic, social and political forces, which historicize the dramatic action. This, in turn, transforms the spectator into *observer*, aiming to arouse their critical consciousness and capacity for action (Boal 1992, p. 93). Through careful handling of empathy, epic theatre allows the actor and the spectator to be both inside and outside the drama, remaining always aware of themselves as social beings and of art as social practice (Babbage 2004, p. 42).

By deliberately disrupting a narrative through stylistic devices, the epic structure prevents audiences from losing themselves in the story, allowing them to remain critical and aware. The conflict remains unsolved and open-ended so that contradictions emerge with greater clarity. If empathy is disrupted rather than encouraged the audience leaves the theatrical experience “not aesthetically soothed but appalled by the vision of the world they have seen and thus stirred to change it” (Babbage 2004, p. 59).

Jade What did you say?

King Oh sting man you got the Queen Bee.

Jade Do you want some advice for your sexual inadequacy?

King Is it true you suck lemon

that's why you got sour nips?

Jade Rather suck lemon than your limp stick.

Rick Oh man shouldn't have done that Jade

shouldn't have started that.

Jade Why not?

Rick The Kings is tough.

Jade Nuh, they're just pups playin' rough.

Rick Then all that bad stuff happened.

(Betzien 2011, pp. 3-4).

As is evident in this excerpt, the writing demands fluid transformation from the girls, to The Kings, back to the girls. In my production, the actors established signature gestures and sounds for The Kings, including howling and barking. Through a heightened contrast in physicality and vocal expression, actors are able to maintain the rapid pace of the narrative. Importantly, it is during fleeting moments of transformation that the actor herself becomes present and the techniques of performance are revealed to the audience. The notion of theatre as artifice and construct are placed centre stage, as part of the event, for the audience to see and experience. We see the decisions that actors have made, and we also see the interpretations that the characters have of the world around them. Director for young audiences Moniek Merx (paraphrased by Brosius in Munk 2003, p. 57) describes

transformation as “transparency” – always seeing the actor through the character. This “creates an electricity for the audience – they are in the moment of creation and part of the process of making that creation” (Brosius in Munk 2003, p. 57).

In most scenes where the characters of the girls ‘quoted’ other characters, they took on a heightened, sometimes grotesque form. The grotesque manifestations allow us to comment on young women’s perspective of community types (figures of authority in particular) and their behaviour. For example, teachers were an important presence in *War Crimes*. The first teacher we meet in the story is a history teacher who is giving a lesson on the ANZAC mythology. He is a passive, worn out and ambivalent character, going through the motions of his lesson for his disruptive and uninterested class. He is stunned when Ishtar, a Muslim Australian, interrogates this conventional and tired perspective of history.

Ishtar	How were they heroes?
<i>Silence</i>	
Ishtar	Weren’t they invading another country?
Ricky	Hey is she dissin’ our diggers?
Teacher	It’s a bit more complicated than that.
Ishtar	How?
Teacher	I think you’ll find the Turkish were doing some pretty nasty things to the Armenians at the time.
Ishtar	And that’s why Australia was invading was it? To free the Armenians from the Muslims?
Lara	Yeah she is. Hey those diggers died for us.
Teacher	Look that’s a very good point Ishtar. Why don’t we turn to page thirty-three for some context.

(Betzien 2011, p. 13).

This scene critiques the way in which history and war is taught in many schools across the country. It comments on the lack of opportunity for debate and analysis of these events. Anna Clark (2008, p. 3), in her paper *Teaching National Narratives and Values in Australian Schools* states that she was “actually surprised by just how many students assume this militarized national identity [is] intrinsically Australian”. The representation of the history teacher as worn out and ambivalent is deliberately trying to incite the notion of an education system that is in need of a revamp.

The second teacher depicted in the play is Jade’s primary school teacher. Though she is shown in a more positive light, she is represented as docile, naive and over enthusiastic. She is so optimistic about her student’s future, she fails to see the difficulties of their social conditions, setting up unrealistic aspirations. She insists on filling them with false promises of a bright future, which ring as patronizing and demeaning, and which merely provoke further anti-social behaviour. Her representation criticizes the shallow notion that if you ‘work hard, if you believe, you will succeed’, which further alienates the disenfranchised.

Structure

According to Laughlin (1997, p. 214), the process of historicizing dramatic events has aided many feminists playwrights eager to reclaim and re-examine history from a woman’s perspective, while at the same time revealing the social and political forces at work in shaping women’s destiny. Historicization is a major feature of Betzien’s work. Her plays are often constructed with the possibility for characters to ‘re-view’ their decisions and the actions that have led them to this particular point in their history. Historicization inevitably prompts Betzien to reject a linear structure, instead calling for flashes forward and cuts back in time. In *Hoods*, Betzien employed the conventions of technology (particularly DVD and video games) in order to ‘stop’, ‘fast-forward’ and ‘rewind’ action (Betzien 2007). This multiple-choice convention stemmed from her wish to challenge a “finished vision of the world” and allow the spectator the opportunity to “participate in an ongoing discourse whereby meanings and choices are open to negotiations” (Babbage in Betzien 2007, p. 67). In *War Crimes*, historicization is set up through the convention of storytelling, whereby the central characters are gathered at the start of the play to recount and show the events which lead to the vandalizing of a war memorial, a race riot and a refugee woman threatening to self immolate in the heart of town. The characters become witnesses to their own performance, “as if they were themselves having to go through the motions

one more time” (Kelleher 2009, p. 53). The audience in turn also witnesses the past, as it is experienced by the actor, in the act of witnessing the character re-viewing their story. By historicizing the dramatic action, and asking audiences to bear witness, their role shifts from spectator to observer, arousing their critical consciousness (Boal 1992, p. 93). Thus, Brecht’s notion of alienation once again takes effect.

Through the process of watching and retelling, the girls in *War Crimes* challenge and contradict each other and thus provide not only conflicting points of view, but also embody the instability of ‘truth’. Through contradictory versions of ‘history’, the audience is exposed to who might be omitted from the official story, and thus “insights emerge as hidden aspects are thrown into relief” (Reinelt 1990, p. 156). This becomes particularly pertinent in the conflicting versions of the night Jade is raped.

Ricky	Oh yeah ‘n then you got the shits ‘cos them soldiers weren’t lookin at you.
Lara	Wrong again Rick Pretty clear that party was gunna get all nasty so we left.
Ricky	We tell Jade that?
Lara	Nah she was out of it.
Ricky	Should we have done that?
Lara	Jade’s a big girl she’s tough.
Ricky	Still.
Lara	Ok finish. Don’t go thinkin’ I’m guilty or nuff ‘cos I isn’t.

(Betzien 2011, p. 7)

Although in the text Lara provides a version of the event that justifies leaving her friend in a volatile situation, in the staging, the audience is left with no doubt that Jade was abandoned and placed at risk of sexual assault. The performance asks audiences to make judgments throughout the play about whose version of the truth is promoted and accepted, who is being silenced (or omitted) and it asks the audience to consider the political and social conditions that might prevent characters from

speaking out against untruths. The text and action explore the complexity of communication, drawing attention to how amplification (words and their transmission) can be manipulated and misrepresented.

