

Peter Falkenberg
Artistic Director, Free Theatre Christchurch

The Theatre as Counterpublic: From *The Balcony* to *Distraction Camp*

It starts with the actors cleaning the beautiful wood of the especially constructed dance floor, a stage on the stage that becomes a meta-stage but also a fetish that needs to be revered and knelt down to and made into an altar in the cleaning process. When the actors put on their tango shoes and for the first dance step onto the stage, this becomes a kind of initiation into the world of the tango/brothel as well as of the distraction camp in which they have to perform. The ambiguity of the theatre as glamorous, shiny fantasy world which is surrounded by mirrors that enable vanity, narcissism and exhibitionism, and the possibility of humiliation and degradation are prefigured and established. The tango dance has the same kind of ambiguities of power and submission, glamour and dirt, as do the three scenes of Jean Genet's *The Balcony* that are quoted in the production – the Bishop, the Judge and the General/Camp Commandant scenes – and the three pieces of films which are enacted – from *Frida*, *The Tango Lesson*, and *The Night Porter* (all films directed by women: Julie Taymor, Sally Potter, Lisa Cavani).

At base, I staged *Distraction Camp* as a performative enquiry into the nature of acting through theatre and film, song and dance. *Distraction Camp* was designed to sit conceptually in relation (not quite opposition) to the “concentration camp.” My premise for the production was provocative: whereas the experience of the concentration camp was one of scarcity and hunger, the current experience of late capitalism (following Baudrillard in *Fatal Strategies*) is one of obesity and obscenity, which ironically can be seen to lead to the same effect. Forced endlessly to consume

entertainments that revolve endlessly around distractions and commodities, audiences have become like the Muselman, resigned to a way of living without meaning, obese yet starved of real nourishment.

Our idea that we live in a free world, which is being continuously fostered by the media, may turn out to be an illusion. In *The Theatre and its Double*, Antonin Artaud says “We are not free... And the theatre has been created to teach us that first of all” (79). In Genet’s *The Balcony*, the re-enactment of perversity in the brothel is mirrored and shown to be the same as outside; the outside needs what happens in the brothel, because whatever is called bad or evil can be projected into it and thereby disavowed. Taking *The Balcony* as inspiration, *Distraction Camp* questions itself as theatre and its own raison d’être, and asks: are we creating our own House of Illusions in the Free Theatre? Is the work we do just another escape, or is it a counter-world to the outside, to the late capitalist, which is a perverted world from our perspective. Do we just escape into a now more nostalgic than utopian illusion, or are we still rehearsing for a revolution, creating another way of living that can catch on and infiltrate the outside world in the way that Artaud envisioned the theatre as a plague?

In my production, the outside was always represented to the inside by several monitors which ran continuously over the heads of the actors. The audience first saw itself arriving, captured on surveillance camera, being at once observers and subjects of observation. After the audience was settled, images of revolutionaries – a band of Maori and a Pakeha army – were shown to be massing in Cathedral Square – Christchurch’s central square – and then marching through the city to the theatre. This footage, conveniently, was left over from a production of Karl Kraus’ *Last Days of Mankind*, which I staged in the Square and throughout the city in 2000. It was

interspersed with images of newsreaders detailing the action and interviewing bystanders. Near the end of the production, the revolutionaries were shown to be climbing the gates of the theatre as the doors were pounded and shouts for freedom were heard. Even being so consciously in the theatre did not prevent members of the audience from becoming alarmed.

The battering of the audience with simultaneously theatrical and filmic images and distractions was meant to mirror the way we live in our mediatised consumer society, and the theatre as the brothel, in its perverse playacting, was to reflect our desires for freedom from the perceived conformity of our lives. By doing so, the production was supposed to make audiences aware of the way they are both inside and outside the theatre. In his Preface to *The Theatre and its Double*, Artaud says: “[T]he theater has been created as an outlet for our repressions” (9). What does this mean for us now? Is it just a kind of a safety valve, a substitution for taking action in life? Or can it be a provocation to recognition and action? Can the theatre, that is, create a counter-public from and with the public that partakes in the performance?

In “Publics and Counterpublics,” Michael Warner writes: “Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers” (86).¹ The Free Theatre – like all progressive, alternative or utopian theatres – regards itself as creating a counterpublic because it produces performances that challenge the status quo. But in doing so, Free Theatre still plays the game of the dominant consumer culture, entering into its matrix regardless. And so, the name of the Free Theatre turns out to be a misnomer. What it can only teach us, following Artaud, is that we are not free.

¹ In *Public Cultures* 14:1 (Duke University Press, 2002) pages 49-90.

In my production, the audience gets addressed directly at the end of the play in a way that makes them complicit with the point of view of the Madame of the brothel:

Salome/a whore: (whinging)...I want to be a good girl, not a bad girl!

