

THE EVOLUTION OF *WIT*'s PERFORMANCE-TEXT

The transposition of a work of art from one medium to another is most often an act of distortion if not outright disfiguration and despoilment. It rarely bestows any favours upon the original artist. If art-works had "rights", as all humans should, then medium-changes usually disregard, disrespect and trample upon them. All medium-shifts necessarily transport the original into a new environment, one frequently unfamiliar, unwelcoming, even hostile. Any novel may suddenly become caged, an animal in a zoo, a prisoner in an aquarium. It is now dispossessed, scrambled into exile, soul-robbed. These are all indignities, desecrations I could not possibly inflict when adjusting the text of a chapter from Sky Gilbert's novella *Wit in Love* (2008) into the springboard for DNA's eponymous performance installation (2009/10).

Of course not all media-shifts will result in face-lifts gone awry. Ravel's magnificent orchestration of Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* suffuses a black-and-white photograph with an exotic palette of vibrant colour - yet if familiar with the original piano composition one could effortlessly "hum along". You might feel this example inapt as the orchestral work is merely a different mode of expression, both versions of *Pictures* remaining in the realm of music. Very well, then. But do you really consider the bland omnipresent deracinated Muzak *music*? DNA most certainly could not etiolate *Wit*.

I have never understood this mania for transforming novels into films. If the book is mediocre, like *Valley of the Dolls*, why even bother? (Unless, of course, your key interest is to make a pile of money, never in my personal list of considerations for creating art.) If the novel is glorious, again, why bother? Did you really think you could "improve" on Dostoyevski's demoniacally mercurial *Crime and Punishment*? Did you imagine rendering public service? Did you find the novel excessively long, confusing and convoluted when some trimming and simplification would give greater clarity to what Dostoyevski meant to say? As a result, so many more people would "understand" this masterpiece. Is it possible your reasoning was the whole story could better be told in film and since that medium had not yet been invented ... In our Age of Incessant Busyness a two-hour film is a massive time-saver - never mind much easier on the eyes - considering the couple-dozen hours needed to read the 550-page opus. Besides, you would be relieving the audience of imagination-strain. Nineteenth-century St. Petersburg will look and sound exactly as it should; Raskolnikov will be dressed exactly as he should; he will drink his tea, tear at his hair, frantically dash about the canals, *prospekts* and *ulitsas* exactly as he should. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words.

It really is time to extinguish this miserable cliché - not so much because it is inaccurate but rather misleading. A simple words-phrase is equally capable of conjuring "a thousand pictures". Tell an audience of that magical thousand people - *the lithe, nimble, forlorn girl* - and a thousand wildly different mind-

images will soon form. Great novels are their own discrete worlds, gripping density-complexities incapable of being expressed in a few dozen pages. Via language-weaving and -massage they are meant to arouse and excite our uniquely personal sensibilities. They demand absorption, slowly and in real time. The only way to even hope for an acceptable replication of this process - as well as conveying the expanse of character-unfolding and experience-intensity - is by making a film of inordinate length, such as Fassbinder's 15-and-a-half-hour TV mini-series of Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. This explains why we felt about an hour would be needed to convey the essence of *Wit*-chapter's ten pages. And even then it was necessary to excise many, many words.

Great novels can certainly be made into fine movies. Yet the film, wonderful as it might be, positing an umbilical-cord connection, will not necessarily hew even close to novel's essence. The perfect case in point is *Lolita* - Nabokov's book, Kubrick's film. The author was invited to write the screenplay, which he did - only to have its 400 pages shrivel from film's estimated seven-hour length to a manageable two.

Until recently I had never understood Nabokov's appreciation, expressed in a *Playboy* interview - *I thought the movie was absolutely first-rate* - as it seemed incomprehensible to tolerate the disconnect between film and novel. Nabokov's *Lolita* revolves entirely around middle-aged Humbert Humbert's (H.H.) obsession with nymphets, certain little girls who flourish in the tiny window between ages twelve and fourteen, at which point they become devoid of interest, at least according to H.H. The girl in question, just before novel's start, was not quite four foot eight, weighing 78 pounds, with a "figure" of 27-23-29. Part of her school-vacation was spent in a summer-camp. *Lolita* was not so much a girl as a *child*.

Kubrick was faced with insurmountable obstacles - 1962's censors, Hollywood Production Code and Catholic Legion of Decency disallowing any whiff of pedophilia - thus obliging *Lolita*'s age to be fourteen, just when nymphets become "washed up", at least in H.H.'s mind. (Incidentally, a man of 40 who desires and has sex with a girl of 14 is *not* a pedophile?) Kubrick's *Lolita* ended up being Sue Lyon, a choice felt apposite as at the time she was 13, only a whisper older than Nabokov's prescribed age. But her specific age is *not* the point. Sue *looks* like a young woman, at least 16 in a bikini, but once given a sophisticated hair-do and her tall just-slim body adorned with a party-gown she looks like next year's debutante attending her graduation dance. A key consideration in casting was her breasts'-size - developed but not yet fully - as producer James Harris has been clear - *We knew we must make her a sex object - she [couldn't] be childlike*.