Defamiliarisation through poetic language

Brecht's use of alienation to interrupt empathy and encourage critical engagement is further demonstrated in *War Crimes* through the use of rhythmic, poetic language. Although Betzien's poetry is faithful to the peculiarities of young people's speech and Australian colloquialism, the act of speaking in imperfect rhyme makes the familiar heightened and strange. This device is especially useful for creating the necessary distance from the emotional intensity of the narrative. Particularly effective is its use during the flashbacks into the rape:

Jade	Wait. Durry fire flies do tricks count cigarettes one two three four hand grips door push slip through it run for it trip split lip get up quick.
-------------	--

Soldiers	Come back ya fuckin' bitch.
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Jade	Bolt hit the edge of the cliff
-------------	-----------------------------------

Jade leaps into the air.

Jade	vault
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Jade is falling.

Jade wait to smash up
 mash up
 eyes shut.

(Betzien 2011, p. 49)

The stress on rhythm and language over action creates a necessary distance and estrangement from this harrowing moment. Rather than depicting a literal and emotionally seductive representation of a woman enduring sexual assault, language acts as a device for distancing emotional engagement, emphasizing the need to remain critical throughout the scene.

Cosmopolitan dramaturgy

War Crimes foregrounds issues of globalization: particularly the resources war in Iraq, the trauma of refugees fleeing this conflict, and the sense of personal and social alienation in Australia's disenfranchised citizens. The play deals with very local concerns and yet resonates on a global scale. Mark Ravenhill (in Rebellato 2009, p. ix) describes this challenge as:

"...something of a paradox. You try to make every gesture, every word and every move as specific and as concrete as you can. But at the same time you hope that somehow the same gesture/word/move will have a resonance, something which is completely outside of the specific and the concrete".

Arjun Appadurai (in Rebellato 2009, p.74) believes that, although what we see tends to be local, what we imagine operates "beyond the boundaries of the nation".

This paradox is a key feature of cosmopolitan playwriting. I will now discuss the way Angela Betzien has applied characteristics of what I am calling 'cosmopolitan' playwriting to resonate more broadly with global concerns.

Evaporation of singularity

Contemporary playwrights working within this cosmopolitan mode are creating characters that are less particular than real people tend to be, in order to heighten the metaphorical power of their work (Rebellato 2009, p. 76). An excellent example of this device is Martin Crimp's *Attempts on her Life*, which centres on an unseen character, Anne. Anne is suggested through a series of brief 'scenarios', sometimes as a bubbly teenager, sometimes as a brutal terrorist. In so doing, Crimp produces a "vivid indefinite character" (Rebellato 2009, p. 77). Other writers like Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Debbie Tucker Green have also placed emphasis on the 'evaporation of singularity' as a useful device in their work. Betzien applies this device in *War Crimes* to conjure the chorus of soldiers. The soldiers in *War Crimes* are depicted as speaking in unison and are described by the central character, Jade, as:

Jade [...]shaved heads all look the same.

(Betzien 2011, p. 6).

By stripping away all identity, the character is dehumanised in order to accentuate the socio-political 'role'; in this case the soldier. In my production, the actors took form on stage as a monolithic block, speaking and moving in unison. The actor's faces were hidden under hats, their gestures and movement highly choreographed. By applying the device of 'evaporation of singularity' called for in the script to the physical action, we were able to highlight how the army strips away personal identity so that a soldier becomes an extension of the military machine. This device allowed us to critique the myth of the glorified 'war hero' so eagerly promoted by the mainstream media and to a large extent by institutionalised education.

De-territorialism

Through the device of 'de-territorialism', playwrights can create ambiguity in terms of localization and thus better create a global interconnectedness. A play can engage with issues of concern specific to Africa, but be directed at an Anglo audience in Australia. Two examples of this are Debbie Tucker Green's *Stoning Mary* and Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (Rebellato 2009, p. 79). Similarly, in *War Crimes* Betzien de-territorialises the action during Jade's rape. The scene is described thus:

Jade dances, the four off-duty soldiers circling her.

The sound track morphs into a war zone.

Jade is engulfed in darkness.

The war track morphs into the thunder of waves on a beach.

(Betzien 2011, p. 8)

As the soundtrack morphs, Jade's rape is de-territorialised, removed from its immediate, local context (a nightclub), and re-contextualised at the centre of armed conflict. In my staging it became fused with Samira's experience of war in Iraq, as if Jade's rape was a vivid memory of Samira's. In this way we were able to draw parallels between the invasion of a country and the invasion of a young woman's body; and between the indignity of rape victims in Australia and rape victims during war, and in this case, in Iraq.

By employing key alienating techniques in our dramaturgy, RealTV firmly places itself in the epic theatre tradition. Moreover, RealTV deliberately employs devices that allow us to resonate on a cosmopolitan scale and in turn promote this ethos. Through a fusion of epic conventions with characteristics of cosmopolitan playwriting, RealTV's play-texts are able to generate a more complex theatrical language and broaden the scope of its power. In so doing, its capacity for interrupting empathetic responses becomes more sophisticated, its metaphorical potential is heightened and the work becomes better equipped to challenge and expose the political complexities of a globalized existence.

CHAPTER 4

Forms of representation - Brechtian techniques staging work for young audiences

As an Argentinean migrant and as a woman, I believe my status provides me with a unique perspective on contemporary Australia. The question of how I, as a political director making work for twenty-first century young audiences, can challenge a system that traditionally has marginalized people on the basis of sex, race, class, sexual preference and religious beliefs, compels me to make the theatre I make.

In this chapter, I will discuss the way my directorial choices for *War Crimes* expose the systems and mechanisms of power which exclude the marginalised citizens within our society and rob them of an effective voice. I will address how I have applied Brechtian techniques to politicize my theatrical choices, and how I have fused these techniques with contemporary forms in order to connect with the sensibilities of young audiences. I will also detail how my choices operate within a cosmopolitan framework, in order to heighten my work's capacity to resonate with broader, global concerns, and in turn promote cosmopolitan principles of democracy and plurality.

War Crimes - themes and issues

War Crimes is about 'war' and 'crime' during a period of international conflict and national social instability. *War Crimes* aims to reflect and connect both the global (the conflict in Iraq) and the local (a series of conflicts within a community in a fictional coastal Australian town). It places its characters in a dialectical continuum by referencing landmark socio-political events, including the 'War on Terror' and the Cronulla race riots. It also depicts tensions which arise from an increasing number of economic casualties (such as the closing of local industry – the town's abattoir), at the mercy of corporate global forces. It brings to the foreground the brutal consequences of war, particularly on civilians. It calls into question the ANZAC myth and highlights the glorification of war in Australian society. It draws links between Australia's hetero-sexist ideology and value system and how it

correlates with violence against women. It depicts a sense of disillusionment and rage, which emerges at the fault line between poverty and exclusion on the one hand, and nationalism and consumerism on the other. At its heart, *War Crimes* raises critical socio-political questions about how powerlessness breeds hatred of 'the other' and what role the government and the media play in perpetuating xenophobia and misogyny in our community. It aims to provoke the question: what is sacred to us as a nation? *War Crimes* invites young audiences to interrogate the values that have shaped Australia in the past and continue to shape Australia in the twenty-first century.

