

## **Open your eyes: Working on Sit with me for a moment and remember**

Michael Pinchbeck

Dylan: Open your eyes. We are here now. We have always been here. You might not have noticed us. But we noticed you. You might not have seen us. But we have seen you.

Lydia: And we are smiling. We are sitting here next to you. We are sitting here for a moment. And we are remembering you. And we hope you remember us too. Because when we left this city we left you. And this bench is all we left behind.{note}]1

### **Breaking toys**

Sit with me for a moment and remember was originally a site-specific one-to-one performance presented in Derby, Leicester, Manchester, Nottingham and Sheffield between 2012-2015. Framed as an installation, it is designed as an encounter for one audience member at a time in a public place, a market square, a busy thoroughfare. The audience member is invited to put on a pair of headphones and listen to an audio recording about what it means to sit for a moment and remember. At a certain point in this audio recording they are invited to close their eyes for 10 seconds. When they open their eyes a performer sits next to them, turns to them and smiles. After the narrative takes the audience member on a journey through a busy city and how we remember, they are again invited to close their eyes for 10 seconds. At this point, the performer reaches out, touches the hand of the audience member, and disappears. When the audience member opens their eyes, they are alone again.

For this article, I reflect on a version of the piece I recently created with my children - - Dylan (9) and Lydia (6). A bench with a plaque reading Sit with me for a moment and remember is placed in a gallery and an encounter takes place. It is both a dedication to a loved one and an invitation to a stranger. The recording invites a moment of reflection and asks the gallery visitor to sit and remember someone or something. The text, spoken by my son and daughter, ghosts their mediated presence into the gallery. In this version there was no performer, only the audio

recording played on a loop. For this article, I consider how it performs their absence and, in doing so, evokes memories of childhood, through the voices of my children.

Tim Etchells, Artistic Director of Forced Entertainment, writes of the company's work, citing Baudrillard: "The child's first relation to its toy is: how can I break it?" I think we have this similar sort of relationship to theatre' (Billingham 2007: 169-170). When Dylan saw the installation with an i-pod velcro-ed to the bench he crawled underneath and tried to take it off. I asked Dylan why he did this and he said 'Because I was bored, I wanted to play on your i-pod'. I asked him whether he thought it was an artwork and he said 'I don't know'. I asked him to describe what we had made. I asked 'Was it a performance?' and he said: 'It was a waste of time'. Lydia described it as 'strange' and it is this 'making strange' of acts of remembrance that is made more possible by the children's voices reading the text. When I asked Lydia what she thought of hearing herself she said 'It was like listening to the past'.

This article unpacks the inherently unpredictable dramaturgy and post-dramatic 'toy-breaking' potential of working with children. I have interviewed them on the school run and at breakfast time and where cited they are speaking about their experience of both making the work and experiencing it at a gallery in Nottingham. This piece continues a thread of working with Dylan and Lydia on previous performances, The Beginning (2012) and The Middle (2013), where they recorded voiceovers. In all cases, as absent protagonists, their voices evoke and problematise the inherent dichotomy of presence and absence. Their voice, as Peggy Phelan writes about, 'performance's being', 'becomes itself through disappearance' (Phelan 1993: 146).

Daddy: How would you describe the bench piece in one word?

Lydia: Strange.

Daddy: Why was it strange?

Lydia: It was strange because it was kids speaking.

Daddy: Why are kids voices different to adult voices?

Dylan: Because children's voices will be clearer because they don't know that people who go to the gallery are going to listen to them. Adults and parents do know, they will know, that if they record their voices then people will listen so they will be more nervous. Children don't know. I mean you told us but we don't know how it sounds.

Daddy: What is the difference between the theatre and the gallery?

Dylan: In the gallery, you can walk around and look at everything. In the theatre like they show you stuff and you can't look at everything in the same way. If you go to the toilet in the theatre and you miss something then you can't see it again. If you go to the toilet in the gallery then you came back you would be able to see the same thing.

## **Making time**

I asked the children if they would like to be involved and they said yes. They took their time over reading the text before the audio recording and, after a short period of rehearsal, I pressed record. Birds sing in the background. There are moments when they hesitate or misread a word, or change the text to something they would rather say, or interrupt each other, or hit each other. The text is broken like Baudrillard's toy and their inherent child-ness comes into play. The text is rewritten, more theirs than mine, more childlike, more honest, more real, more them, less theatrical. As an artwork, it is unprofessional and imperfect, amateur in the sense that it is performed out of love. Much like Tim Etchells has described Forced Entertainment's devising process, 'the work... is finished, broken and you're picking it up and prodding it to see what can remain, what can be done with this' (Billingham 2007: 169-170). As David Williams writes: 'Let its seams, stitchings, flaws be visible - it is provisional, contingent, in process, ravelled and unravelling, human, imperfect, a made thing still being made' (Williams 2010, 201). We decided to leave these moments in, the interruptions and altercations, and 'let its flaws be visible' and it has been installed in a gallery twice, both as part of We Share Residency in Nottingham,{note}}2 an on-going artistic collaboration between parents and children, and the TaPRA Gallery 2017.{note}}3 The bench piece, like memory itself, is 'a made thing still being made'.

I took the children to see the exhibition after its installation in Nottingham and they spent time listening to their own voices, sitting on the bench and looking out of the window. Dylan enjoyed seeing the bench that usually sits in our back garden having been moved across the city and wondered how it got there. Lydia was excited about hearing her own voice and seeing the work in an exhibition. This iteration saw me record the text as a dialogue instead of a monologue for the first time. It is a dialogue between two children. A conversation between brother and sister. A conversation happening on the bench, either side of where the visitor is sitting, as if the children are sitting there too. They ask the visitor to close their eyes and imagine them. With this iteration, a new conversation has started. A conversation about memory, family and loss. A conversation that has informed much of my performance work to date.

