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Theron Schmidt, 'Acting, Disabled: Back to Back Theatre and the Politics of Appearance', in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Jerome Carroll, Steve Giles, and Karen Jüers-Munby (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 189–207

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For some, any theatre that wants to have political relevance must find a way to overcome theatre's own limitations: it must become more real, more immediate, and more authentic than the empty forms of the past. This kind of claim was exemplified by articulations in the 1980s and 90s of the value of 'performance' over 'theatre', such as Chantal Pontbriand's assertion that 'performance presents; it does not re-present', or Josette Féral's declaration (in the same 1982 issue of *Modern Drama*) that 'performance escapes all illusion and representation' and simply '*takes place*'.<sup>1</sup> In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann describes an affinity between his central term and features of performance art: 'postdramatic theatre can be seen as an attempt to conceptualize art in the sense that it offers not a representation but an intentionally unmediated experience of the real (time, space, body)'.<sup>2</sup> And yet, it is clear that the 'real' with which one has an allegedly unmediated experience in the kinds of practices that Lehmann describes is not the de-aestheticised real of the everyday, but instead the carefully constructed environment of the theatre. One possible ramification of Lehmann's influential intervention, then, might be to open up space for claiming a positive value for the theatrical, not only in distinction to the dramatic (as his title obviously intends), but also in relation to the performative. In this way, rather than suggesting that the political potential of postdramatic theatre depends on its capacity to resist or refuse the machinery of representation, I am interested in the political relevance of artistic practices that invest in and explore theatre as an apparatus of appearances. Such practices amplify artifice rather than producing authenticity, disjoin spectatorial feelings from sympathetic identification, and proliferate sensation as not necessarily co-identical with selfhood. I will argue that a postdramatic theatre might be political because, dis severed from the drive towards dramatic illusion, it is free to be *more* theatrical, not less.

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<sup>1</sup> Chantal Pontbriand, "'The Eye Finds No Fixed Point on Which to Rest ...'", trans. by C. R. Parsons, *Modern Drama*, 25.1 (1982), 154-62 (p. 155); Josette Féral, 'Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified', trans. by Terese Lyons, *Modern Drama*, 25.1 (1982), 170-81 (p. 177). Original emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* [*Postdramatisches Theater*, 1999], trans. by Karen Jüers-Munby (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 134.

I will focus here on the recent production *Food Court* by Back to Back Theatre, which seems to typify many postdramatic tendencies as catalogued by Lehmann: ‘parataxis, simultaneity, play with the density of signs, musicalization, visual dramaturgy, physicality, irruption of the real, situation/event.’<sup>3</sup> In addition to its formal experimentation, this work is marked, as with all of Back to Back’s work over the past twenty years, by its use of intellectually disabled performers. At first glance, the apparent ‘reality’ of the performers’ disability might seem to support the ‘irruption of the real’ described by Lehmann. As in Bert O. States’ description of the appearance of children or animals on stage, these actors might be seen to possess a kind of ‘abnormal durability’ with regard to the appetite of theatre for ingesting the real and turning it into signs.<sup>4</sup> For a project that would seek to overcome the representational quality of the theatre, animals, children, and intellectually disabled actors might all be useful because (we might think) they apparently *can’t act*, and so when we encounter these beings on stage we encounter them for themselves rather than for whom they appear to be. However, this is not the claim I want to make. Rather than their potential usefulness for transforming the theatrical space, I’m interested in the implications that the appearance of these actors on stage might have for the categories of ability and disability in their extra-theatrical senses. My contention is that the distinction between abled and disabled, like the distinction between child and adult or between human and non-human, is a political distinction; and that these distinctions are matters of appearance and spectatorial relation rather than of any kind of intrinsic reality. In *Food Court*, I will argue, it is exactly the capacity to choose to appear – that is, to act – which is at stake. This is what I mean by a politics of appearance.