Leaving aside other blatant deviations - making H.H. seem in love when his mind was only sex-sodden; turning a hellish hotel-night into cheap burlesque

“comedy”; no hint of the poor girl’s anguish as she sobs herself to sleep every night - Kubrick has grotesquely mangled the novel’s central premise. As Nabokov has said - *Humbert was fond of “little girls” - not simply “young girls”. Nymphets are girl-children, not starlets and “sex kittens”*. The novelist’s title-character is the former, the cinéaste’s the latter. This betrayal pains me so intensely because of its spurious nature: those unknowing will note the screenplay was written by Nabokov and naturally assume the film faithful to author’s intent. Not only is it galling to have viewers arrive at this patently false conclusion but worse, once seen, many will not consider reading the original - thus countless people will never experience the subtleties, daring originality and wondrous word-play in one of last century’s most brilliantly-crafted novels.

There still remains the mystery of Nabokov’s high praise. It was only recently, upon again re-reading the novel, this time with A. Appell Jr.’s annotations, that I uncovered approbation’s circumstances. Apparently days before the official premiere Kubrick invited Nabokov to a private screening. That was when he found out mere snippets of his screenplay had been retained, the rest jettisoned. Mindful of Nabokov’s quasi-aristocratic upbringing in Tsarist St. Petersburg, his old-world courtly manners, one cannot imagine a furious tirade, neither a public nor face-to-face humiliating upbraiding. Instead he waited five years to speak his true mind, to literary cognoscenti, during an interview with *Paris Review* - *the film is only a blurred skimpy glimpse of the marvellous picture I imagined and set down scene by scene during the six months I worked in a Los Angeles villa. ... I do not wish to imply that Kubrick’s film is mediocre; in its own right, it is first-rate, but it is not what I wrote.*

He then went on, moreover, to insinuate into our minds what he called “the one pitiless Russian word” *poshlost*, meaning - *not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive. It is an amalgam of pretentiousness and philistine vulgarity - before elaborating - A tinge of poshlost is often given by the cinema to the novel it distorts and coarsens in its crooked glass. Kubrick, I think, avoided this fault in his version, but I shall never understand why he did not follow my directions and dreams. It is a great pity.*

If mangling, disfiguring and all other above-listed evils were not DNA’s intentions with *Wit*, then what exactly were they? Well, above creating an extraordinary experience, audacious, strange, surprising and unnerving, I wanted our heightened vivification to be as respectful as possible of Sky’s text - and yet be as “*real*” as possible. (Ezra Pound’s slogan was – *Make it new*. DNA’s is - *Make it real*.) Within that constraint I felt our imaginations could be put to fullest use in space design - an installation, the creation of which informs *Designs on WIT IN LOVE*, published in *Compulsive Acts* (2014) - and flagrant liberties could be taken with all aspects of theatrical performance (sound, lights, etc.). Before I

begin teasing out the route taken to arrive at the performance-text, it is necessary to say a few words about the novella, its author and our relationship.

Wit in Love takes the form of a journal written over six weeks by a troubled Professor of Logic, inspired by the great, probably-closeted, Ludwig Wittgenstein. The action takes place in Cambridge less than a year before the onset of the (for now, anyway) last World War. Wit is haunted by mixed feelings over his recently-died lover; he needs to let go and move on. We read his thoughts on existential questions; we follow a train of (mostly) irritations as he interacts with students, other professors, friends, family and random people. The turmoil of his thoughts renders him almost incapacitated - until he finally stops over-thinking, stops rationalizing and then, yes, falls in love.

Sky Gilbert is one of Canada's most versatile and influential artists. In 1979 he co-founded Buddies in Bad Times, our nation's first gay / queer theatre, and was its Artistic Director for 18 years. He is so prolific by the time you read this it will be out of date - but you can count on him being the author of over 30 plays (almost all of which he has directed), six novels, a couple of poetry collections and a memoir. He has also made nine films, is a highly-opinionated gay activist and in-your-face drag queen. Presently at University of Guelph he holds the Chair in Creative Writing and Theatre studies.

I have known Sky for well over thirty years; for much of that time we have been friends. He is a most generous supporter of artists, particularly those budding. DNA has been on the receiving end of his largesse for decades; detailing the extent of his unflinching encouragement consumes many pages of my work in progress, *The Magnificent Sky over DNA*. Very few have his degree of appreciation - and profound understanding - of our work.

An idea is Sparked

In very early 2008 I was peacefully enjoying the warmth and beauty of Costa Rica - reading, reflecting, so glad to be alone, away from DNA's seemingly-endless administrative duties.

Then, out of the blue, an email arrived from Sky - *I've just finished a novella, it's going to be published soon, I've based one of the characters on you, please read the chapter now, quickly, and tell me what you think. There might be a few people who might recognize you, I really want to be sure I am not unwittingly offending you.*

I wrote back - *Don't be silly, it's fiction, you write whatever you want, its only based on me. I refuse to read what you've sent me, please get me a copy when it's published and then I'll read the whole thing.*

So in late summer he dropped off *Wit in Love* - and I read it. "My" character appears so late I had forgotten all about it. But when I did get to that point, my attitude was nonchalant - *yes, right, that makes sense, that's way over the top, that's so accurate*. In other words, it all felt really familiar and did not have much impact on me.

Much of post-trip 2008 had been miserable; I was not feeling particularly social. Finally things took a turn for the better and shortly before Christmas I invited Sky over for dinner. We'd spoken on the phone a couple of times but had not seen each other for over a year. That had never happened before.

