

A detailed critique of Karla Shacklock's *The Buttercup*, from a phenomenological perspective.

Introduction

The Buttercup was billed alongside Clerke & Joy's devised theatre piece *Volcano* and Low Profile's *Three Short Essays* as part of Two Destination Language's platform, FLINT, (30/10/2013), The Point, Eastleigh. In a billing of emotive or interactive pieces, Shacklock's interdisciplinary solo performance with live music by Caspar Riis and lighting by Matt Graham used elements such as autobiography, object play and speech combined with contemporary dance. Karla Shacklock Company's aim is to find "authenticity" and "truth" in performance in order to "allow our audience to have an experience, to feel, to be with us rather than to sit back and watch us", (Shacklock 2013: Tour Pack). As Phenomenology calls on the notion of the piece existing only in the moment of the live performance, Shacklock's intentions of truth and authenticity in performance create a lived experience in that moment for both audience and performer which will be described in a pre-reflective manner; a "descriptive analysis" revealing "felt meaning" over "definitive knowledge". (Sheets-Johnstone 1979:5)

Stanton B. Garner Jr, sees phenomenology's aims as: To redirect attention from the world as it is conceived by the abstracting, 'scientific' gaze (the objective world) to the world as it appears or discloses itself to the perceiving subject (the phenomenal world); to pursue the thing as it is given to consciousness in direct experience; to return perception to the fullness of its encounter with its environment. (Fortier 2002:37)

Therefore, what follows is a description of Shacklock's performance in terms of the audience's encounter with it, how the experience was felt and how Shacklock achieved this using autobiography, speech, object play and the Lived Body.

Phenomenological Description

In concerning the critique of *The Buttercup* with "how the world appears (as phenomena), to the humans who encounter it", (Fortier 2002:38), my personal response to the event as a whole will be described alongside Shacklock's performance drawing on particularly evocative moments. The opening section saw Shacklock manipulate a sheet of black plastic. This section was slow moving with no speech. As Shacklock tentatively took each step, balanced on two feet and one hand, she slowly extended beneath the bundle of plastic which weighed her down- the weight of the world on her back, (see figure 1). Her hunched stance felt uncomfortable and I felt claustrophobic, anxious for the piece to move on. The frustration of waiting for it to progress made the sense of relief when it did more effective. Her charisma and humour as she began to speak was felt and enjoyed in juxtaposition to the slow dark beginning.

As Shacklock spoke, the experience immediately became a transaction or conversation between us. I laughed at her humour, became anxious as she repeated her words until their

meaning changed from light-heartedness to despair. The yellow of her washing up gloves was refreshing against the stark setting, as was her smile and personality. At this point, Shacklock the human was introduced, wearing her heart on her sleeve, disarmingly honest, vulnerable, fiery and funny. This section felt as though Shacklock's emotions were being shared openly and genuinely, they felt real for her. As the piece progressed and Shacklock discovered the buttercup growing in the "shit", I experienced excitement with her and a sense of reassurance that I was not alone, both in the moment of the performance and in my own life experiences that related to the aspects of autobiography, (Shacklock in performance 2013). It was a shared experience and one that, having described in terms of the instant effect it had on myself as an audience member, will now be applied to notions of the lived body, object play, autobiography and speech in order to explore how Shacklock made this a shared phenomenological experience.