The connection between politics and appearance has been a recent area of exploration within political philosophy, and my argument draws substantially upon these developments. Most notably, Jacques Rancière has argued for a reconceptualising of the domain of politics that shifts attention away from the particularities of a given political discourse, and instead focuses on the pre-discursive conditions that allow for certain gestures and speech-acts to be recognised as valid while others are excluded. Rancière writes, ‘Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak’.<sup>5</sup> For Rancière and others, there is a strong connection between political distributions of visibility and aesthetic practices, such that Rancière

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* [*Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*, 2000], trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 13.

refers to an 'aesthetic regime of politics',<sup>6</sup> and Giorgio Agamben has written that 'The task of politics is to return appearance itself to appearance, *to cause appearance itself to appear*.'<sup>7</sup> This emphasis marks a departure from previous analyses within political theory, such as Michel Foucault's attention to the uses and distributions of power, or Louis Althusser's study of the interrelation between ideology and identity; in this more recent line of thought, the emphasis is less on the production and control of political subjects, and more on the conditions by which those subjects even come to *appear* – to be recognised and understood – as political beings in the first place.

One of the ways that this shift in political thinking is distinguished from previous analyses is evident in the distinction Rancière makes between 'politics' and 'policing'. Rancière uses the idea of the 'police' to refer to day-to-day operations of governance: the application of power as well as resistances to it. But these day-to-day operations are not politics. Instead, this activity of policing is underpinned by a distribution of roles, a distribution that is incomplete and excludes from the political order any allocated role for those whom Rancière describes as 'the part of those who have no part'.<sup>8</sup> Throughout his writing on politics, Rancière invokes ideas of representation, of appearance, and of the symbolic value of speech and gesture to describe the operations of politics. That is to say, for Rancière, politics takes place in the realm of sensibility – the realm of the senses – and it is for this reason that Rancière asks that we consider politics as an 'aesthetic' activity.<sup>9</sup> The job of the police-function, then, is to maintain a particular 'distribution of the sensible': 'Policing is not so much the "disciplining" of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of *occupations* and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed.'<sup>10</sup> If policing is about maintaining a particular distribution of the sensible, then politics takes place through acts of 'dissensus': 'Politics consist in reconfiguring the partition of the sensible, in bringing on stage new objects and subjects, in making visible that which was not visible, audible as speaking beings they who were merely heard as noisy animals.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'The Face' [1995], trans. by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, in Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 91-100, p. 95. Emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* [*La Méésentente*, 1995], trans. by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 9, passim.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Aesthetics', *Maska*, 19.5/6 (88/89) (Winter 2004), 10-16 (p. 10).

<sup>10</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 29. Original emphasis. See also Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> Rancière, 'The Politics of Aesthetics', p. 10.

In this last passage, with its reference to 'bringing on stage new objects and subjects', Rancière invokes the metaphor of the theatre. To what extent is this only a metaphor, and to what extent might Rancière be suggesting that the actual theatre could be a useful place for thinking about politics? It's clear from his many writings about works of art that he identifies useful lessons for politics in artistic works, but he also explicitly rejects the idea that the political value of art might derive from 'the messages and feelings that it carries on the state of social and political issues,' nor the 'way it represents social structures, conflicts or identities.' Instead, art is political as it frames 'a specific space-time sensorium' and 'reframe[s] the way in which practices, modes of being and modes of feeling and saying are interwoven in a common sense, which means "a sense of the common", embodied in a common sensorium.'<sup>12</sup> That is to say, theatre's relevance to politics derives – and derives *only*, according to Rancière – from the way in which it is fundamentally concerned with acts of appearance, with modes of speech and gesture, and with the production of feelings and sensations *as productions*, irrespective of the content ('political' or otherwise) of those feelings or sensations. Elsewhere, Rancière declares, 'The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible.'<sup>13</sup> I take this to mean that a theatre that is politically efficacious, in Rancière's sense of the term politics, would not derive its political force from its connection to or accurate portrayal of the dynamics of a particular struggle as it takes place outside the theatre. Instead, the contribution that theatre can make must be based on its specifically theatrical properties.