As usual, our conversation coursed over a wide range of topics - books we had read, new ideas about what to create next, our most recent irritations concerning arts councils - a typical dinner with Sky. During our evening together it never occurred to me we had not touched on his new book. As it was coming to a close he finally asked me what I'd thought of it as well as "my" character. I told him my reaction, which I just described to you.

And then the magic happened.

For some reason, I suppose to refresh my memory, I brought the book, opened it up to "my" chapter and started reading aloud. Right away Sky was bursting with laughter. Soon, so was I. After ten minutes of this I put the book down - *I think I want to do a show with this text, right here, in my kitchen*. My mind was racing. I was blurting out idea after idea. Sky was delighted; I was hyper-excited. The beginnings of a performance-installation were being conceived.

Since that dinner not a day passed without me thinking about this new idea. Did I *really* want to do it?

I shared the chapter with our then-Board President, Gregory Nixon. He liked it. I passed it on to DNA's Associate Artist, Magdalena Vasko. She also enjoyed it. Might she be interested in following up our last co-creation, SHE ALONE (2007), with a new work? Yes. Good. So we got started - right away.

And exit Sky. Once I had received permission to use his text and assured him I would not alter it save possibly reduce its length, his involvement entirely ceased. No questions, no requests for updates, no suggestions. In fact, it was a mirror of my attitude in Costa Rica - do whatever you need and then I'll have a look at it.

And what did he think of the performance? He laughed and laughed and laughed. And then ... he laughed some more.

The Presumptions

There can be no doubt Wit's character bears more than glancing semblance to Sky himself. The personage I had "inspired" was his brother. Before settling down to work there was no question I was to be the solo performer - a rather tricky prospect seeing I had zero experience (if we discount the regrettable years of my misguided quest to become a concert pianist). I was to portray three roles: Wit, his brother and the narrator (Wit). For a debut this was actually not at all a terrorizing prospect as in the very beginning we imagined me *reading* the text. When it slowly became apparent this was not a satisfactory option and I would have to perform without text's presence, I *did* become panic-gripped, eminently understandable seeing as memory-slips were high on my reasons-list for pianist-career abandonment. All this to say I remember text-adjustment being a purely intellectual pursuit, always meant to enrich the performance, never mindful I would one day be obliged to commit it to memory.

Right from the beginning we knew this concoction would take place in my sizable kitchen. This was so self-evident one cannot even call it a decision. The chapter's action takes place, almost exclusively, in the kitchen of Wit's brother (who, incidentally, is never given a name). No matter how fraught, the relationship between brothers is always intimate thus accentuating the need for a kindred venue. That the audience would number in the mid-teens was not a consideration - more important was the ability to make clear eye contact with everyone, to speak in normal tones with whispers audible. Most happily, Magda and I could create the installation in private, in leisurely fashion without encumbrances gifted by rules-bound arts-indifferent authorities one encounters most everywhere.

It also became clear early on, that even though *Wit* takes place some 80 years ago, we had no desire to go back in time and attempt era's replication. There was no need to do so. You will find nothing in *Wit* that could not happen today. In fact, the text is timeless - until people no longer live in houses, until taxis and trains disappear.

Down to Work

We began with a discussion about performance-length and soon decided we would need at least 45 minutes though it would be preferable to not go over an hour. This time-zone started when I opened my mouth and ended with my last word, including all pauses and activities. Considering time needed for initial audience "processing" (acceptance of engagement-rules); placement (people were brought in three at a time); acclimatization; post-performance bewilderment (is it really over?) and installation-details perusal, we had a run-time of approximately 90 minutes.

We also decided the overwhelming bulk of our audience would not have read Sky's novella. As a result, names like Arthur and Pyotor would not be familiar, carried no resonance. Besides, those characters had no impact on the chapter's narrative; they were momentary reflections in Wit's mind. As there was no reason to retain them, they were excised with one exception - the Neurotic, possessed of an all-telling nickname, such fun to "identify" him by pointing my finger at a surprised audience member.

I then typed up the entire one-paragraph chapter, leaving multi-line spaces after every couple of sentences in order to make notes. After reading it through aloud, it became clear the text would have to be shortened. Giving weight to certain words, letting them resonate, takes time. Time is also needed for the text to *breathe*. Every sentence then faced the same questions - is it essential? does it contain anything extraneous, not critical to the narrative or characters' nature? Over the course of the next months I kept slowly chipping away.

You talk like a book, Dad.

Lolita to Humbert Humbert

Wit is a piece of literature, its style literary. This presented a small problem for us. As you know, being as faithful as possible to the text was of paramount importance - yet it was inescapable I would be addressing a live audience. Fortunately enough, Sky's text contains no archaic language and few anachronisms so it was not difficult to nudge the text from the literary to the conversational - without losing speakers' literacy or "dumbing it down".

In the end I made the compromise - a very minor one - of keeping some "difficult" or unhelpful expressions and omitting a couple others. Thus, the Neurotic stayed "cognitively inhibited" and "neurally impaired" with the brother dressed in "jodhpurs". The house-entrance remained a "cramped, baroque vestibule". But we removed the notion Wit's being with his brother was a "psychic purging", that he "disembarked" from the train and his brother's arms were "striated".