Directorial style

My production of *War Crimes* begins with nothing more than a large wooden box on stage. The soundtrack of a military call cues actors into action, as a radio announcement detailing the latest death of an Australian soldier killed in Afghanistan is heard. Actors, embodying soldiers, appear. With military precision, they open the box to reveal a final actor, limp and lifeless. This body could be a girl or it could be the dead soldier referenced in the news announcement. From the large box, four more, smaller boxes are revealed and placed in the empty space. A war soundtrack builds. The limp body is stuffed with force into one of the smaller boxes. The body has come alive and begins to struggle against this action. The actors drag the new boxes across the space in unison, conjuring a sense of military ritual. The body, which now begins to look and sound like a woman, pulls her self out of the box, only to be forced down again by a soldier. The soundtrack of battle is peaking. With meticulous, regimented rhythm, more boxes are revealed and moved about the space, as if through direct order, while the young woman screams and weaves herself through the formation of soldiers. She eventually escapes the action, running as fast as she can around the edge of the playing space. The military figures continue to work in an orderly fashion, until the space is completely transformed. The space now depicts a cliff edge by the beach. The war soundtrack subsides to reveal the sound of the ocean's waves. The soldiers, like ghosts, slowly dissolve behind this cliff, leaving the young girl whimpering on stage (refer to *War Crimes* video: 00:00sec – 1min:03sec).

This opening sets up the conditions for experiencing the work. It asks the audience to respond to a variety of stimuli simultaneously (image, music, text). It sets up the theatrical language of the play and the demands on the audience. It communicates that this work will engage with transformation, it will speak non-literally, it will utilize a physical style of performance, and it will explore issues of gender, race, sexuality and power through an impressionistic form. "The spectator, drawn into the theatrical

event, becomes theatricalised. Hence, less goes on in him than with him” (Brecht in Wright 1989, p. 45).

Cross-racial casting

According to theatre scholar Nadine Holdsworth (2010, p. 80):

“theatre that engages with the nation will have to move away from tired and impossible questions of national identity and instead rely on creative interactions and collaborations that continually make and re-make the nation in the present tense”.

As an attempt to challenge/counteract what Australian director Lee Lewis (2007, p. 4) calls “a white centric theatre industry”, *War Crimes* was staged in collaboration with a racially diverse group of female actors. My objective was to highlight the cultural diversity that is so prevalent in contemporary, multicultural Australia, yet rarely seen on our stages. In so doing, my directorial intention was also two fold: to infuse a sense of cosmopolitanism through my directorial choices; to apply a Brechtian approach which would subvert clichéd representations of Australian voices and identities.

The cross-racial casting of *War Crimes* served a number of political aims. Firstly, it allowed the work to challenge the mainstream, sanctioned image of a white ‘Australian face’. Lewis (2007), in her important essay *Cross-Racial Casting - changing the face of Australian Theatre*, argues that Australian cultural institutions, particularly the theatre, continue to promote the government’s “nationalist strategy for reaffirming the dominant fantasy of Australia as an all-white nation” (Lewis 2007, p. 54). This fantasy denies a significant number of Australian citizens, who are racially different or not ‘white looking’, from identifying as Australians. It produces “white centrality” and normalizes white dominance in core cultural and governmental spaces (Lewis 2007, p. 8) and thus maintains a racist construction of privilege.

Secondly, cross-racial casting allowed me to further promote cosmopolitan principles of justice, democracy and inclusion. The cast of *War Crimes* was made up of a black South-African /Australian, a Torres-Strait Islander/Malaysian/Australian, a Nigerian-Croatian/Australian, an Italian/Australian and an Anglo/Australian. By predominantly casting non-Anglo Australians, or those Lee Lewis (2007, p. 8) provocatively describes as “Third World Looking People” my intention was to ensure that the version

of Australia that I was staging did not reinforce a racist construct of white privilege. I was being deliberately nationalistic by claiming *War Crimes* is Australia. But I was also consciously promoting post-modern and cosmopolitan principles by being intentionally democratic and pluralistic in my casting choices, showcasing diverse voices and races.

Finally I used cross-racial casting as a form of defamiliarisation. In *War Crimes*, actor Candy Bowers, who is black South-African /Australian, was cast in the role of Lara, the most nationalistic and bigoted character in the play. I deliberately cast Candy in this role to contest the stereotype of the 'Australian racist' as exclusively white. Cross-racial casting is a reimagining of Brecht's notion of *gestus* "allowing the object to be recognized, at the same time making it appear unfamiliar (Brecht in Rouse 1998, p. 234). In casting a black woman in this role I was able to defamiliarise any clichéd notions of who and what constitutes a racist, and in turn comment on how racism operates as a learned, ideological construct. When a black actor is asked to embody and speak racist bigotry, the ideology at play is foregrounded. It reveals how hegemony operates and demonstrates how the dominant can assimilate even traditionally excluded groups in exchange for non-resistance, and thus maintain the status quo.

I regularly observed that during many of Lara's racist outbursts, audience members would often make audible comments such as "that character is being racist". This is a clear indication that they recognized what was being deliberately instructed to examine, and that they were able to recognise the power interplay happening on stage.

Cultural sensitivity

Giorgio Agamben (in Grehan 2009, p. 120) argues that "the refugee is *the* figure of the contemporary age, a figure who poses a challenge to existing notions of citizenship, justice and sovereignty". In Australia, refugees have become highly politicized. Particularly refugees from the Middle East have been used as scapegoats, becoming a symbol of fear and danger as a means of justifying Australia's involvement in the never ending 'War on Terror'. Both Governments of the last decade, with the help of the mainstream media, have generated a deep panic and fear of "Muslim orchestrated terrorism" (Holdsworth 2010, p. 69) by refugees and asylum seekers from this particular part of the world.

It was critical for RealTV to "delve so much deeper beneath the habitual generalisations of public discourse" (Archer 2005, p. 36) when it came to the representation of the Middle Eastern refugee characters in *War Crimes*.

Unfortunately, I was unable to find suitable young women actors who were of Arabic background to play these roles. One might speculate that this indicates a sense of disillusionment from Middle Eastern communities to pursue careers in the dramatic arts since, as Lee Lewis (2007) argues, there are so few opportunities for non Anglo actors in Australia. It therefore became crucial that Middle Eastern cultural consultants were brought on board to assist in the development of these characters. I felt it was my responsibility to ensure that the cultural life of a community that had been so vilified by the mainstream was authentically framed. I did not want to reduce these characters to stereotypes, nor to generalize, or worse, trivialize them or their experience.

Consultants Wahibe Mussa and Alice Melike Ulgezer were invited into the process of both writing and staging *War Crimes*. Alice Melike Ulgezer is of Turkish Australian background. She is a researcher and writer with an interest in Islamic mysticism. Wahibe Moussa is a Lebanese born actor/writer and community consultant. Both have worked extensively with Arab women, most recently with Iraqi refugees living in Australia.