If this is the case, then what is it that is specific to the theatrical, and how might this relate to the 'postdramatic'? Lehmann argues that there are political and ethical possibilities of theatre that have been 'more or less concealed by dramatic theatre'.<sup>14</sup> Once theatre lays aside the concerns of dramatic representation – which Lehmann characterises as being most concerned with presenting an illusion of a whole, complete, and self-sufficient world<sup>15</sup> – then new possibilities become available. As Lehmann deliberately refuses a single definition for the postdramatic, it is perhaps most useful as a means of proposing a separation between the dramatic and the theatrical: there are an abundance of qualities and dynamics of the theatrical experience that are independent of the function of drama, though they are often put to the service of drama. Postdramatic theatre, then, opens up a space in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'The Political in the Post-Dramatic', *Maska*, 17.74/75 (2002), 74-76 (p. 76).

<sup>15</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 22.

which these operations can be foregrounded as the primary concern of the theatre. That is to say, what remains when you remove the 'drama' from theatre – when you remove the attempt to create illusions of self-contained worlds of plot and action – is not reality (nor nothingness), but the mechanism of theatre itself: the production of appearances, the staging of sensations, the interweaving of frames of sensibility. Or, to borrow Rancière's words above that could just as easily be a description of postdramatic theatre: 'bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible.'

However, Lehmann seems to suggest that, having dispensed with dramatic illusion, theatre must also overcome its own machinery in order to realise its political potential. As he describes it, the ethico-political possibilities of theatre have to do with the extent to which the spectator is implicated in the situation, resulting in the cultivation of what he describes as 'response-ability': 'the mutual implication of actors and spectators in the production of images.'<sup>16</sup> Lehmann has also referred to this as 'the politics of perception'.<sup>17</sup> For Lehmann, this potential enables theatre to be a site of resistance to the growing commodification of life and human relations, as described by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Lehmann echoes Debord's Situationist remedy when he proclaims:

[T]he task of theatre must be to create *situations* rather than spectacles, experiences of real time processes, instead of merely representing time. Theatre can deconstitute to a certain degree the spectatorial habit and thereby open a space where the possibility of an intervention makes itself felt. [...] It realizes its modest political potential by creating ways of perception, of self-perception and implication of spectators in the theatrical process which interrupt the order of the theatre as spectacle, which is also a political order.<sup>18</sup>

This opposition between situations and spectacles, between real-time processes and representations, recalls some of the kinds of distinctions made between performance and theatre in the 1980s and 90s to which I referred earlier. It also echoes a critique of spectatorship as itself insufficient for theatre to realise its political potential, such as that expressed by Tim Etchells' call for a theatre that creates 'not audience to a spectacle but witnesses to an event.'<sup>19</sup>

One interpretation of Back to Back's work might be to see it as embodying the kind of resistance to spectacle that Lehmann describes: the 'realness' of the performers' disability might be understood to transform the theatre-event into a situation rather than a spectacle, to which audiences

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-87.

<sup>17</sup> Lehmann, 'The Political in the Post-Dramatic', p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 18. See also Peggy Phelan's foreword to the same volume, which borrows Etchells' phrase for its title: 'Performing Questions, Producing Witnesses', pp. 9-14.

feel themselves to be witnesses rather than spectators, 'to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way,' as Etchells puts it.<sup>20</sup> But as Caroline Wake has argued, such a distinction is based on an assumed difference between 'active' (good) and 'passive' (bad) spectatorship, a distinction that Rancière has done much to critique.<sup>21</sup> Rather than denigrating theatre as merely second-hand experience, of value only when it punctures its representational frame, I see in *Food Court* a sustained engagement with the dynamics of theatrical spectacle as a political realm in its own right. In my reading, the production does not aim to get at some 'real' politics behind these representational surfaces, but instead stages the idea that disability is precisely a matter of appearance as such; it is a problem of appearance (or non-appearance), and, as in the kinds of arguments by Rancière to which I referred earlier, the distribution of appearance is the domain of politics. In this way, the work is political not because it is *opposed* to spectacle but because of its construction *as* spectacle, and the theatre is used as a place to stage dynamics from the world outside the theatre, which are already theatrical problems.