Object-play

The use of object-play was a predominant feature throughout *The Buttercup*, determining movement choreography, creating visual images and *tableau vivant*, and being transformed into different things as part of the narrative. The ordinary, everyday objects; black plastic evoking bin-liners, marigold washing up gloves, and watering cans made Shacklock and her story accessible, and down to earth, they were normal familiar objects creating an image of Shacklock as Everywoman. It felt dirty, gritty and part of normal life and less of an idealised facade. The marigold gloves were slapped, stretched, inflated, tied together to form a hat and carefully placed in the pile of black plastic to form the Buttercup growing in the Shit, (see figure 2). As she "ran in the rain", Shacklock emptied a watering can of rice in a spiral on stage, she then stood tall beneath the can, showering in the rice in a state of ecstasy, (Shacklock in performance 2013). Shacklock retraced her steps, spiralling the stage following the path of rice. She used expansive, circular arcs and lunges in a careful and tentative manner. The movement of someone exploring, searching and growing gradually in confidence. As she threw rice above her head and felt it fall on her body and settle around her, Shacklock was positioned with bent knees, inwardly focused with soft arms one extended to the side, one bent at the elbow, (see figure 3). This invoked an image of waiting, watching and self-discovery like the classical sculpture of Discobolus on the precipice of movement, (see figure 4). The object-play added to the phenomenological experience by bringing tangible games and images to the stage, the imagined world of Shacklock was transformed into real time and space in front of the audience.

Autobiography

Dispersed within the visual montages and dance phrases, autobiographical events gradually unfolded, revealing a set of experiences that ran high on drama and emotion. For example, as Shacklock played with a pair of marigold washing up gloves, the phrase "this is great isn't it"

was repeated continually as she flapped and flung the gloves between her legs and about her body, (Shacklock in performance 2013). Her movements became more frantic and frenzied building towards a climax as her speech became faster and more desperate and the slapping of the marigolds more violent and uncontrolled. A tension existed between flagellation and sexual arousal. This section reflected the idea of a cleansing ritual evident in the piece as a whole. The high tension and emotion changing from playful to ecstatically desperate and devastated were not symbolised or described, but lived by Shacklock on stage. By reliving her autobiographical experience Shacklock rid herself of these emotions like a ritual. For the audience, these emotions were lived empathetically, laughing at the games and crying at the darkest moments. Furthermore, in relating the events of her story to my own past I lived an experience with Shacklock and at the same time relived my own emotions triggered by my own memories. These layers of lived experiences were particularly affecting to myself as an audience member as Shacklock spoke: “I went running in the rain and I cried”, she ran, encircling the stage space, (Shacklock in performance 2013). The rice, poured out of watering cans spiralled on the stage floor and poured over her head, created a heavy shower that both cleansed Shacklock and muddled the image on stage, evoking a draining sense of exhaustion after intense exercise or high emotion, (see figure 5). The use of autobiography here made the event a more authentic expression of emotion rather than a mere representation, which in turn, compelled myself as an audience member to respond in emotive ways.

The use of Speech in Performance

The use of speech throughout the performance created a conversation between Shacklock and the audience. It contributed to the tangibility of the event and engaged the audience more directly. Additionally, hearing Shacklock’s voice and watching her facial expressions made for a personal and honest interaction. The speech was delivered in vignettes using extreme emotion, repetition, and story-telling.

Phenomenology’s primary concern is with the engagement in lived experience between the individual consciousness and reality, which manifests itself not as a series of linguistic signs but as sensory and mental phenomena-the ‘world’ is what we encounter in perception and reflection. (Fortier 2002:41)

In this case the use of spoken language adds to the lived experience not by delivering signs or codes to be read but by engaging the audience in a real conversation where authentic feelings were exchanged between Shacklock and her audience. “Language effects the individual’s engagement with the world” (Fortier 2002:41), and in this case speech brought the audience closer to Shacklock’s created experience.

A Durational and Transformative Experience

The felt experience of *The Buttercup*, was perceived as a durational event happening in real

time and space. The speech, object-play and autobiographical vignettes contributed towards a real event where Shacklock lived real emotions. By the end of the performance something was different or transformed. She had rid herself of her memories and despair and found hope. This occurred as part of the process of living and performing the event. The idea of transformation; of the glove to the buttercup, desperation to hope, trapped claustrophobic movements to expansive traveling phrases could only occur through the duration of the event. We would not experience the hope and excitement at the end if the washing up glove had not been transformed into the buttercup and if we hadn't experienced the despair at the beginning. Therefore the experience of the lived body for both performer and audience member is that of the phenomenological whole reliant on the duration of the piece existing only then in that moment.