Wahibe and Melike were able to illuminate the interconnectedness of faith and culture within Iraqi communities and provided a much deeper insight into the struggles of living in contemporary Australia. They were also able to paint a clear picture of life for Iraqis pre and post invasion. When the period of the rehearsals began, Melike had recently returned from a visit to Iraq. They shared their knowledge of cultural values of the Iraqi community and how these values would impact upon the narrative of *War Crimes*, specifically the journey of characters Ishtar and Samira.

Wahibe and Melike also provided greater authenticity to these character's voices. They advised on the restructure of dialogue so that it better reflected the linguistic nuances of Iraqi migrants' use of English. The following is a short example of how a scene evolved with the assistance of our consultants.

Angela's original scene read:

Samira	Ishtar are you ill?
Ishtar	No.
Samira	You would tell me if you were ill.
Ishtar	I'm not ill.

Samira Then why do you see the school nurse today?

Ishtar How do you know that?

Samira Your brother tells me.

(Betzien 2011¹)

With the consultants help, the scene became:

Samira Ishtar. You sick?

Ishtar No.

Samira You tell me if you sick.

Ishtar I'm not sick.

Samira Why you see school nurse today?

Ishtar How do you know that?

Samira Your brother.

(Betzien 2011)

Though the changes seem minor, they made great impact in terms of authenticating Samira's voice. Wahibe was also responsible for voice coaching to ensure the actors could produce a convincing Iraqi accent. We also performed several scenes in Arabic, which the actors learnt to speak under Wahibe's training.

Directorially, it became important for me to ensure that we subverted any misconceptions about the hijab. With this understanding I was better able to direct Ishtar's journey. Through my production, the hijab operated clearly as a symbol of strength, giving Ishtar power and self-worth in a context where

¹ As the *War Crimes* text went to print before the end of rehearsals, this scene does not appear in the publication.

she was excluded. The hijab not only became a tool for political activism, but it also became a symbol of cultural identity that united her to her mother and to her family's history of political and social struggle. Through this immersive research and consultation, the actors and I were better able to understand the historical determinants – the economic, political, and social factors that influence the social conditions of the historical period of the play (Rouse 1998, p. 231) and how they impact on the relationships between the characters and the society depicted. It informed choices made in character development, gestus and blocking or theatrical 'arrangement' (Rouse 1998, p. 233) as dictated in sociological terms.

The audience response to this level of consultation was very positive. One young man of Arabic heritage commented during a question and answer session that the representation of the Islamic characters had reminded him of his own mother, and he asked how we had managed to produce such an accurate depiction.

Kelleher (2009, p. 10) argues that for theatre to affect us politically, it must be able to contain some authentic quality, a fidelity to the characters that the actors are standing in 'for' or speaking 'of'. This fidelity is not necessarily reliant on 'realism' but rather on a level of commitment to cultural accuracy. In this way, the theatre has a great capacity to "get 'under our skin' and work its political power there, in order to make a difference to what is going on in the world at large" (Kelleher 2009, p. 11). Thanks to the genuine investment that was made into the cultural consultation, the necessary grains of authenticity were found. The cast and I were able to produce complex depictions of our Iraqi characters and their stories were able to get 'under the skin' of our audience. But more importantly, their historical determinants were ever present in the choices that the actors and I made in the theatricalising of their stories. In feedback forms, one student wrote:

"you brought great awareness of issues of refugees and the war to us. Thank you!" (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

This feedback seems to indicate a deepening understanding of the struggle of refugees in contemporary Australia and therefore a destabilization of the naturalized dominant ideological stance on these issues.

Subverting patriarchal constructs

RealTV has always been very concerned with the representation and authentication of women and their experiences. According to feminist theory, women are often depicted as a “strict masculinist fantasy with no relation to real women” (Fortier 1997, p. 73). ‘Women’ as patriarchal constructs are reduced to behavioural stereotypes (virgin, whore, Madonna, bitch) and objectified through the male gaze so that they are nothing more than fetishised body parts (breast, vagina, face, ass) (Fortier, 1997, p. 73).

Through *War Crimes*, I was deliberately attempting to overturn traditional representations of women by exploiting the Brechtian technique of the ‘double role of the actor’ which allows the performer to maintain a critical distance from the character and to showcase ‘the thinking actor’ (Love 1998, p. 280).

There is nothing charming or genteel about the young women depicted in *War Crimes*. The behavioural stereotypes of ‘woman’ in patriarchal terms is rejected. Even Ishtar, who is perhaps the character mostly closely aligned to a ‘feminine’ ideal, is so preoccupied with her struggle to assert herself in Australian society that her fury distances her from white, middle class femininity. In order to further alienate the representation of Ishtar, the actor doubled as a number of male characters, continuously interrupting any association with ‘femininity’ for both actor and character. Instead, the actors and the characters were actively ‘butching up’ in order to claim more space, more freedom, more power. Through this subversion of the ‘feminine’ ideal, what was revealed was the way gender behaviour and construct is aligned with access, reward and power. The greater the disparity between the characters’ behaviour and the ‘feminine’ ideal, the more ostracized they became. The play exposes the real ‘war’ elucidated by the title of the play; a war against gender. It is the girls struggling against the town of Cumberagunja.

In contrast to the way characters are treated in ‘fictional’ drama, the bold performance style adopted by the female ensemble was relished and admired by the audience. Many students and teachers praised the actors for what one teacher described as a representation of ‘real girls’. The alienating and transformative performance style employed by the cast, exposed women’s physical absence and authentic representation on stage and readdressed the imbalance of power.

Alienation effect, contradiction and cross gender role play

Brecht defined the concept of *Verfremdung* (alienation) as:

“an alienated illustration is one that, while allowing the object to be recognized at the same time makes it appear unfamiliar” (Brecht in Rouse 2007, p. 300).

Cross-gender playing has been used as a means of alienating gender in order to make powerful comments about the way gender acts an oppressive construct; a central theme of feminist theory. Alienating gender and gendered behavior not only illuminates its performative construct, it also demonstrates its inherent power and agency. According to Laughlin (1997, pp. 216-17), “men are socialized to respond to a male body and a male voice; from an early age they seem to be trained to discount what women say”. Hence, the value of alienating actor and character through cross-gender casting: “by putting a man in a dress, in the same constraints as the woman characters in the play, it becomes clear to the men in the audience what women are up against”(Laughlin 1997, pp. 216-17). In my production, I tried to re-imagine this notion in the reverse, with women performing the male gender in order to explicitly demonstrate how male gender is ‘performed’, and in so doing expose the ideology that underpins male gendered actions and misogyny.

Alienation can also act as a means of creating distance in order to disrupt emotional engagement. This was particularly important during the sequence depicting Jade’s rape. Students commented that it was easier to watch the rape scenes because they were performed by women. One student wrote:

“Although it upset me, the rape scene was incredibly well done” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

Another student described the depiction of the scenes as “tasteful” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6). As with Helene Weigel’s famous silent scream in Brecht’s production of *Mother Courage* where the audiences were “shocked, stunned and shaken by Courage’s grief, but not allowed to share it on the plane of petty emotional titillation” (Rouse in Reinelt et. al 2007, p. 303), I too was deliberately trying to avoid emotional titillation. The stylized and distanced depiction of rape constructed with an all female ensemble produced a detached demonstration of a sexual crime. It allowed the actor playing the rape victim, and the audience witnessing the scenes, a necessary emotional and critical distance. It also made the male characters appear familiar but strange and began to highlight contradiction in the role of the soldier. Stressing contradictions is a fundamental

Brechtian feat. Brecht placed great importance in looking “assiduously for contradictions, for deviations from type, for the ugly in the beautiful and the beautiful in the ugly” (Brecht in Rouse 1997, p. 239). The contradiction in this instance is two fold; firstly it showcases women performing cross-gendered role and secondly, it signposts the social and political role of the soldier not as a hero, but as a criminal performing a heinous act. It throws into relief questions about gender, power and violence on both the home and war front.