Back to Back's artistic director, Bruce Gladwin, has described this engagement with theatricality was a conscious decision on the part of the company. *Food Court* followed a series of works in non-traditional performance spaces, including their widely known piece *small metal objects* (presented internationally from 2005-2011), which takes place in a train station with the audience listening to remotely miked performers through individual headsets. But in a post-show discussion, Gladwin tellingly described a return to proscenium theatre as 'the most challenging and thrilling thing we could do.'<sup>22</sup> From its opening moments, *Food Court* deliberately accentuates the mechanisms of theatrical representation, including costume, text, and visibility, as intrinsically connected to the problems it raises with regard to the representation of disability. The piece begins with an entrance through a drawn curtain at the front of the stage by Mark Deans, his face immediately recognisable as having been shaped by the effects of Down's syndrome. Squirming, making a few funny faces at the audience, he squints into the lights. He looks down, picks up something from the floor that is too small for me to see, and moves it to stage right. He stands there, looking pleased with himself, still illuminated but no longer blinded by the lights. He looks down again in order to position himself exactly, and I laugh with recognition, realising that the thing he moved was the 'spike', the small piece of electrical tape

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Caroline Wake, 'The Accident and the Account: Towards a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies', *Performance Paradigm*, 5.1 (2009) <<http://www.performanceparadigm.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/wake.pdf>> [accessed 1 November 2012]; Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Post-show discussion, Barbican Theatre, 24 June 2010. Participants: Lloyd Swanton, Bruce Gladwin, Sarah Mainwaring, Sonia Teuben, Mark Deans, Scott Price, Nicki Holland. Moderated by Brian Logan.

used to mark where a performer should stand or a prop should be placed. Throughout the piece, the theatricality of the event is always similarly announced. Whenever something is shown or said, we are always aware that it is being shown or said on a stage. During dialogue involving other actors, for example, Mark holds a boom mic over their heads, moving the mic from actor to actor – even though they are quite visibly equipped with individual wireless mics. And throughout the play, all the dialogue is projected as surtitles. It is a representational world within which these individual bodies appear, and they, too, are representations.

But as a spectator, where do I locate my own responsibility in relation to this world of appearances? Am I being asked to watch differently than I would watch any other theatre? In the programme notes to the Brussels production of *Food Court*, John Bailey describes a cultural tendency to regard the event itself as having a significance that is additional to its aesthetic content: ‘there is a perception of theatre dealing with disability as “worthy”; that is, as having an intrinsic value that precedes the merit of the actual work done.’<sup>23</sup> Though Bailey describes the way this attitude can be condescending and ‘poisonous’, it is also immediately generative of a fissure that Back to Back draw upon in their work. In a post-show discussion, artistic director Bruce Gladwin comments,

I think there’s a tension that sits in the piece. When the actors first come through the split in the curtain, I anticipate there’s a kind of reading in the audience where audience is going, ‘There’s a guy with Down’s syndrome. I wonder if he’s playing a person with Down’s syndrome?’ I think that’s a tension that the audience is never released from. Who are these characters? What is this world that they’re in? And is the intention that they are people with disabilities or that they’re not? And that’s something that we’re interested in playing with in our work.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast with Etchells’ analogy, here there is no easy distinction between ‘audience to a spectacle’ and ‘witness to an event’; instead, I might conceive of my role as both audience to a crafted spectacle, *and* also as witness to an event of ‘real’ empowerment, self-expression, agency, etc. That is to say, I have one kind of relationship with the performers’ performance, and another kind of socially mediated relationship with the performers themselves and what I assume they might be going through as they perform the actions they are performing in front of me. Indeed, my assumptions are more than likely misconceived, and to cast myself as witness is to propagate these misconceptions. Rather than seeking to resolve these complicated and problematic relationships to the event, Back to Back’s theatre productions exacerbate the disjunction between these two different understandings of the nature of the event to which I am spectator: whether it is ‘real’ or an ‘imitation’, and whether I am supposed to ignore or pay attention to the performers’ eccentricities of speech and movement.