Other simple alterations also made the literary more conversational. For example, while Wit prepares himself for the inevitable drama as his brother would have *discovered* something and would be in the midst of a dazzling revelation, he says - *I have never known him not to be*. That was changed to - *Always*. And some poor boy or girl - *glancing at my brother with an adoration more appropriate for stage or screen idols* - was transformed into - *looking at my brother with adoration, as if he were a movie star*. (But I did *not* add - *... like Brad Pitt*. That would have gotten a couple of laughs, perhaps, but it would have been wrong. It would have brought the audience into a *concrete* present as opposed to a *timeless* present.)

A few other strategies were employed to inject the conversational tone. I granted myself permission to repeat any word or phrase I wished. I did this rarely and it was always for text's empowerment (as well as amusement). For example, instead of saying the barber always took - *such a dreadfully long time* - it was so much lovelier to say - *and he takes such a long, long, long, looong time*. Again, instead of - *But the endless tweaking, standing back, and looking in the mirror* - the repetitive action was underscored - *But this endless tweaking, standing back, looking in the mirror, standing back, tweaking, looking in the mirror, standing back, tweaking ...*

I also created a list of words, calling them the *generics*. These words (and the very occasional phrase) in themselves had no particular significant meaning but contextually provided a wide array of functions. They served as excellent bridges - Sky has some pretty abrupt text-shifts, innocuous from a literary point of view but rather jarring when relating the story. At other times generics would simply help narrative's flow. Sometimes I would get purposefully lost in my own thoughts, ponder, enter my own private world (more on that later) and would need a word to spring me back to "reality". I might want to say a word to indicate I was mulling over a thought - or "thinking out loud". At times there was a need to emphasize or affirm something - to myself or an audience member. I can think of examples where a generic would stretch things out and "milk the moment" - or its repetition take the place of a pause.

I think it important to realize that - almost always - these were adlibbed. Yes, I would enjoy the use of a particular generic in a particular place and repeat it night after night. In general, however, this was a selection of words "in my back pocket", ready for use whenever the situation seemed to warrant it or at times I just felt like it.

Here now are a few examples - in sentences - of some generics I used on a regular basis. It is important to note that, as I write, this list is right in front of me, but I am going to formulate usage-examples as I go along. This is because I want to emphasize they are purely possibilities to illustrate the point, not necessarily duplicates of how lines were actually performed. The generic appears in bold aside Sky's actual text -

Now, I can't say why I needed to see him, ...

Right about this time I was still obsessed with the extravagant growth on my eyebrow ...

Wait. He considers himself an artist. **Yes**, an artist.

No, a scientist, **hmmm**, **yes**, a scientist of hair.

Alright, I pay the cabbie ...

And if he cannot get what he wants, well, he has a fit ...

Oh my god, I so wish he would stop saying things like my favourite brother ...

These generics, by themselves, might not seem of much significance - yet once intoned they can convey such a rich spectrum of emotion, from nonchalance to utter boredom to seething frustration to doubtful self-questioning.

Other minor alterations concerned elimination of nearly all contractions. Those remaining we hoped would contribute to text's naturalness or that context would not allow for misunderstanding. So "don't" became "do not", "can't" became "cannot", etc. This was to achieve greater clarity of communication. All too often I have experienced confusion caused by mumbling - not that I was ever going to mumble - or mis-hearing. And it can be a serious issue when we are dealing with direct opposites. Potentially unfortunate consequences arise if you hear - *I can see you tomorrow* - when - *I can't see you tomorrow* - was actually said.

Removing apostrophes often permits a greater range of expression as well as allows opportunity for added emphasis. For example, it is much more powerful to say - *I do not like haircuts* - than the more tame - *I don't like haircuts*.

I must make clear the text consisted of Wit recounting events interspersed with quotes from both himself and his brother. Characters' identity was never in question - when Wit regurgitated his own words, I always faced sharply left, where there was no audience. Wit's conveyance of his brother's words was directed in the opposite direction, again to "empty space". (When quotes were appended with *he said*, those two words were spoken carelessly, almost inaudibly.) So all the rest, the narrator's - meaning text's bulk - was aimed at audience members, not as a group, impossible as they faced me in a 230-degree arc, but rather to every single individual. Eye contact would continually shift from one person to another.

Another decision was to eliminate almost all descriptions of how characters speak. Had I uttered lines in the prescribed manner and then immediately announced that mode of speaking, it would have been not only superfluous but, after a while, tedious and annoying. Contrariwise, if I expressed a line in a way different from Sky's text, then stating that original way of speaking would have been incongruous and confusing.

Nevertheless, exceptions were allowed. At one point Wit opines - *I know the effect Schopenhauer has on you* - and his brother retorts - *Do you? he says, idiotically*. For me this was irresistible. It was too great a pleasure to say - *Do*

you? - in a perfectly straight way followed by the self-deprecatory - *he says, idiotically.*

Near the very end, as Wit is about to leave and volleys - *Excuse me.* The brother's response flashed - *Where are you going? he yelled.* I would say - *Where are you going?* - in a quiet, puzzled manner. But then, as loudly as possible, I shouted - *he yelled.* The effect was most startling. Throughout the performance I had never raised my voice. To hear me blast those words - and believe me, I can shout extremely loud - was stunning. Adding to the dynamics was Wit's next line - *It really was quite comical.* What a perfect foil!