Queer representation

Jill Dolan (in Fortier 1997) argues that it is not only essential to interrupt and subvert “representational conventions of the male gaze” (through the maintenance of the fourth wall), but more importantly argues for “the explicit representation of lesbian sexuality as a ‘truly radical’ and ‘sufficiently blatant’ way of transgressing and subverting the status quo” (Fortier 1997, p. 77).

Dolan states:

“Because gay male and lesbian sexuality is completely out of place – un-imagined, unimagined, invisible – in traditional aesthetic contexts, the most transgressive act at this historical moment would be representing it to excess, in dominant and marginalized reception communities. The explicitness of pornography seems the most constructive choice for practicing cultural disruptions” (in Fortier 1997, p. 77).

Though I agree with Jill Dolan’s sentiment about embracing a “radical and excessive representation”, the context in which our work is presented (schools) and the audience we were playing to (mostly under eighteens) means that we are not able to apply such a subversive approach. However, I did decide to depict a number of kissing scenes between Jade and Jordan. I certainly felt it was the best way to assert queer sexuality and thus normalize it. Betzien’s strategy was also to employ the tropes of traditional heterosexual romance (boy meets girl, boy loses girl) and to give the scenes between Jade and Jordan a *Home and Away* style veneer. This strategy relied on young people’s familiarity with the romantic genre, and through appropriation, it also served to affirm queer relationships.

We also did not shy away from the representation of a trans-gendered character. In the play, the character of Jordan was struggling to define herself within strict gender categories. We dressed the

character in male clothes and tried to create an androgynous body (whilst still acknowledging the female actor's physical form). Naomi Rukavina, the actress playing Jordan was not asked to hide the fact that she was a woman, rather to show how behaviour and gestures are learnt and performed, so that questions about what is 'innate' are thrown into relief. In this way, Naomi's performance was true to the Brechtian notion that an actor should "demonstrate her knowledge of human relations, human behaviours and capacity" (Brecht in Auslander 1998, p.62). Naomi's representation of Jordan provided yet another means to comment on the way gender is constructed, perceived and received and to what extent gender and sexuality is a performative and therefore alterable state. It also shed light on the pervasiveness of the dominant heterosexist ideology, and on the ways in which theatre continues to promote it as the norm.

Hip-hop

War Crimes was inspired by hip-hop culture (rap, dj-ing, graffiti, dance). This culture informed both the writing and the production. Since its emergence in the South Bronx in the nineteen seventies, hip-hop culture has spread to both urban and suburban communities throughout the world. Hip-hop dance culture has been popularised through television programs like *So You Think You Can Dance?* In Australia there exists a healthy hip-hop music scene.

The choice for hip-hop stemmed from the interaction we had with the young women we met in Shepparton, as I discussed in my introduction. We also noticed that hip-hop was a strong influence on the culture of the young people we consulted with during our creative development stages. Angela and I decided it was imperative the play spoke directly to young people, and was infused with their 'grounded aesthetics' (McLean and Richer 2003, p. 4). Grounded aesthetics refers to the cultural language that young people of a particular class, generation and sex use to identify with one another. I felt that hip-hop as the chosen grounded aesthetic would support the Brechtian notion of "social gestus" defined as "the mimetic gestural expression of the social relationships in which people of a particular epoch stand to each other" (Brecht in Rouse 1998, p. 233).

As a means of developing politically charged physical action, I was excited by hip-hop's use of grand gestures. I was also drawn to its reliance on acrobatic moves, its stylish poses, the idea of 'battle', its use of animation and illusion and the way it interplays with character and comedy. Hip-hop dance form is often used to tell stories through iconographic gestures; I felt this idea could be reimagined and reapplied through a fusion with epic theatre in order to comment on stage action and relationships.

By drawing from hip-hop dance, I felt I would be able to accentuate and heighten the comedic, sensual and violent culture of the central characters and maintain a necessary critical distance in order for the actor to comment on the character and the audience to critically examine action. Moreover, because hip-hop plays with accent, stillness and the juxtaposition of sharp movement and fluid gestures, I felt it would help to create more dynamic, imaginative and surprising choices for blocking scenes. In so doing, I would subvert any association with a more dreary and slow tempo political or didactic theatre. Brecht himself was all too aware of this “heavy, slow, laborious and pedestrian” (Brecht 1992, p. 283) association of political theatre and encouraged “quick, light and strong” staging and performance delivery in order to “convey stories, ideas and virtuous feats to the spectator” (Brecht 1992, p. 283). Hip-hop provided me with what I felt was the ideal contemporary performance language to speak to a twenty first century young audience about political concerns.

We engaged Matt Cornell, a young choreographer specialising in hip-hop and break dance. Techniques such as locking, popping, vogue-ing, liquid and shuffling were explored as a foundation for physical and attitudinal/gestic blocking in order to “tell the story intelligently” (Brecht in Rouse 1998, p. 233).

Hip-hop culture was most overtly applied in the representation of the Kings. These characters became caricatures of an aggressive hip-hop male subculture, with exaggerated stances, gestures and costuming. The actors pushed their pants low around their hips, covered their faces with their bandanas like robbers, swivelled their caps side ways and created a stereotype of the crotch grabbing, overtly macho identity that is commonly associated with ‘gangsta’ rappers. ‘Gangsta’ rap, which is critiqued for its close association with and promotion of misogyny, is the most commercially successful sub-genre of hip-hop. We depicted the Kings as ‘wanna-be gansta’ rappers, because we wanted to accentuate their sexist attitudes towards their female counterparts (the girl gang). Yet we did not make them as menacing as the soldiers. It seemed effective for us to draw on the familiarity of the ‘gangsta’ rapper as an iconic image, which young people know and could read quickly. By conjuring this familiar stereotype and estranging it through cross-gender role-play, we exposed how these popular and sanctioned cultural forms assert a sexist concept of masculinity and give licence for men to demean women (refer to *War Crimes* video: 03min.: 59sec – 4min.: 46sec).