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<sup>23</sup> Back to Back Theatre, *Food Court*, theatrical programme (Brussels: Kunstenfestivaldesarts, 2010), p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Post-show discussion, Barbican Theatre, 24 June 2010.



After Mark, the next performer to enter is Scott Price, who calls our attention to another aspect of the theatrical apparatus by performing a mic check – but this, too, is far from straightforward, as Scott uses the mic to mimic sexual excitement. Scott is followed by a remarkable pair of entrances (figure 1). First is Nicki Holland. She stands centre stage. Staring deadpan at the audience, she is dressed in tight black sweatpants and a golden, glittering leotard, her body bulging against the tight fabric around her hips, waist, and breasts. She turns to profile, her stature slightly hunched, her expression matter-of-fact. She stands there for a few beats. *This is her body. This is who she is.* She turns to the back. A few more beats, and then she moves stage-right and sits in a chair. A few moments later, performer Sonia Teuben<sup>25</sup> enters through the curtain, dressed in a matching costume within which all the lumpy distinctiveness of her body, too, is obvious. She repeats the sequence of poses, then joins Nicki to begin the scene. These entrances function both as presentation and representation, invoking a complex set of interrelations between appearance and reality. The reality of who they are is on display: their unusual body shapes in all their imperfections, their unique physiognomy, their blank stares. *These people are really disabled. This is what disabled people really look like.* And yet, these stage entrances emphasise that disability is a matter of appearance: it is a matter of how we see these people. Here, they are revealed, and also masked, by their sparkling golden tops, by their illumination in the stage lights, and in their moment of representing themselves.

The women begin to speak. The first dialogue of the play is a conversation between Nicki and Sonia in which they are talking about food, with Mark moving between them with the boom mic and the words appearing over their heads as they speak. It feels like verbatim text: ‘Have you ever had a hamburger? No. Have you ever had hot chips? No.’<sup>26</sup> Nicki and Sonia’s attention is drawn to Sarah Mainwaring, who enters and takes a seat stage-left, the opposite side of the stage from them. She is not wearing distinctive clothing; her hands and head are constantly moving and rotating involuntarily; she is of slim build. ‘She’s fat,’ says Sonia. The two other women tease Sarah, gradually building into bullying; Sarah never says anything, nor appears to react in any way, and the two other women comment that she ‘doesn’t speak.’ The scene climaxes with the following tirade, noted in the script as partly improvised, with, as always, surtitles and microphones:

Fat person

Fat guts

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<sup>25</sup> This part was originally developed and performed by Rita Halabarec but was played by Teuben in the production I saw.

<sup>26</sup> Back to Back Theatre, *Food Court* (unpublished script provided to the author, 2009). The script assigns fictional names to all the characters, but, for simplicity, and because these names are almost never seen or spoken in the play, I will continue to refer to the performers by their real names. I have chosen to use the performers’ first names because they indicate gender.

|               |               |
|---------------|---------------|
| Fat head      | Fat arms      |
| Fat face      | Fat knee      |
| Fat ears      | Fat feet      |
| Fat nose      | Fat kidney    |
| Fat brain     | Fat liver     |
| Fat daughter  | Fat you       |
| Fat skeleton  | Fat diarrhoea |
| Fat Muslim    | Fat tumor     |
| Fat Christian | Fat shit      |
| Fat European  | Fat smell     |
| Fat history   | Fat priest    |
| Fat maggot    | Fat evil      |
| Fat beast     | Fat world     |
| Fat cancer    | Fat nation    |
| Fat monster   | Fat boring    |
| Fat freak     | Fat breast    |
| Fat witch     | Fat bone      |

That's for you.  
Look at them looking at you.