The Lived Body

Essential to the phenomenological experience discussed above aided by autobiography, object-play and speech used in a transformative, durational manner, is the notion of the Lived Body. "Guarner quotes the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who wrote, 'To perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body' (p27) and refers to 'lived bodiliness' (1994:28)", (Fortier 2002:49). The perception of the event occurs through consciousness but is not necessarily separated from the body. The spectator's felt response occurs as they are conscious of the event, experiencing it through the lived body. The notion of the lived body as defined by Sondra Horton Fraleigh combines existentialism and phenomenology: "A phenomenological (or lived) dualism implicates consciousness and intention and assumes an indivisible unity of body, soul, and mind", (1996:4). Fraleigh's notion of the lived body, allows meaning and emotion to be experienced by both body and mind, (rather than separating them, rendering the body as subordinate). The "lived body as a concept is a positive view, because the philosophers who developed the concept view the body as meaningful (Merleau-Ponty, Marcel, and to some extent Sartre) and innately purposeful (Ricoeur, Hans Jonas, and others)", (Fraleigh 1996:4). This applied to dance allows the dancer to perform as the lived body, experiencing the event through their own senses, creating a purposeful experience for the audience member who in turn perceives the event through their own lived body. Existentialism's emphasis on the individual's experience of meaning allows the ambiguity of performance to create an authentic lived experience for performer and individual audience members. Shacklock discusses truth and authenticity in her work; "when the performer exists truthfully and authentically in the present moment of consciousness, the audience can also exist truthfully and authentically in the present moment of consciousness". "This allows for performer and audience to exist together, neither party anticipating what might happen, nor reflecting on what has just happened" (Shacklock 2013(a):3). The coexistence of audience and performer in the event, living individual experiences occur as a result of the experience perceived in and felt by the lived body discussed above.

Conclusion and the State of Beyond

The notion of the Lived Body in performance relates to Shacklock's process of choreographing and performing in the state of "Beyond" which is evidenced in the *The Buttercup*. Shacklock discusses her practice placing emphasis on "the performer and their consciousness"; "a practice concerned with truth, authenticity, being in the present and going beyond", (2013 (a): 1). She seeks to define the state of Beyond that encompasses her practice, looking at notions of the "Self", stripping back to a neutral existence without pre-judgement or personae; "Transformation", into another version of the Self; the performance existing only in "Present time"; "Real feelings or Truth", as a "higher conscious of thought", and "Storing and reassessing experiences", that allows them to reoccur whilst still existing in the way that they emerged. (Shacklock 2013 (a))

Transformation into another version of the self in performance, the idea of the event only existing in the moment and real feelings relate to the phenomenological forming and performing of dance. The performance of *The Buttercup*, existing in that moment in time created a lived experience for both performer and audience member using those methods. The experience of real emotions and authenticity through the lived body have been outlined above from the perspective of the audience member and Shacklock's research seeks to provide a choreographic and performance process that is true to the phenomenological experience, seeking her state of "Beyond". Parallels can be drawn between Shacklock's state of Beyond and Constantin Stanislavski's approach to theatre, against merely "going through the motions", (Fortier 2002:49). Regarding his method of acting; "'the actor passes from the plane of actual reality into the plane of another life' (p466); the actor creates life and 'the feeling of truth' (p467)", (Fortier 2002:48). Although Shacklock's state of "Beyond" relates to another version of the self and Stanislavski's relates to another character entirely, both draw on autobiographical experiences to reach an experience of the lived body. Phenomenologists "call for in our relation to the world and ourselves, and 'emotional memory', 'the memory that resides in the actor's feelings and is brought to the surface of his consciousness by his five senses' (p252)", (Fortier 2002:49). In *The Buttercup*, Shacklock spoke because she as a person needed to, she lost control in fits of energy, taking more risks than a refined dance piece that merely 'goes through the motions'. It is the state of Beyond and the Lived Body that made Shacklock's piece intensely emotive in terms of her style of delivery and phenomenological in its performance and perception.

[Word count: 2,199 excluding separated quotes and headings]

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



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