

## **Free Theatre: How to be free and to belong at the same time.**

New Zealanders have a tradition to escape overseas from the narrow confines of their island and its conformist society. Then, sometimes some years later, they come back home again, exchanging their sense of and desire for freedom for the sense of and desire for belonging. Theatre might become a place, where these two desires could be fulfilled at the same time in a precarious balance between art and life.

Towards the writing of a book on Free Theatre Christchurch (est. 1979), core ensemble members reflect on the ongoing work of New Zealand's longest running producer of experimental theatre.

## **The Circle Run: in search of a sense of *communitas* on the periphery**

Dr George Parker

In the Free Theatre, we have a foundational warm-up exercise where we run around in a large circle. The aim is to try and move together as one. This doesn't necessarily mean moving in exactly the same way, but moving *together*, which may also involve different movements as we search for a 'sense of group'. This is the basis to our ensemble approach to theatre, a way of building a sense of company with a focus on a body-oriented notion of theatre, as opposed to the usual head-oriented, 'talking heads' style drama. Free Theatre's approach also works counter to the usual social, economic realities of professional theatre, which require actors to work more as individual contractors than develop a sense of a collective ensemble.

This paper considers how the circle run is a building block to a theatre practice that seeks to challenge the social, economic and political realities of our society. I am interested in exploring how the strategies employed to more effectively find a sense of group in the circle run, and most especially a greater than usual focus on peripheral vision, are paradigmatic of an approach to theatre (and life) that aims to take account of the social and political environment via a perspective from the periphery. I discuss how in *Frankenstein* (2016), *Fantasia* (2005/6), *Murder Hope of Women/The Philosopher's Stone* (1998) the circle run allows for a search on the periphery for a sense of community via the destruction of an other Other.

## **Auditioning for a role in *Kafka's Amerika***

Dr Marian McCurdy

Kafka's fragmentary *Amerika*, a novel about trying to belong, was the starting point for Free Theatre's *Kafka's Amerika* (2014). The audience were positioned in the role of the protagonist Karl in the final section of the novel and invited to join The Great Nature Theatre of Oklahoma. What followed was 40 minutes of queuing, processing and interrogation amidst an environment of sensory overload. What the audience were queuing

for, why they were being interrogated and what they would ultimately be joining was unclear. What was clear is that they were participating in a process that would end in their belonging. And as the Nature Theater of Oklahoma stands in Kafka's novel for America itself, to belong involves auditioning for a role and being accepted for a part.

Kafka proposes that America has become a theatre – an all pervasive, brutally competitive, intoxicating, frightening and oppressive spectacle of entertainment to which we are faced with the expectation of belonging. To be a good citizen and to be accepted into this society is to be a good actor – to successfully play preordained, prescribed and approved roles which are permitted by those in power. Rather than creating theatre in order to be accepted into and to belong to this society, I will discuss the way Free Theatre uses acting to expose the acting required in everyday life, to ask questions for ourselves and for our audiences about what it is that we are being coerced into belonging to and why we might desire to resist.

### **A foothold for belonging inside the *Distraction Camp***

Dr Greta Bond

At the end of Free Theatre's *Distraction Camp*, diverging from Genet's *The Balcony* (an influential source text), the actors close the doors against the revolutionaries outside, and return to dancing together. Rather than the actors taking their role-plays up in the outside world, the house of illusions remains sealed, and the audience, who have watched throughout reflected in a giant mirror at the back of the stage, are invited down to dance as well. *Distraction Camp* finally invites audiences to come and partake; to communicate; to exchange; to argue; to dance: there is the possibility of dialogue. The real world, it seems, is inside. Or is it?

Today we find that everything in political life has become a narrative, with events endlessly re-framed until any relation to our lived actuality is dissolved. The problem is not that there are untruths, but that all "alternative facts" being equal, truth as a notion no longer has value. We are constantly distracted from the possibility of anything being true. The internet provides the ultimate aestheticization of the political sphere, not imposed from above but rather with every individual building a twitter hall-of-mirrors from their phone. Much of the agit-prop of modern "political" theatre, providing an easily digestible "message" to an audience who already agrees, similarly creates a kind of hermetic virtue chamber that reassures rather than challenges.

In this proto-fascist context of "liquid modernity" - or, Artaud's "slippery world which is committing suicide without noticing it" – distraction becomes an excuse to do nothing. This paper asks under what (if any) circumstances theatre – anachronistic, immediate, living, and uncomfortable – might still provide a shared truth-laboratory, a foothold for belonging, in an alienating and alienated post-truth world.

## **Searching for Freedom with the voice.**

Dr Emma Johnston

As a student of opera, I never felt at home within the conventions of classical singing. My voice felt completely alienated from my body. I regarded my voice as a product, rather than as something in process. I felt dislocated.

Through my work with Free Theatre Christchurch, exploring my voice in the context of avant-garde performance, I have come to transgress the conventions of my classically-trained voice, and to understand the containment of the voice as reflecting wider social, political and ideological barriers. The voice has the potential to upset borders and rules by its presence as something that is constantly passing through corporeal thresholds and boundaries. Rather than performing belonging, the voice can be heard to transgress belonging, and embrace dislocation in a search for new identities and ways of expressing. The “experimental voice” explores all forms of human vocal expression, pushing to the extremes, exploring the margins of possibility. Within the frame of avant-garde theatre, these vocalities from diverse localities, these marginal or marginalized voices, can be given context and meaning in search of new ways of belonging.

In this paper, I will discuss the “experimental” voice work of Free Theatre, particularly in relation to *Footprints/Tapuwaē* (2001/2015), *The Mauricio Kagel Project* (2015), *Hereafter* (2012) and *Distraction Camp* (2009/2010).