What I have just described is a perfect example of disassociation, a technique we employed throughout the piece. For instance I wore formal-concert-tails and a schoolgirl kilt rather than the prescribed riding boots, jodhpurs and white nightshirt with long billowing sleeves. The cupboards were *not* overflowing. No wheel of Camembert made an appearance - though Parmigiano Reggiano did. There were not one, instead two candelabra, but *not* on the table. There were many more than three knives however they were plunged into the table, *not* the wall.

The above examples were clearly evident, all references to the text - but each palpably disconnected from the spoken narrative. We have now entered the aforementioned realm of "flagrant liberties".

Disassociation, in theatre, is manifested by distinct variants in the use - or substitution - of important principal elements. It can be the re-thinking, re-imagining of any given work's materials. Disassociation may be seen as a re-configuration - not a betrayal - of the essence of a play.

Purists will claim any changes to the original text or stage directions are a distortion of the author's intentions. They will also say the same with reference to contractions, omissions or additions. I say - *nonsense.* (*Pace, Mr. Beckett.*)

Time's passage brings change and alters perceptions, meaning and impact. Standing in a field, in 1910, watching a man drive an automobile is utterly different from seeing, today, a woman whiz by in a flashy sports model. How easy to forget homosexuality - until only recently, say, 40 years ago - was considered an illness, a mental disorder, by Western world's medical profession. Once a certain amount of time has gone by it is no longer possible to perceive any work of art in the light of its actual creation.

I should point out, however, that disassociation is different from modernization. The latter simply tries to update the past. Think any Shakespeare play in 21st Century clothes. Modernization, in theatre, is merely old works' presentation in contemporary guise with superficial trappings.

A different modernization-species occurs with situation-shifts to an era closer to ours, for example a first World War play that now purports to take place, say, in Vietnam. Granted, there are differences between Frenchmen toiling in a German POW camp and Americans languishing in a Vietcong jail. However this seems merely a re-contextualization in hopes today's audience might better be able to "identify" with events more recent, a time more familiar. But disassociation this is not - unless other re-considerations penetrate that rather simplistic veneer.

Why attach such importance to disassociation? Well, the slavishly literal is often boring and stale whereas disassociation may excite the mind, stimulate the senses. When a conflict exists between what is described and what is seen, a sharper sense of awareness may arise. When puzzle-pieces do not neatly fit together, questions are raised, not answers provided. Doubt is cast over accuracy, even text's veracity. Uncertainty wobbles confidence. The stage is now set for the unpredictable. Now theatre has the potential of being stimulating, challenging. Otherwise - what's the point?

Just a moment ... just a sec ... wait another ...

DNA has always been fond - some would say overly fond - of pauses, gaps of time when seemingly "nothing" happens. Not that we needed justification but it was still gratifying to discover our protagonist shared the same affliction, reaffirming our need to lessen words-numbers.

Wittgenstein was apparently notorious for conducting pause-studded lectures. Any given stoppage could last a minute, two minutes, three minutes, four minutes. These may not seem particularly long times, but in the context of a professor imparting "wisdom" they are nothing less than tension-mounting, disconcerting silences.

As Ray Monk explains in his well-written exhaustive biography, *Ludwig Wittgenstein - The Duty of Genius* (1990), the philosopher did not arrive with a well-prepared plan he would then execute. (Actually it would be more accurate to call these sessions *seminars* as they were conducted in his personal quarters with small groups of students, another similarity to DNA's venture.) Instead, Wittgenstein would toss out ideas for consideration and discussion, ideas that had been churning about in his mind or had just occurred to him. He was not out to "prove his point" but challenge ways of thinking, thought-process' means. So, peculiar and unsettling as they may have been, these pauses - even during conversations - were not mysterious at all. Wittgenstein was just thinking.

A far larger issue, however, is at hand here: permit me a pause-paeon.

We live in an age of visual assault, aural bombardment. Not for a split second may the eyes be allowed to rest, not for two moments may the ears be graced

with silence. Television and film are media most efficient at producing this suffocating barrage, however some curious mania of forcing most everything to proceed at rapidest pace possible is increasingly a mainstay of "mainstream" theatre. A crucial tenet: audience-attention must never be allowed to flit and flirt - it must always be fixed on the specific, desired action on stage. The director's job is to make sure something is always "happening" and, moreover, designers must assist in ensuring the audience will, in fact, look where they are supposed to. If action lags it must somehow be corrected, otherwise we are in the midst of a "dead spot". I suppose all this is taught in schools - but how would I know? I have never attended an Institute of the Dramatic Arts.

In any case, my idea of theatre is inimical to what I have just outlined.

Pauses, of multi-hued durations, are critical to all DNA productions. They allow spectators moments to taste and digest, if not savour, what has just happened. They give the mind freedom to roam - wherever it wishes, whether this meandering is in relation to the piece in progress or not. Instead of being constantly fixated on the "action", elisions allow attention-diversion. Vacancies open up possibilities to feel more deeply, give time to dart or plunge into your thoughts. Reverberations, resonances may be revealed or heightened. Pauses are cool sorbets between main courses.

