

'Going solo – Dr Misri Dey talks solo performance and Debbie Tucker Green's play, *Random*'

Imagine finding a performance flyer:

'A Lecture upon Heads', including: 'Humorous Oration in Praise of the Law, Nobody's, Somebody's, Anybody's and Everybody's...Family of Nobody's'.¹

You might think this is a contemporary satirical piece of stand up, or an experimental performance lecture, or a spoken-word performance. It is, in fact, from a solo theatre piece by Alexander Stevens called 'The celebrated LECTURE on HEADS', dating back to the 18th century. It was both transgressive and hugely popular, being a biting satirical critique of Western colonialism dressed up as pioneering bravery through the lauded figure of Alexander the Great. Stevens went on to perform this piece 1000 times, across England and Europe, and yet at that time, solo work was not officially sanctioned as lawful performance. Only two theatre companies were licensed to perform, working in theatres chartered by the King under royal patent: The Theatre Royal (later Drury Lane) and its rival, Lincoln's Inn Fields.

So, Stephens and his colleagues worked around this by performing at unusual times in the day, or turning it into a social event: 'come and drink a dish of chocolate' while the performance went on. Solo performance has long continued this tradition of both entrepreneurial and challenging practice, providing a platform for devisers or playwrights to act as ciphers, engaging with the pressing, current issues of their times. *Random* is one such play - Debbie Tucker Green's writing about one young black boy being killed in 2009 remaining absolutely vital in the light of the ongoing murders of young black Londoners today.

Solo performance has a long history of maverick practice, involving challenging the status quo. Examples abound, as in the aforementioned work of Stevens and Foote in 18th century England, through to the long lasting 'freak' shows of Fayres and circuses, questioning the borders between what it is to be a man or woman, animal or human. Victorian music hall performance attracted 'acts' like Harry Relph's Little Tich, in 1867 – a very small man in very large boots. In Europe, Josephine Baker and her grotesque parody of the native women dancing in a banana skirt challenged audiences at the Follie Bergeres in the early 1920's; numerous performance artists like Marina Abramovic, Chris Burden, Bobby Baker carried out durational and endurance feats in the early 60's and 70's in the USA and UK. One infamous example is circus performer Philippe Petit, who stretched a trapeze wire across the Twin Towers and walked out between them, inviting the awe of the viewers watching below even as he was arrested and then later released. The list goes on.

In a theatre context, the term 'solo' usually conjures up an image of a lone figure, in a spotlight, communicating to an audience through monologue; perhaps stand-up comedy, monodrama, or spoken word poetry. In our era of inter-connectedness, ably facilitated by

the internet and popular media, we know however that solo, as a state of being, is a seductive illusion, an 'as if' alone, as we contain the echoes and influences of our teachers, friends and heroines all. Of course, this is how all theatre operates, inviting us to believe the actors are the characters they portray, even while we know this not to be the case in reality. I have come to describe solo performance as work where one performer holds the main focus and weight of the performance, although others are usually involved in both its making and manifestation.

Solo practices occur in other areas of work: the philosopher, walking thinking into being; the hermit, enclosed and embracing aloneness in a face to face with their God; the mail pilot, flying through the night. Endurance, courage and a maverick individuality all emerge as vital qualities for this kind of lone worker. Within the performing arts, the violinist, or prima ballerina are literally 'outstanding' - alone in the space, separated from the orchestra or corps de ballet. Again, the soloist performs 'as if' alone, yet very much in collaboration with others.