Madame: There are no good girls, just good actors. It's human nature to wish to divide the world into the good and the bad. It's so simple. But whom does one hate in the person of the dirty, greedy, sensual whore? Just the same as the "dirty, greedy, sensual Jew." One's own self, one's own greed, one's own lechery. And what does one hate in the person of the sadistic SS officer? Again, one's own self, one's own brutality. Evil men are as necessary to good men as whores are to decent women. Good girls or bad girls? You're just working girls, that's all. It was I who decided to call my establishment a House of Illusions, but I'm only the manager. Each individual, when he rings the bell and enters, brings his own scenario, perfectly thought out. My job is merely to rent the theatre, and furnish the props, the costumes, the actors and the actresses.

(BANGING ON THE DOOR TO THE OUTSIDE)

Who's there? What do they want? Freedom? From the Distraction Camp? Shut them out! Lock the doors. Switch off the monitors. (claps hands) Let's dance.

One of the ironies of this approach was that several reviewers criticised the production for its didacticism, without necessarily noticing who is actually instructing them into the discipline via the rules of the house. This is when the intervention from outside the theatre is taking place, with the monitors showing the theatre being stormed, the doors being pounded and shouts heard from outside, which together with the actors onstage would seem to put the audience on the wrong side of the revolution. The play ends with an actor ordering that the doors be locked against the revolution and inviting the audience to join in the dance; the actors come out directly to individual spectators and draw them down onto the stage to dance the tango with them. The audience that saw themselves in the big mirrors reflected onstage, seeing themselves seeing the dance throughout the performance, now enter the stage in person, becoming actors (or at least dancers) themselves.

Unlike in *Paradise Now* or *Dionysus in 69*, paradigms of utopian theatre, the audience is not joining the actors in a sexual/political experience of liberation. Or rather they are but instead of being drawn into an alternative, idealist *communitas*, as the audience is self-consciously put into the dance, they are also entering fully into the House of Illusions, the fascist brothel, and all that implies. In Baudrillard's terms, they join "the systems of simulation" (87). As Baudrillard in his ironic logic says: "it's the business of the work of art to make a fetish of this nullity":

The work of art – a new and triumphant fetish and not a sad alienated one – should work to deconstruct its own traditional aura, its authority and power of illusion, in order to shine resplendent in the pure obscenity of the commodity. (118).

Just as the audience shouldn't necessarily take the admonishment of the actor who says Jews and women are both dirty, so let's dance, as a lesson, so too this audience who enters into the dance does so on the terms of the production – that is as a step into what has been revealed to be illusion and distraction rather than productive communal engagement.

Why tango? Tango has become very popular again these days in Christchurch as elsewhere. Unlike many other forms of social dance, it is not really communal, focused as it is on a pair. And it does not represent the union of opposites, but rather the tango enacts a power struggle: the man dominates, the woman submits. This is not necessarily a prescription for social harmony.

Tango works like the brothel and like fascism through and with the dialectics of power and submission, sadism and masochism, brutality and sentimentality. In *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, Marta E. Savigliano writes: "Tango has deflected its own incorporation into the world political economy of Passion as an

exotic raw material and has simultaneously lured itself into co-option by conforming to various tastes regarding music and dance” (3).² And she adds: “Passion’s power is akin to a terrorist maneuver that asks for containment” (10). I would agree with her that tango is a practice that has submitted to the power of dominant global culture. But along with Marta Savigliano, I want also to uphold that:

Tango is a practice already ready for struggle. It knows about taking sides and risks. And it knows about accusing and whining, about making intimate confessions in public. Tango knows how to make a spectacle of its cruel destiny. (212)

Thus tango appears to be a strategy both for resistance and for losing.

Michael Warner writes of counterpublics: “they are ideological for the real powerlessness of human agents in capitalist society” (81). But he also states that “Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is to be hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative and not replicative merely” (88). My argument is that this poesis of scene making is an illusory hope. It is not poesis but replication that is needed. Only by replication can the irony of our current condition be made visible. This is the only agency remaining to us.

In my production, I look at the world through the eyes of a postmodernist where, in Savigliano’s words, “life is a perpetual homesickness in a disharmonious world where we happen to miss experiences that actually never occurred and where desire for that which is impossible maintains the necessary tension to keep on living” (213). And in fact, if we follow Baudrillard, the distinction between truth and illusion, theatre and reality, is no longer valid. As he writes in *Fatal Strategies*:

² Boulder CO: Westview Press, Inc, 1995.

If for a while the form of theatre and the form of the real were in dialectical play with each other, today it is the pure and empty form of theater which plays with the pure and empty form of the real. Illusion is proscribed; the scission between stage and audience is abolished; theatre goes down into the street and into everydayness; it claims to invest the whole of the real, dissolve into it, and at the same time transfigure it. (62-3)³

And he goes on:

If our perversion lies in this, that we never desire the real event, but its spectacle, never things, but their sign, and the secret derision of their sign, it means that we don't really want things to change; the change must also seduce us. (76)

And he concludes, "In order for Revolution to come, it has to seduce us..." (76). And seduction always begins with submission.

³ *Fatal Strategies*, trans by Philip Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski, edited by Jim Fleming (1983; New York: Semiotext(e), 1990.