You can put down a book anytime you wish and go for coffee. Not so in theatre. Pauses allow for consideration, for contemplation. They permit art to breathe, bestow justice to the text. You now have space to consider that character's obstinacy, the other's quirkiness. In the programme-note I thanked Sky - *for writing such a gloriously complex, convoluted, contradictory tormented text*. It jumps all over the place. Tenses continually oscillate. The story of Wit's visit is told in correct event-sequence - but is constantly juxtaposed with other concerns. Story-lines run simultaneously. The barber-visit is injected with ruminations on people's thinking-processes, paradoxes of language and scientists' misplaced pride. The discussion of Schopenhauer's philosophy is interspersed with offerings of wine and cheese, revelations about Wit's austerity versus his brother's extravagances, the irritation caused by his continual references to Wit being his *only* brother, his *favourite* brother. Thrown off balance, pauses permit bearings-regaining. Your mind is now allowed to go blank, letting you recover, thereby refreshing you. Focus-breaks ready you for the next burst of attentiveness and thus have potential to sharpen your mind and senses.

In fact, in order to set the tone, DNA's WIT began with a giant pause. When everyone was in place and kitchen door locked - yes, locked - the audience had to wait quite some while before I spoke. This was not just a cap-tip to the philosopher's idiosyncrasy. For myself, it permitted studied drawing-completion, the potential of squeezing out its highest composition-level. The light was dark - in sharp contrast to "processing"-room's white brilliance. During this time the audience's eyes were allowed to adjust before wandering all over the room to

discover its peculiar arrangements and the cornucopia of detail therein contained.

You are a Homosexual

Words tend to have greater immediacy and impact when spoken directly to a person. Proximity has greater potential of drawing one in; facial expressions immensely enrich words. When the President addresses his nation on TV the resultant effect is he appears talking to specifically you. A thousand-mile gap has been erased. Whittling away at Sky's text I was always aware it would all be delivered at particularly close quarters. Every word had to count.

WIT's intimacy meant most of the audience was within 12, none further than 20-odd feet away from me, all visible to each other. I didn't move around much during the performance, but when I did, there were moments I was inches away from audience members. Some were even physically touched.

Needless to say, this is not "normal" procedure in theatre. The effect on people is utterly dependent on their personality and how they are feeling at that moment. "DNA veterans" are, of course, quite used to these circumstances. First-timers, though, may find the heightened proximity to be anywhere from engaging and thrilling to embarrassing and intimidating.

Other audience-challenges were more profound: patrons were confronted face to face. Confrontation is not necessarily threatening, however it is always direct and personal.

Early on, when Wit spoke about not being sure why he felt this need to visit his brother, I tossed it into the air, made it an invitation to a response. I would stare at one person, then another. No matter what the reaction, I would shrug - *I can't say why I needed to see him. I just did.*

A little later, referring to the Neurotic, I would point to a male in the audience, insinuating him as that character. I would then involve him in my analysis of his personality. Not changing the text I spoke in a questioning manner: was it correct to call him "neurally impaired"? was it accurate to assume his "cognitive inhibition"?

When I attributed the barber's taking "such a long time" to be an indication of his artistry, if I saw an audience member smile, I would turn to her - *I see you are smiling. Yes, an artist.*

After stating Wit's brother lived alone I would ask - *Why?* - and fix my eyes on someone for as long as even ten seconds. By the end there might be no

response (*how should I know?*), a palms-turn-up indicating ignorance, or - *I don't know*. When I explained he could not keep servants, I would repeat that almost-glare - *Why?* And again, I waited aggressively for a response from one specific person - and then inform him of my brother's merciless nature, his constant mind-changing, etc.

Another example, almost always - nothing was carved in stone, it depended on the audience, my mood - occurred in the Freud section where I would single out some sweet person, suddenly point at him and enlighten - *Because you are a homosexual*.

Before I detail the final machinations needed to wring the performance-text to its apex I need to detail a few circumstances and why they infuriate me. My frustration stems from having arrived at this acme yet being utterly unable to prove it. I do my best to neither dissemble nor self-aggrandize but everything I write about DNA I like to be able to back up with aural and/or ocular proof. There are so few who witnessed what I am to talk about so you have no choice but to accept my word - or not. You should, however, have faith that Magda, part of every performance, would revolt were I to publish anything indisputably misaligned or incorrect.

WIT IN LOVE's first incarnation occurred pre-Christmas 2009 where the installation was inspired but my performance could only be called acceptable. I was insecure; victory each night was defined by melt-down's absence; I may have appeared comfortable and assured whereas negative inner tension was ever present. This all may be judged by viewing archival video.

Theatre Centre's *Free Fall '10* run took place five months later and while the installation revealed delicate improvements, my own performance was of an entirely different order. In the intervening months I did not permit the text a vacation; one might say it became ingrained, a part of me. I came to feel command over the material; it became a plaything, a clay-lump agreeably subject to my moulding. This resulted in a distinctly higher level of confidence - never overconfidence - allowing me a new degree of control. I was now able to shift gears with ease while being more attentive, receptive and responsive to everything around me.

What irks me to no end is documentation's lack of this infinitely superior version. Henry Sansom made the aforementioned archival video; now he wanted to follow up with a post-production film. Instead of shooting directly after Closing, however, he fell ill; filming was delayed almost three weeks which obliged me to live within the installation and go through the arduous daily routine of keeping the text afloat.

Filming itself was considerably more trying than I had ever imagined. Henry had managed SHE ALONE in a single take; I was never told he wanted to shoot me first from one angle, then another, then yet another - and not even complete sections, rather five sentences here, repeat, repeat, repeat and then the next couple of lines. The tedium was mind-numbing; continually turning on focus only to shut it down moments later was not only annoying but draining; the continual repetitions made me think of Wit-barber's endless tweaking, standing back, looking in the mirror, etc.