These are horrifying, powerful words, and yet as they slide around the theatre they slip in and out of their horrific signification. We see the words as text to be read. We hear them as amplified sounds. As in Lehmann's description of the postdramatic (quoted above), we are at *play with the density of signs*. We do not know if the speaker is talking to the other woman, or to a character who is represented by the woman, or repeating the things that she has been called.

The piece then moves into its second half. The transition is mediated by Mark, who speaks for the first and only time, reading lines from the surtitles as each word bounces like it is on a Karaoke machine. The words indicate a shift away from the current scene. *Parataxis* (rather than narrative): 'Past the juice bar, past the Asian Hut, past the car park, past the last house, past the factories, over the creek and down the dirt road to the forest....' At the main stage of the Barbican in London, where I saw it, the curtains part to reveal the full height and depth of the stage. A translucent screen covers the proscenium opening, and the remainder of the action takes place behind this gauzy covering: the figures are shadowy, dimly lit, casting shadows against the back of the theatre. *Visual dramaturgy*. The surtitles are visible at the front of the stage, but also pass through the screen so they are visible on the back wall, along with large video projections of shifting, indistinct branches (figure 2). *Physicality*. The two women accuse Sarah of having soiled herself, and force her to take off her clothes. They then order her to dance; in a dim spotlight, but obscured by the screen, we see her slowly shifting

her weight from side to side, her arms moving in erratic spirals through the air. To the side of the stage, an audience of shadows slowly assembles. *Musicalization*. The repetitive, churning music, provided by live accompaniment by 'post-rock' trio The Necks, builds to a climax.

After some time, they stop her dancing. They appear to beat her. Mark and Scott, standing some distance away, provide the sound effects using boxing gloves and the microphone. They leave her for dead: 'Wild animals will kill you. / You'll get burnt. / You're evil. / We can't rescue you. / I'm not your mother, your sister or your friend. / We're not your carers. / Guilty! / As ever!' They leave the stage, and Scott comes over to the prone body, describing his sexual inexperience and his desire to learn more. 'I need some encouragement. I'm confused of what is appropriate sexually. I'm pretty immature.' He leaves. Sarah rises, walks toward the screen separating her from the audience, and, while walking, for the first time, speaks. Her words, the last words in the show, are taken from Caliban, the speech that begins: 'Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises ....' She speaks slowly, putting each word together sound by sound, and the letters of the surtitles swarm and swim across the screen until they form each word. The screen falls away, and she is alone on stage.

These representations of abuse and victimisation are hard to watch, and they're meant to be. In the Barbican post-show discussion, Gladwin describes the questions and thinking that emerged during the making of *Food Court*. He refers to *small metal objects*, the work which immediately preceded *Food Court*, as a 'feel good piece' because audiences enjoyed the voyeuristic pleasures of its site-specificity, as well as the way in which it presents characters played by disabled actors as the 'good guys' in contrast with the selfish and reprehensible characters played by non-disabled actors. For Gladwin, one of the driving interests behind *Food Court* was to push at assumed boundaries of characterisation with regard to disabled actors and/or characters by presenting disabled actors/characters who are perpetrators as well as victims of abuse. He explains, 'If you can't act evil, then you're sub-human, in a way, because we're all capable of being evil.' In an insightful commentary on theatrical work involving intellectually disabled actors, Matt Hargrave describes similar predicaments facing such actors more generally. Noting that the common definition of 'disabled' is 'incapable of performing or functioning,' he asks, 'What might it mean then for a disabled person to stand in front of an audience and begin to speak?'

The fact that he is on stage speaking directly to us denotes iconically that he is disabled: he is a disabled man because he *looks like* one. But does his obvious impairment mean that he must *remain* iconic, unable to break out of the label, 'disabled man'? His disability also indexes or *points* to itself. And his appearance is symbolically loaded: disability carries connotations of 'dependency', 'affliction' or premature death. Because disability is used as a metaphor in so many stories and cultural references, the disabled actor is literally trapped in a prison house of signs. Semiotically encumbered from the start, any 'characterisation' is smothered by the 'fact' of his disability.