The scene where the girl gang breaks into the primary school and vandalises the classroom was staged by drawing from the illusionary techniques of hip-hop dance, particularly the dance technique ‘liquid’. Liquid is about creating a fluid-like motion in the body that conjures up the notion of ‘trance’. Rather than depicting a literal trashing of the classroom, I wanted to heighten the moment and accentuate the characters’ sense of fun and euphoria as they lose themselves in the senseless destruction. By relying on the techniques of liquid/illusion, we were able to elongate and slow down

the tempo of the sequence and to produce a sense of the girls falling into a trance. The moment articulates the characters' need to affirm some control over their lack of empowerment and disillusionment with the system (refer to *War Crimes* video: 20min.: 18 sec. – 21 min.:10 sec). Students responded positively to this moment:

[Your favourite moment of *War Crimes* was] “*The trashing of the school in slow motion, the pauses with stillness and silence that emphasises the weariness of the situation*” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

Finally, the technique of locking was a key element in the production, particularly the representation of the soldiers. When ‘locking’, dancers hold their positions for longer, similar to a freeze frame or a sudden pause. ‘Locking’ provided a clear contrast from the fluid movement of the female characters. These sudden shifts in tempo created a sense of militaristic movement. When the actors put their military hats on, they locked them into place, holding the pose for a second longer, to accentuate the presence of the soldier. Similarly, in the way they picked up the boxes when they transformed the space, they would ‘pop’ them out of one formation, hold the box still, lock it in place, and then shift the box into a new position. This play with rhythm and contrasts of sharp changes assisted in producing quick burst of focus, but also allowed for other action, such as Jade running, to continue in counterpoint over the top of these transition scenes. A good example is the transition scene out of direct audience address and into the second running sequence: the actors as soldiers use locking to dismantle the war memorial, while Jade ‘runs through the town’ and we are able to keep both images in focus (refer to *War Crimes* video: 51min.: 18sec. – 51min.: 42sec.) Hip-hop allowed me the ability to manipulate tempo and hold menacing figures such as soldiers on stage, and thereby sustain tension, particularly through transition scenes.

Design

The principle function of Tanja Beer’s set design was to enable transformation and the flow of action. It was necessary for the design to be non-literal and capable of morphing into multiple spaces (school, beach, club, park, War Memorial). The design exposed the “seams of theatrical illusion” (Dolan 2010, p. 5) and drew focus to the way the actor controlled the production and constructed meaning.

Costumes served the function of supporting the meta-narrative of war and sustained a strong military presence throughout the drama. The base ensemble costumes were designed to suggest 'army fatigues' through a unified grey/black/blue colour scheme, cargo pants and military style caps. However, this base 'look' was sufficiently flexible to allow the actor to conjure up all the other distinct characters (both male and female) in the play. Over the top of this base costume, which we continuously returned to in the action, the designer and actors added small but distinguishing features to define key characters. For example, the girl gang characters wore colourful hair extensions – a popular fashion accessory among teen girls – that could be easily disguised under a cap. Other token costume elements like hoodies, scarves and hijabs helped to define characters symbolically and culturally. Through basic manipulation of these elements, the actors could perform swift transformations on stage and draw from the audience's capacity for quick iconic identification without losing the military presence demanded by meta-narrative.

Brecht (in Thomson and Sacks 2006, 268) wrote:

"Too little attention is paid these days to the life of reality. The things we put on stage are dead, never mind how real they are, if they have no function, if they are not used by actors or used on their behalf."

Following Brecht's example, we only used two functional props: a can of spray paint and a petrol tin. When juxtaposed with the abstract set, the realistic quality of these objects was heightened and they gained symbolic value as tools for protest and activism. Both the props and the distinguishing costume features (particularly the hijabs) aided in expressing the characters' difference, their rage, their disillusionment and their identity. This is why it was important to physically represent them within the milieu of the abstract and impressionistic; it reinforced the themes and gave them weight and thus foregrounded the meta-narrative.

According to McLean and Richer (2003), theatre that speaks to young people in a global age must embrace the elements of complexity and surprise. "Work must feel unpredictable, and capable of changing rapidly, demonstrating innovative approaches" (McLean and Richer 2003, p. 5). The set boxes were a way to exploit this notion theatrically. We were able to surprise audiences through different ways of transforming and manipulating space. Audiences never knew how the set would evolve; sometimes the girl characters transformed it through physical action (moving boxes as if they were naturalistic furniture pieces). Other times, the soldiers appeared and transformed the set, maintaining a ghost like menacing presence. This made the blocking thrilling and unpredictable. Most importantly, it maintained the act of transformation at the forefront; the power of the 'actor at work' as

a central feature. In so doing, it exposed the mechanics and labour of theatre. In turn, illusion was dismantled and what was emphasised was the way 'truth', behaviour and communication is constructed. Throughout the feedback forms, many students made mention of how much they enjoyed the transformation of the set via the manipulation of the boxes:

[Your favourite moment of *War Crimes* was] "*The way the boxes were used to transform the scenes.*" (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p.6).

[Your favourite moment of *War Crimes* was] "*Really good non-naturalist scenes with the boxes*" (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p.6).

Kelleher (2009, p. 43) argues that the value of theatre in relation to politics and political thinking lies in its capacity to persuade audiences to listen *not* to the rhetoric of the performance, but rather to *look* at the construction and representation of the rhetoric itself. It is the theatre's ability to draw attention "to the machinery of representation and amplification" (Kelleher 2009, p. 43) over the message itself, which encourages questions for the audience about the act of communication and our expected faith and presumed trust in rhetoric and modes of amplification (political speeches, the media), which we as citizens are expected to passively consume and consent to.

Sound design

A tightly synchronized, original soundtrack composed by Pete Goodwin accompanied *War Crimes*. He took a cinematic approach to the score of *War Crimes*, underscoring almost the entire production. His multilayered soundscape helped to locate the action around the fictional coastal town through the use of ocean waves, school bells and club music. It also functioned to conjure the presence of the media reinforcing the political milieu of the town through news announcements about the death of local soldier Damien Grier and the closure of the town's abattoir. However, sound reached its most powerful expression when used in an ironic way, and to contradict and juxtapose stage action and dialogue.

According to Brecht, a contradiction between design and text elements can achieve an alienating effect, illuminating a moment in a strange and surprising way thus enabling the audience to see the

moment afresh. Theatre is essentially, “an aggregate of independent arts in provocative tension” (in Weber and Heinmen 1984, 33).

Weber & Heinmen cite a scene from Brecht’s film *Kuhle Wampe* as an example of Brecht’s provocative tension within the meta-narrative:

“Romantic organ music is played as an unemployed youth returns home after another futile search for work, evoking a poignant contrast between music and image” (Weber and Heinmen 1984, 33).

Similarly, Pete Goddwin’s score created a powerful ironic counterpoint to nationalism in *War Crimes*. Whenever Lara and Ricky expressed vehement nationalistic sentiment (“Lara: Diggers died for us” (Betzien 2011, p. 14)) or racist rhetoric (“Ricky: Yeah. To save us from Terrorists” (Betzien 2011, p.14), *The Last Post* would build and the actors playing Ricky and Lara would transform into the soldiers (*War Crimes* video, 15min.: 13sec. – 15min: 50sec). By correlating racist and nationalistic opinion with the transformation of the soldiers, a tension was produced and a correlation was drawn through sound and image.

Arabic drumming and music, was used to underscore Jade’s running sequences (refer to *War Crimes* video: 21min.: 10sec. – 22min: 55sec.; 51min.: 42sec.- 52min: 53min:30sec. and 58min.:50sec. – 1:00hr.:44sec.). This created an interesting juxtaposition between music and image, inviting the audience to make connections between Jade’s narrative and that of the Iraqi story.