Solo theatre crosses both popular and classical art forms. Just one list could include Greek oratory, old time music hall, cabaret, fayres and circus performance, vaudeville, magic, performance and live art, one act shows, monodramas, monologues, spoken word/slam poetry, performance lectures and stand-up comedy. In introducing the solo play *Random*, we are working in the further specific theatre context of solo performance that prioritises words. The monologue is a core speech device in this kind of work and has a long, shape shifting history – from long form, Greek oratory and medieval storytelling to specific moments in Renaissance plays where a character offers the audience a window into their private thoughts. It has more recently been used to describe entire performances. *Random* is a 'monopolylogue' – where one actor, in this case Petra Letang, switches between multiple parts. Recent well-known solo works like this include Simon Callow's *Shakespeare's Heroes* (2011) or the *Mystery of Charles Dickens* (2012). Older key monopolylogues include the work of Lily Tomlin, Danny Hoch or Anna Deavere Smith. Deavere Smith's verbatim theatre works are powerful examples of the monopolylogue; in *Twilight: Los Angeles*, or *Fires in the Mirror* (both 1992) she 'walks in other people's words', conveying multiple voices and experiences based on real life interviews. An acoustic conjuring up of other people takes place, in the theatre, but the actor is also very present. This is not an act of ventriloquism, where the performer is merely a conduit – rather, their humanity, engaged in this act of telling, is also necessary and relevant. In a telephone interview, Tinueke Craig, the director of *Random* also discussed her ambition to achieve this kind of dual representation; of both characters and actor. Letang is Mother, Sister, Father, Brother, and also herself, in the present - a black woman (like many others) whose role it is to speak out and bear witness when black boys and black men die. *Random* also offers a clear example of solo work which seems to owe more of its influences to popular performance traditions of rap, hip hop, spoken word poetry and music than a theatre focused on literature. Think Benjamin Zephaniah, Jonzi D's hip hop 'Feater', spoken word poets Sarah Kay, Inua Eliams, Kate Tempest, Aleshya Wise, as opposed to the plays of a Sarah Kane or a Steven Berkoff. Not that their words are not 'literary', if by that we mean finely placed, tough and precise. But they gather their meanings as much from rhythm and pace, melody and motion as they do from allusion and metaphor, and historical references. These wordsmiths speak about

pressing topics of the day, and use music, rhythm, and sound to bring world issues to diverse audiences.

And this is another particular feature of solo performance – as a highly useful platform for issue based, often autobiographical work. Explorations of gender identity, race or class abound, fictioning lives into being which have previously been overlooked, ignored, or erased in the mainstream canons calling themselves literature or art. Group pieces can and do engage in issue based work, but in solo work, one could argue that the stakes are higher. The audience is the receiver of the work – there are no ‘others’ on stage to dialogue with, to mediate the message, and so frequently direct address occurs, aimed at the audience. This intensifies the relationship between performer and audience and heightens their involvement.

Writers of solo performance face particular challenges. How to have multiple voices in the work, with only one performer available? How to change the dynamics and energies of the work? How to create conflict? For the solo performer, the situation offers both high risk and reward. She is charged with being ‘enough’ for one evening’s entertainment, to fill the performance space, to switch between multiple personas, energies and dynamics. Virtuosity is written into the contract. It is no surprise that it is a platform often used by emerging actors – the actor is highly visible, and the spoils are great if this particular minefield is danced through with aplomb. For the director, challenges can include negotiating successfully the particularly intense relationship that working with just the one actor can engender, as well as deciding on how much focus is given to other materials like image, music, objects or sound in the performance space

Solo performance is steadily growing in popularity, in the UK and internationally. The past fifteen years have seen the growth of organisations specifically focusing on solo practitioners and their work, as opposed to being an add-on to a fringe venue or event. Examples include the Centre of Solo Performance in London, the digital Solo Contemporary Performance Forum, numerous festivals like ‘Flying Solo’ in Manchester, ‘the One Festival’ or ‘United Solo Festival’ (New York). Economics has a part to play: it is relatively straightforward to both rehearse and produce solo work (you are never late for rehearsal) and we are operating in a climate of shrinking cultural resources. Solo working also exists in multiple genres, so is flexible and adaptable to change. Further to this, YouTube, Vimeo, and Instagram all provide fast access to multiple kinds of solo performed work for a young generation, and incorporate theatrical devices like direct address, monologue and autobiographical performance into blogs. The virtual performance space is well suited to the solo form. The general public now has access to the technology of social media, the means with which to write up their own lives, and perhaps more crucially, a ready ‘audience’ to notice what they do. Putting aside well justified arguments around the questionable quality of some of these outpourings, solo performance can and should ride this wave of enthusiasm. Solo professional work is moving from marginal to more mainstream venues, occupying virtual performance platforms, and becoming more popular with young people increasingly aware of their ability to create. If harnessed well, perhaps this appetite can be relocated into live theatre spaces, creating a demand for other vital works like Tucker-Green’s to be commissioned and produced.