For Hargrave, these confining assumptions about the limits of representation are exemplified by the advice reportedly given to one of the directors he interviews: 'I was told very early on in the process that these actors will only play themselves.'<sup>27</sup>

In Back to Back's post-show discussion about the process of making *Food Court*, it was obvious that the company directly engaged and confronted these challenges, and I was particularly struck by the extent to which the content of the work was informed by interests and challenges that were specific to the actors' own development *as actors*. Gladwin describes his job as director as being 'to put forward challenges for the actors that will help them grow and develop as performers.'<sup>28</sup> For example, the character ultimately played by Sarah was initially developed by Sonia, whom Gladwin describes as highly regarded amongst the company for her oratorical skills; the character is mute (until the end) as a result of the decision to have Sonia work with the productive constraint of not speaking during the improvisations that made up the devising process. Similarly, the opening exchange around food arose out of a desire to work with dialogue, particularly because one of the actors who originally played the scene (Rita Halabarec, who was not in the London production) tended to work primarily with monologue rather than dialogue. Mark's text – the Karaoke-like moment that marks the transition between scenes – emerged because Mark has never spoken in previous performances; Gladwin describes his strength as being with physical performance and creating strong relationships with audiences. The use of surtitles and text-captioning was a way to support him in speaking on stage. And the agonising scene in which the two women force Sarah to strip and to dance was revealed to have come almost directly out of a company improvisation. Sarah has a background in experimental performance that includes, for example, using her naked body as a tool for painting; when the actors in the improvisation ordered her to take her clothes off, they were hugely surprised to find that she nonchalantly complied.

These glimpses of the devising process, which took place over three years, reveal the extent to which the performance is the direct result of the actors engaging with challenges of theatrical appearance and representation. In addition to staging disability, the performance stages the complexity and challenges of staging itself. Rather than directly approaching broader issues of disability in culture, this piece might be understood as an account of the ways in which the actors

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<sup>27</sup> Matt Hargrave, 'Pure Products Go Crazy', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 14.1 (2009), 37-54 (p. 48). Original emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> In reporting on the post-show discussion, I am primarily using Gladwin's comments to represent the position of the company as a whole. My selective reporting does not reflect the extent to which Gladwin deferred to the comments and experience of the actors, who shared the stage with him, and who repeatedly articulated their experience of sharing authorship and ownership of the work.

negotiated their own experience of speaking on stage, of acting on stage, of 'being oneself' on stage. When a disabled person appears on stage and begins to speak, then, it is not the reality of his or her disability that appears, but the way that disability is already a representation – and the theatre is the place where representations are made and re-made, where they are malleable. What becomes possible here with regard to disability is the capacity to deploy it: to make it stand for something else, to falsify it, to stand to one side of it, to wear it as a costume, to use it as a dance.

Curiously, there is a kind of paradox of productivity at play, in which the peculiar kind of labour involved in the theatre might be seen to reflect and reverse some of the social problems of disability. On the one hand, if the actor is standing in for disability *in general* (in the sort of iconic function that Hargrave describes), then some kind of surplus-value is extracted at the cost of the actor's individuality; it could be anyone, interchangeably representing the idea of disability. On the other hand, one form of resistance to this reductive signification would be to foreground the individuality of the actor. The actor would then be obstinately non-productive within the economy of the theatre: they are not 'really' acting, and therefore not doing the work they should be doing in the theatre, and might instead be described as doing a kind of performativity – simply 'taking place', in Féral's terms. But this is also a position of resignation, the one to which Hargrave referred in his quote from the director who was told 'these actors will only be themselves'. A third possibility, one that sits between these two positions and destabilises them, is to produce the performers precisely *as* actors, neither identifiable as themselves, nor as an abstraction, but occupying a specific and contingent representational function within a framework of appearance. In this way, what is apparent is not the actor's productivity or stubborn non-productivity, but the economy of production itself.