This shoot-process was utterly unlike what I had worked on all those months, namely a non-stop performance from beginning to end. Not only was I mentally unprepared but completely inexperienced in serving up the continuity constantly expected of me. When we resumed filming next day, me exhausted, I remember begging Henry to at least *begin* with a complete take of each of the remaining fourteen chunks I had divided the text into before fiddling around with whatever else his fancy called for. That way he could be assured of at least a decent scene-sequence, angles and close-ups be damned. He acquiesced - but only to a degree. Those "chunks" soon became divided into sections of increasingly shorter duration.

I'm sure the end product would have been fine - I was ultimately still in good form, compliant as best possible, fighting reasonably successfully through aggravations, devoid of tantrums. I suppose the only positive aspect of the whole experience was realizing what a grinding ordeal it is to play a major film-role requiring weeks or months of shooting. For the first time I understood why stars demand multi-millions for the pleasure of being put through such torment. It is so easy for a director to announce - *Let's do it again!* - yet so much more demanding for the actor to consistently remain in character, sustain energy, duplicate mind-set and emotion-level. (Incidentally, while shooting *Lolita* Kubrick quickly realized Sellers' first takes were always the best so he arranged for all his scenes to be shot simultaneously from multiple angles. Lucky Peter! Henry, of course, had no budget, his crew consisted of Magda whereas I had imagined her role would be to succour *me* ...)

I think you can sense where this story is going. After six months I asked how it was coming along - *Fine. Some sections need studio-work.* Might Magda and I see a few snippets? - *No.* That I understood as one who despises workshops, both others' and the rare occasions when demanded of DNA. I feel so strongly work should be presented to the public *only* when truly ready, not in some larva/pupa stage and most certainly not to solicit audience feedback in order to make it more "accessible" or "friendly". I maintain - *Have a vision, develop it to its fullest extent and then show it.*

Finally, over a year later, Henry found the courage to tell us he'd not made a back-up and there was a problem with the original hard-drive. We wondered - *Could anything be salvaged, did any footage still remain?* He took the drive somewhere for retrieval. Months later we inquired about its status. It turned out

no progress had been made; the guy was terribly busy; Henry did not have a good “feeling” about the retrieval-place. More months later we heard exactly the same story. In desperation DNA wrote him a cheque for \$500 - though he had been clearly told we would not cost-contribute - and told him to get the drive to a reputable business. He said he would, next week.

Ultimately I have no idea of truth's degree in what I've recounted, other than becoming increasingly bewildered as the normally frank, personable, confiding Henry had molassed into dissimulations' and evasions' fog. After who-remembers-how-many-more-months later I finally reached wits' end dealing with this “passive aggression” and recruited Magda - *I can't deal with this any more. It's now your responsibility. Find out what is really going on. I don't even care any more if there's a film or not. I just want this saga to end. Now. Magda's report? - Henry says the drive is completely dead. Nothing can be recovered. Zero. There will be no film, not even tiny sequences for a personal record. I succeeded in not erupting - That is the worst news possible. What about our \$500? And not that I really care, but what exactly happened?* Magda always retains calm in hopes of diffusing my anger - *I asked him to explain but he said he wanted to tell you directly, in person.* That was over two years ago. Henry lives a 10-minute bike ride away. He has my phone number and email address. I have never heard from him again.

Forgive the digression; it was written solely in selfish interests to possibly make me feel better; I am not sure it succeeded; I swear to now continue and stay on track.

Earlier I promised to revisit not directing text at anyone but myself - “thinking out loud”, trying to re-imagine moments of that contentious evening. At those times my text would be launched at tulips-vase, air, knives, table-top, anywhere except audience-members. Here I must express gratitude to Gregory Nixon, who watched performances from the earliest to the last one. He gave very few recommendations - though all significant and apposite. Most importantly he suggested, after the first run, that while performing I conjure up and relive what I was about to speak of - yet another useful pause-function. And so I began to try figuring out, in real time, what circumstance's accuracy was, sometimes in my mind, other times out loud.

My audible wonderings, for example, might have resulted in - *Personal relationships, in general, were ... what? - Uninteresting? Insignificant? Impenetrable? Or confusing, inconsistent, irrelevant - whatever would spring to mind before landing on the correct - too petty and demeaning to concern my brother.*

The knives'-purpose in the wall (actually the table), was to stimulate - *what? - Unease? Conversation? Fear? Or fascination, wonder, make a philosophical statement?* - before denying any explanation, commenting only on their beauty.

During the first run I would state - *Language makes us all the same but it also makes us different. It is a paradox.* The last sentence was often spoken almost blithely, with a shrug. In the later version I often waited before that line in order to contemplate. Only after some consideration would I come to the conclusion it was indeed *a paradox* - and then say so. But then I might continue thinking about it, trying to solve that "paradox"-riddle - without ever being able to do so. Alright, time to move on, continue telling the story.

The first time around one would hear Sky's precise text - *my brother is always succinct, precise and direct; one of the few things I love about him.* In the next run I might well hesitate after "direct" and actually think - and then, yes, come to the realization that indeed these *were* among the few things I loved about him.

All the above delineate the critical difference between "reciting" statements and sharing realizations of the moment.