Mash-up

In terms of music, writing and staging, *War Crimes* experimented with DJ remix theory, adapting mash-up techniques to fuse narrative and juxtapose scenes and images. Remix or mash-up is common in contemporary electronic music and is often used to promote two or more previously released songs. Popular mash-ups in this category often juxtapose songs by pop acts like Christina Aguilera with the Strokes, or Madonna and the Sex Pistols. Remix uses samples from two or more elements to access specific sounds, taking them beyond their initial possibilities (Navas, 2006).

Contemporary political theatre, in the post-modern and global age has a responsibility to “oppose current state of consensus by provoking disagreements of various sorts” (Kelleher 2009, p. 72). My production of *War Crimes* set out to oppose consensus by deliberately presenting an imagined world that was in stark contradiction with the ‘real’ world. *War Crimes*, through its casting and staging choices framed and represented the voices and bodies of those who are often misrepresented or simply omitted from “the wider political drama” (Kelleher 2009, p. 68). In this way, I was readdressing an imbalance of power.

Brecht famously relied on “stylization and exaggeration of gesture, intonation or tempo in some of their [Berlin Ensemble] most serious productions, although with different emotional emphasis and a different balance between playing the role and demonstrating it” (Rouse 1998, p.236). I also exploited tempo, exaggerated stylization and gesture and asked the actors to perform *War Crimes* by alternating between presentation and representation of the characters. In so doing, I gave focus to the construction of meaning and, in turn, through my aesthetics choices, I attempted to highlight contradictions in the dominant ideology. Through the infusion of this Brechtian approach with contemporary form I was able to redefine political aesthetics for a new cultural and educational climate.

According to Edward Bond, “a just society lies in the hands of children who have conjoined rational criticism with imaginative freedom” (Nicholson 2009, p. 11). By presenting *War Crimes* in a contemporary epic style, I attempted to challenge, engage and ignite the imagination of the audience so that young people can better reflect on the kind of world they want to live in and the responsibility they bear to its citizens.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Audience feedback

One thousand, three hundred and nineteen secondary students saw *War Crimes* across thirteen Victorian schools. I have drawn some impressions from both the discussions that ensued during the post-show question and answers sessions and from Regional Arts Victoria's feedback summary report on *War Crimes*, an unpublished report based on feedback forms completed by both students and teachers. This report is utilized by Regional Arts Victoria (RAV) to inform programming decisions and to strengthen relationships between artists, teachers and Regional Arts Victoria's Arts2Go program.

According to Regional Arts Victoria's report, the median star rating out of five (five being the highest score and one being the lowest) was four point six six (4.66). Some key words students used to describe the production were:

"Amazing", "confronting", "engaging", "powerful", "brilliant", "fun", "awesome", "entertaining" and many of them told us they "loved this performance" (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

Teachers gave the production a rating of 'excellent' over all for '*artistic quality*' and 'excellent' in terms of '*education value*'. One teacher did give it a score of 'good' (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 8). This teacher felt that the production was pitched '*very much above [student] level*' which was mostly year nines and tens. Most teachers did agree that the work was better suited to students fifteen years and over, however one teacher did comment that it would be unfair to judge students based on age:

"Really hard one. One 14 year old is so contrasting in resilience and life experiences to another. Impossible to respond. All of my kids got so much from this amazing piece though I did feel nervous for a handful of student's ability to cope with the material"

(Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 8).

Another teacher recognized that they might have underestimated their students:

“I was concerned that some may find some of the issues too confronting but they didn't have a problem with the content - rather they appreciated that it tackled the hard issues” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 8).

During post-show discussions, students engaged enthusiastically in conversation, and often stayed beyond the designated ten-minute ‘question and answer’ time to talk about the show with the performers and myself. I was surprised the students seemed to shy away from talking about the themes and content and instead focused on the form. Many students asked how long it took to stage the production and how the actors came up with the choreography. They were also very keen to learn about the techniques used for transformation.

Director's response

The fact that the conversation centered on the form, rather than the content of the play did concern me. I have asked myself why this has been the case. I felt that enormous attention was placed on the appropriate theatrical form and aesthetic expression to best articulate politics. I also feel that any further stress on the politics would have compromised the production and overburdened the theatrical experience. The style of *War Crimes* was frenetic, almost to the point of “rebellious” (Barker 1997, p.46). This created a kind of tension between wanting to ‘instruct’ in a didactic sense, yet behaving in a manner that was free of ‘social service’. Like Barker, I too feel that to simply satisfy socio/political agendas leads to “uncreative and unimaginative work” (Nicholson 2009, p.8), which can create artistically impoverished theatre.

I believe the strength of *War Crimes* was that it was radical in its theatrical experimentation, which resulted in a production that felt unpredictable, playful, complex and at times even ambiguous. It was through its form that I was able to drive provocative questions, stimulate creative thinking and even inspire some form of social action in the audience:

“I thought it was brilliant! Confronting and wonderfully performed, it inspired our theatre class to add more movement pieces into our reaction play and aim to make it a more profound

theatre experience just like War Crimes was” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

A leading scholar in theatre in education, Anthony Jackson (in Nicholson 2009, p. 79), argues that theatre for young audiences can be “effective educationally only *if it is effective aesthetically*” (italics original). I believe the reason why our audience focused the post show discussion on form over content is precisely because they were connecting to its rebellious spirit, its inventiveness, and the creative risks it showcased. The following responses seem to suggest this:

“It was very confronting in a way that didn’t make you cringe” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

“It was very fun to watch and was making me be on the edge of my seat the whole time” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

“The morphing in scenes / into characters was amazing” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

However, I must acknowledge that the work operated at breakneck pace and perhaps I did not allow sufficient time for the audience to fully absorb the political message. This was my challenge in directing *War Crimes* for young audiences. While it may seem the choreographic style was too fast and too swift a language for gestic action in a true Brechtian sense, I still needed to find a movement style that would hold stage positions just long enough to suit the concentration span of young audiences. Hip-hop seemed to keep up with the way young people read and absorb information and to contain the necessary reference to their contemporary world.

“The honesty of the themes and the realistic and recognisable characters” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

“Amazingly confronting piece, fantastic focus, great transformation. I loved this performance; it was entertaining, real, had amazing value and it was fantastic!” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

Despite the fact that students discussed form over content I maintained the hope that once the immediate rush of the theatrical experience wore off, the political message of *War Crimes* would remain, and the potency of the metaphors and symbols would resonate with the audience. According to Kelleher (2009), sometimes the politics may not affect an audience member until much later, when they have had a chance to absorb it. Louis Althusser (in Kelleher 2009, p. 19) describes the delayed reaction to the politics of performance thus: “a politics begins to ‘search in me, despite myself, now that all the actors and sets have been cleared away for the advent of its silent discourse”.

One teacher affirmed this in her feedback:

“War Crimes was a powerful piece of theatre that challenged my students. It has been a number of weeks since we viewed the performance and my students are still discussing it.” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011 p. 8).

My most ambitious objective with this work was to disrupt the imagination of young audiences. Did my theatrical production inspire young people and give them the creative tools to “interpret the performative society in which they live and offer imaginative insights into another world, which once seen, can not be unseen”? (Nicholson 2009, p.58). I will reference some feedback from students, which seem to suggest that this did happen.