This is a compelling possibility because it relates to one of the arguments within disability studies that seeks to put forward a social definition of disability, rather than a medical or individualist definition. For example, in Michael Oliver's influential book *The Politics of Disablement* (1990), disability is presented as an artefact not of individual impairment but of capitalist modes of production, within which disability is constituted as a result of a system that is not capable of finding productive uses for some people. In a different system, Oliver argued, individuals would still have impairments, but disability would be differently constituted or would not be constituted at all – that is to say, disability is a function of social apparatuses rather than of individual conditions.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, in Back to Back's artistic statement, they do not describe themselves as making work about disability; instead, they declare that they use this ambivalent position as a perspective from which to comment on what they call 'the majority', and it is this majority that is the subject of their work: 'Family, career,

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

sex, politics, religion, education, academia and culture are all subject to a lateral analysis from an artistic team whose defining characteristic is separation from the spectacle of their subject matter.<sup>30</sup> In this way, I would argue that the relationship between the politics of disablement and the mechanisms of the theatre is not an arbitrary one, but one in which the kinds of problems that disability produces within the theatre – and also the kinds of problems that theatricality poses for ideas of disability – are interrelated.

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière writes:

Political statements and literary locutions [and we might add theatrical stagings] produce effects in reality. They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making. They define variations of sensible intensities, perceptions, and the abilities of bodies.<sup>31</sup>

A preoccupation with the production of ‘variations of sensible intensities’ feels like an apt description of postdramatic theatre as typified by Back to Back. And yet one might also argue that these adjustments of perception, and the introduction of new ‘sensible intensities’, have always been fundamental to the work of theatre regardless of its position in relation to the ‘dramatic’, from forms of Greek tragedy to Shakespeare to *Food Court*. As Gladwin revealed, the company’s interest in making *Food Court* was to work with this perceptual machinery of theatre: this was ‘the most challenging and thrilling thing we could do.’ The legacy of these modes of appearance haunts *Food Court*: its representation of brutal violence, or the lines taken from Caliban. As I have argued, this piece is not about *being* disabled but about *appearing* disabled; and Rancière’s arguments help to expand upon the ways in which working on the level of appearance *is* political. That is, participation in politics is only possible if one has access to variable modes of sensibility, to multiple ways of speaking and to expanding capacities of ‘acting’.

In my experience of *Food Court*, what affected me was not the sensible reality of these bodies to which I was witness, but the flickering of appearances and representations within which I was spectator: the actors’ unreadable gestures and un-locatable speech-acts, the abilities of their bodies to ‘mean’ and their capacity to use them to make-mean. These are not instabilities introduced in order to destabilise the theatre, to challenge the law of spectacle in order to make it more ‘real’ or ‘ethical’. But they are instabilities in appearance that are possible because of the event’s nature *as* theatre. Such theatricality is not wholly dependent on the mechanism of the theatre, of course, but the theatre

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<sup>30</sup> Back to Back Theatre, ‘Artistic Rationale’ <<http://backtobacktheatre.com/about/artistic-rationale>> [accessed 1 November 2012].

<sup>31</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 39.

is a tool that helps to frame, focus, and amplify these 'variations of sensible intensities'. For me, the relevance of this performance to issues of disability is not in the way that it might bring 'reality' onto stage, puncturing the theatre's representational operations, but the way in which it reveals that sense of reality to always be an apprehension, a matter of perspective, a matter of 'the way we see' disability. Theatre is both a place in which we see these appearances, and also a place that allows us to see the mechanisms of appearance. That is to say, this theatre is a place where appearance is seen; it is this that makes it political.

## Figures

Figure 1: Nicki Holland and Rita Halabarec in *Food Court*. Halabarec's role was played by Sonia Tueben later in the tour. Image: Jeff Busby.

Figure 2: Nicki Holland, Sarah Mainwaring, and Rita Halabarec. Image: Jeff Busby.

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