Feverishly Trying to Remember

During WIT's second incarnation I took the principle of speculation to an entirely different level, one that has concerned thinkers for as long as people have lived: the nature of memory. How does it work; how (un)reliable is it; how do we dredge up - if we so wish - whatever some believe remains forever stored in our minds?

I began deliberately wondering aloud about the accuracy of characters' memory, mulling things over, trying to ascertain narrative's reliability - *Now what exactly happened next? Did I or did I ...? My brother ... or did he instead ...? What did I say at that point? No, I don't think I said anything at all, I think I just frowned.*

At other times uncertainties contrasted with absolute confidences. During the evening's penultimate part, for example, Wit unmistakably saw that large knife lying on the piano; his brother without question displayed self-inflicted arm-scabs; Wit increasingly realized the whole evening was his brother's carefully planned martyr-like set-up.

I have no doubt those memory-questionings - in contrast to other events' crystalline certainty - gave the performance a new dimension nudging it ever closer to reality.

It is important to remember I was relating a long vinous evening's events, a particularly fractious meeting with my brother. Think listening to a friend

recounting last week's turbulent fight with her boyfriend. How on earth is one to remember every last detail, the order of the events, the precise words spoken? In such an outpour, we repeatedly hear - *So last Tuesday, no that was on Wednesday ...* - and - *Just after telling me what a lousy cocksucker I was, no, he started by complaining about my "indifference", whatever that means, and then out comes the cocksucking tirade. Useless. Hopelessly fucked. That's me. At least according to him.*

People often do not converse in proper sentences with correct syntax. We frequently talk shorthand. No wonder I sometimes spoke in incomplete phrases, grammatically incorrect sentences, correcting myself - or not - as I went along. Such imprecisions, inaccuracies and confusions reflect our true modes of expression - a reflection of the "reality" in which we live our lives.

Yet a beautiful brutality is contained in all this - Artaud might call it "cruelty". On Closing Night, Henry was essentially out of view so he could scribble notes for future filming. At performance's end, he privately approached Magda and quietly wondered - *Did Hillar lose his place a couple of times and get confused about where he was?*

Magda, my co-creator, my anchor - she knew. And smiled.

As it happened, the Free Fall version was eligible for Doras (Toronto's version of Tony Awards) and a number of jurors attended. A few friends who stayed around for post-show drinks expressed the feeling - to my surprise - I had now attained a level of skill, control, even mastery, that a nomination for Outstanding Performance was not out of the question. Well, it never happened - and I'm not suggesting it should have. In the final analysis I ended up sabotaging myself: along with fractured syntax no doubt those very calculated muddlings were precisely what did me in. After all, how can one highly praise a performer when he's seemingly floundering, grip-less, through a performance as though in a grimy viscous haze?

And now to conclude with an exquisite irony. Through inescapable necessity I was forced to ram that thorny text-thicket into my aging, polluted mind. And even when following my ritual of talking through the text once in the morning, once in the afternoon and then one last time, to Magda directly pre-setup, the performance was always a gamble. One would never know which part would collapse or magically evanesce. The victory, the first time around, was just, somehow, arriving at the end without complete collapse, without abject deliquescence. And then - in the end - to have arrived at apotheosis via expressing unreliable, dislocated memory, that quintessential human fallibility?

Delectable, no?

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As we lumber - or should I say scud? - into the 21st century, our world has become enshrined in visual overload. A perfect example is television news.

A screen-corner icon identifies the channel. Another, larger, logo reinforces channel's identity - as though one needs a constant reminder of channel-choice. A box with shifting text will elucidate the viewer with names of announcer, programme, subject-matter, a quote just uttered. A text-conveyor-belt in continual motion. Another screen-section tells you what time it is along with latest stock-index quotes. A line at the bottom informs you - in a loop - of news not presently presented by the announcer. A perpetual pulsating update.

In fact, we have transcended ordinary "news" - there is only *breaking* news. And it must always be accompanied by explosions of colour, graphics and sound. It must blink, flash and throb. Drumbeats, burbling crescendos, sound-effect staccatos. Clatter atop clutter.

All various boxes must never be still. A coloured line must continually be in motion, encircling them. Somewhere else on the screen we must have in-and-out fades of varying colour-shades. Still images must be rapidly flashed at you, whooshed in and out or dissolved and replaced by means of pyrotechnical pixilations.

To complement all these dynamics, suave ectoplasmic phantoms intertwine and transmute forming a continually-mutating background to the face of someone speaking, an ostensibly soothing accompaniment to the Important Person's thoughts. Non-stop fluidity of images contrasting concrete words.

It is a visual assault, an aural bombardment. Not for a split second may the eye be allowed to rest, may one's attention be allowed to wander.

Television and film are media most efficiently producing this kind of barrage. This mania of forcing most everything to proceed at the most rapid pace possible is a mainstay of "mainstream" theatre. A crucial tenet seems to be the audience's attention must never be allowed to flit and flirt - it must always be fixed on the specific, desired action on stage. The director's job is to make sure there is always something "happening" and, moreover, designers must assist in assuring that the audience will, in fact, look where they are supposed to. If action lags it must somehow be corrected, otherwise we are in the midst of a "dead spot". I suppose all this is taught in schools - but how would I know? I have never attended an institute of the dramatic arts.

In any case, my idea of theatre is inimical to what I have just outlined.