Each time, the recorded voice is different but the text is the same; each time, the performer becomes both a stranger and a ghost, a living presence and a fleeting memory of someone or something the audience member has lost. The audience member is invited by the audio soundscape to read the plaque on the bench out loud to themselves, as both incantation and dedication. This utterance performs a kind of summoning ritual as it is the cue for the performer to make their entrance. Jacques Derrida considers how we might perform absence and, in doing so, evoke memories of presence. He writes 'Theatre is born of its own disappearance' (Derrida 1978: 233). In the bench piece, the appearance and disappearance of the performer enacts a moment of present absence: a loved one is found then lost; loneliness is replaced with togetherness and then returned to loneliness again. The bench piece speaks of commemoration and how we remember both as individuals and as a nation. On Remembrance Day, we traditionally stand for two minutes to remember the fallen. In recent times, we have stood to remember tragic events more often. Sometimes this silence is disrupted by the everyday. Birds sing in the background.

Daddy: How would you describe what we did?

Dylan: A recording.

Daddy: What would you say it was Lydia?

Lydia: An artwork.

Daddy: How could we make it better?

Dylan: More voices.

Lydia: More adult voices.

Dylan: That's what I just said.

Daddy: Can you remember what it says on the bench?

Dylan: Sit with me and...

Lydia: SIT WITH ME AND REMEMBER

Dylan: Don't shout Lydia.

Lydia: Sorry.

Dylan: Sit with me for a moment and remember.

## **Marking Loss**

Peggy Phelan writes about how 'Performance marks the body itself as loss' (Phelan 1993: 148 and 152). In the bench piece, the fragility and ephemerality of the children's voices somehow speaks of our own mortality. It asks how we might mark the unstoppable and irrevocable passage of time. As Guillaume Apollinaire wrote in Le Pont Mirabeau, describing himself standing on a bridge looking down at the River Seine, 'Les Jours S'En Vent, Je D'Emeure', roughly translated as 'The days fly by, I stay here' (Apollinaire 2014: 11). Sitting on the bench listening to my children's voices, I became even more conscious of the incongruity of being still in an act of contemplation, as the city moves around it. An accidental statue. An impromptu mannequin challenge. A private act made in public. A made thing still being made.

The choice to resist the flow of people, like the flow of the River Seine, or the flow of time, is rewarded by a personal encounter with the materiality of memory. The experience is different for each person to sit on the bench, remembering their children or their childhood. In this sense, it is a 'making familiar' of remembrance. As Matthew Goulish writes, 'Some words speak of events, other words, events make us speak' (Goulish 2000: 152). I take this as an instruction for making performance that only I can make; about stories only I can tell. It articulates an artist's impulse to make work about a significant event in their life. The bench piece, or more specifically, the text within it, manifests the words that those events made me speak. Unknown to the audience and unmentioned in the piece, they include the loss of a brother, the loss of a son and the loss of generations around me that made me consider my own relationship to time. I am standing on the bridge looking down at the river like Apollinaire. For the bench piece, where the experience is authored or 'authorized by the audience' (Bottoms 2009: 65-76), perhaps Goulish's quote could be rephrased to say 'Some words speak of loss, other words, loss makes us speak'.

It is important to note the technology used in the performance. There is a concealed ipod and a pair of headphones that cocoon the audience member in their experience of the piece. The technology allows them to be 'alone together' with the voices that they hear, as described by Sherry Turkle (Turkle 2011). Art critic, Wayne Burrows, who saw the piece, wrote this in response: '[it] carries very private reflections into a public space, and for all its intimacy offers a strangely contradictory experience, almost daring us to expose something of our inner lives to strangers around us, while keeping everything but touch itself perfectly hidden' (Burrows 2012).

In conclusion, by working with my children on this piece, I wanted to initiate debate about sharing personal stories, about what their voices could say about the materiality of memory and family. The next step would be to record the text with other voices, older voices, younger voices, voices with different accents, speaking different languages, to continue the conversation. Working with my children has enacted a new register for my work and beta-tested new ways of working. Put simply, it has enabled me to 'open my eyes' and re-embrace acts of remembrance. It has explored the axis of 'making strange' and 'making familiar' the ritual of remembering a loved one. It has enabled me to explore how Dylan and Lydia

perform the text without acting it, their child-ness, their 'not knowing-ness' creates a space where it feels more real. The bench is now back in our garden where I sit on it with my children and we talk about the piece we made. Birds sing in the background. And the plaque is starting to rust.

Daddy: What do you think that it is saying to an audience?

Dylan: Come here and bring back the memories.

Lydia: It's saying sit down and remember the past times.

Dylan: What do you think grown-ups remember?

Lydia: Their children.

Dylan: If they have any.

Daddy: What were grown-ups before they were grown-ups?

Lydia: BABIES.

Dylan: Children.

What was it like working together?

Lydia: It was good.

Dylan: It was a waste of time. [{note}]4

## References

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## Notes

1 Audio recording from *Sit with me for a moment and remember* (2017). Available to download here: <http://michaelpinchbeck.co.uk/sit-with-me-for-a-moment/>

2 We Share Residency, Lace Market Gallery, Nottingham (16-22 March 2017). An exhibition about working artist parents curated by Julian Hughes and Nicola Smith.

3 TaPRA Gallery, TaPRA, University of Salford (30 August – 1 September 2017). Curated by Dr. Alison Matthews. More information here: <http://tapra.org/tapra-gallery/>

4 Author interview with Dylan Pinchbeck and Lydia Pinchbeck (19 June 2017).