“It was interesting. I learnt something new today; thank you so much.” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

“Some scenes made me uncomfortable which I felt was a good thing because it has increased my awareness about the very different lives of other girls my age.” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

These two comments seem to indicate a shift in thinking through learning. They imply a collision between two contrasting views, a discomfort arising from a rupture created in their normal state of being and the opening of a new scope of understanding. They suggest that the world was recalibrated or re-imagined in a new way.

“Thank you for demonstrating that a cast of five women can be just as impactful, if not more impactful than a cast of all men in conveying a powerful message” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

This comment articulates something truly remarkable. It indicates that for this young person there was a clear shift in the balance of gender power and that through the work they were able to re-imagine the capacity that women have to enact change and articulate injustices.

“It was a really good depiction of current political events that are relevant to me and my age group/society” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

The fact that this young person describes the show as “a good depiction of current political events” seems to imply that there was enjoyment and pleasure received by not just the content but also the form. It seems to suggest that the political questions raised had immediate relevancy and connected with this young person’s lived experience. It implies a contextualization of the politics at play for “my age group/society” drawing parallels between the real and the ‘imagined’ or fictional world. The feedback articulates the way the work drew attention to the young audience’s role as social actors within a wider political sphere.

More specifically still, my objective was for audiences think about the issues relating to war, refugees, women’s exclusion, identity and notions of the sacred. The answers provided by young people about what they did *not* like about *War Crimes*, I think are more revealing. I wish to address three responses:

“The kiss between Jordan and Jade made me uncomfortable” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

“Some of the disrespect towards the ANZACS and the ADF I questioned at times” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

“The racism but it is portrayed realistically, in a good way and makes you think” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

I believe these comments reflect the way the production successfully contradicted mainstream attitudes and perceptions of race, gender, sexuality and war. Robyn Archer argues that in today’s conservative political climate “we’ve dispensed altogether with dialectic, we want dogma” (Archer 2005, p. 37). *War Crimes* challenged dogmatic attitudes that centre on the mythology of the all-powerful white, militaristic male. *War Crimes* presented a counter-narrative to a hegemonic power

structure, which subverted and destabilized its power. The comments above suggest that this was achieved, at least to some extent. In fact, most students were very aware of our political objective through *War Crimes* and were able to articulate it in the feedback forms. I cite three responses that best demonstrate this:

*“A very powerful piece of theatre that forced me to question war and its purpose”
(Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).*

*“I think that the bravery of your writer, director and cast to put on this show is great and you brought great awareness of issues of refugees and the war to us. Thank you!”
(Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).*

“It was really special to see a production devoted to issues which are so often overlooked in modern society. Well done!” (Regional Arts Victoria unpublished report, 2011, p. 6).

My research demonstrates that in this instance *War Crimes* as a piece of contemporary political theatre did intervene in the mainstream social, political and media based narratives that currently prevail, by staging a poetically charged counter-narrative. This counter-narrative readdressed critical political events and contradicted myths and value systems. Holdsworth (2010, p. 43) argues that theatre, in its temporal distance from moments of unrest and political urgency, can act as a form of cultural witnessing, as an acknowledgement and a reminder that critical events happened (for instance, Cronulla, Iraq, self-immolation by refugees in Australia). Theatre can interrupt, interrogate and challenge the construct of these events, in order to provide a deeper, more complex understanding of them. *War Crimes* not only acted as a cultural witness but also invited young audiences to question current Australian values and symbols in relation to these events. It attempted to foreground its construct and contradictions through a direct and explicit interplay with social, political and economic forces. It exposed how these forces are shaping Australia in the twenty-first century and what implications they are having for the world at large. In so doing, the work resonated both locally and globally, and tapped into a cosmopolitan sense of responsibility for the world we live in.

The issue of making political theatre relevant to a contemporary young audience is still very much a live one and I certainly do not feel I have found the only means of presenting politically challenging work for young people. I acknowledge that there still exists a very fine line between, on the one hand, didactic and heavy-handed political theatre and, on the other, confronting and challenging political

work that truly speaks powerfully to young audiences in a globalized context. This is the ongoing challenge for the contemporary political theatre maker. Contemporary political theatre for young audiences, when successful, is rich, layered and complex. Through a radical, rebellious reimagining of the possibilities for theatre, it can act as a provocation to its audience to be “active makers of meaning” (Nicholson 2009, p.80) and to reimagine their world both metaphorically and literally.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Karl Marx (in Babbage 2004, p. 58) viewed contemporary culture as: “both a scene of alienation for human beings from themselves, their lives, and others, and also as holding out the promise of the conquest or overcoming of alienation”.

RealTV strives to create work that will assist audiences to overcome this sense of alienation. We push the imaginary boundaries of what political theatre is, by exploiting and re-conceiving alienation techniques by fusing it with contemporary cultural forms. We understand that young people “enjoy work that stretches the imagination, that asks them to fill in blanks and asks them to be partners on a journey of surprise, challenge and purpose” (Brosius in Munk 2003, p. 60). By embracing the desire, the speed and power of our audience’s capacity to absorb images and distil information, RealTV has striven to keep political theatre cosmopolitan, theatrical and poetic, without having to compromise on its essential job: to deconstruct and call to question the hegemonic forces of the dominant ideology. RealTV’s work draws focus on artifice, language and its construct and the means of amplification prevalent in performative societies. It does so through the power of theatricality inherent in Brecht’s epic theatre. When re-imagined and reconceived through a fusion with popular forms, we are able to engage and disturb our audience’s imagination. By provoking and disturbing the imagination, we attempt to empower audiences by instilling confidence and pleasure in their capacity for critical thinking and analysis. Our focus has been on demonstrating the malleable nature of living in a globalized world through the complex language of theatre. In so doing, we attempt to subvert the sense of alienation, substituting instead an optimistic sense of solidarity, understanding and a desire for change.

Through a cosmopolitan framework, we promote new visions of what the world can be, and we strive to encourage a moral sense of responsibility for our global community. If we see our world and ourselves and understand the acts that produce injustice, “we can try to ‘do’ something about it, in short, do politics” (Kelleher 2009, p. 14).

Rose Myers (in McLean and Richer, 2003, p. 6) states:

“We must also recognize that the theatre has a capacity to provide a dynamic and confronting experience like no other. It is crucial to us that our work is highly accessible, captivating and celebrating the imaginations of our audience”.

I whole-heartedly agree with this statement. I believe celebrating the power of the imagination is paramount, particularly in our current political climate where we are given little opportunity to imagine a different world. However, theatre must also never lose sight of the need to culturally disrupt traditional structures of oppression. This is the central preoccupation of my work as a director and as the co-founder of RealTV.

John McGrath (in Brewer 1999), founder of radical theatre company 7:84, believes that although the theatre can never cause social change, it can articulate pressure towards it:

“above all, it can be the way people find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination” (in Brewer, 1999, p. 165.).

To make theatre that is raising global political concerns, and to achieve a sense of solidarity through the engagement and empowerment of an audience’s imagination is a deeply cosmopolitan feat, and one that propels political theatre into the new millennium.

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