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Non-Actor as Performer: Creating Distance Between Performance and Reality: A Performance Review of Healing Wars and Don't Go

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Healing Wars: created by Liz Lerman, directed and choreographed by Keith Thompson. November 5–14, 2021 at Arizona State University.

Don't Go: co-directed by Michael Rohd and Nik Zaleski. November 13, 2021 at Arizona State University.

Audience interaction in performance can be used to create a variety of results for the audience experience. Two recent productions at Arizona State University (ASU) took the popular trend of interactive theater to a new level by integrating a non-actor into the full performance, watched by the rest of the audience. In *Healing Wars*, created by Liz Lerman and directed and choreographed by Keith Thompson, a non-actor joined the company to perform as the Vet. In Sojourn Theatre's *Don't Go*, co-directed by Michael Rohd and Nik Zaleski for the ASU Gammage Beyond series, four new non-actors were chosen for each show and integrated into the performance. The use of non-actor as performer created a distancing effect in each show between performance and reality, but the unique method of integration between non-actor and production resulted in radically different audience reactions.

The show *Healing Wars* uses a mixture of modern dance and text to compare the soldier and veteran experiences in the Civil War and the war in Iraq. The show specifically indicates that the role of the Vet should be played by a real-life veteran. In the production at Arizona State University, the role of the Vet was played by Dr. Kermit Brown, a Lecturer in Leadership & Integrative Studies at the school (Chacon 2021). Dr. Brown is a Marine Corps Gulf War veteran; his biography in the program indicates that *Healing Wars* was his first theatrical performance. Social media and show advertisements heavily featured Dr. Brown, showcasing both his involvement in the production as well as his veteran status and his status as a non-actor. However, within the production itself it was unclear whether Dr. Brown was intended to be viewed as a performer playing a role or as himself.

During the preamble to the show, an immersive walking tour where audience members encounter several installations featuring characters that appear later in the show, Dr. Brown first appears in conversation with another actor, Kendal Janzen who plays the role of the Narrator. The two are in an unscripted conversation about war and their lives, largely led by Dr. Brown. This moment was clearly intended to highlight Dr. Brown's lived experience and was the most effective distancing moment of the play; audiences both experienced the theatricality of the event and were forced to reckon with modern day realities of war. Once the show began, however, Dr. Brown no longer spoke about his own experiences, but rather those of the character the Vet. This attempt to integrate him into the cast of actors was complicated in three ways: his costume (or lack thereof), his lack of performance experience, and the presence of other veterans within the cast.

While most of the cast was costumed in period costumes or modern-day neutral army fatigues, Dr. Brown wore street clothes. As a result, he stood out dramatically from the rest of the cast. He additionally stood out from the cast due to his lack of experience as a performer. While he delivered his lines with passion, he simply did not have the training to deliver a realistic performance as another character. At one point he appeared to forget his lines, and he struggled with the dancing. Had director Thompson chosen to make more explicit Dr. Brown's position as a non-actor, rather than attempting to integrate him into the dancing ensemble, his casting might have been an effective tool to create space between performance and reality, as it was in the preamble. Instead, the audience was unclear in which light they should view Dr. Brown.

Dr. Brown's casting was additionally complicated by the presence of two veterans in the cast, both strong actors. Aaron Hernandez, a sophomore theater major and Anders Lettie, a senior in the acting concentration, are both veterans and actors who performed exceptionally in the show (Perkins 2021). Lettie delivered a particularly moving dance solo as the Surgical Assistant. The veteran status of both Lettie and Hernandez was mentioned briefly in promotional materials, but they were not highlighted to the same extent as Dr. Brown, nor was their veteran status mentioned in their program bios. By casting these veterans in the show, clearly because of their talent and not only their veteran status,

director Thompson unintentionally created that distance between performance and reality that he was seeking to do with Dr. Brown. Instead of struggling to place Dr. Brown and his position as actor or non-actor, audiences were able to fully enjoy the strong performances of Lettie and Hernandez and also reckon with the fact that the themes of the show were not just themes, but realities for the two actors.

In contrast, Sojourn Theatre made the clear choice to keep the statuses of the actors and non-actors separate in their production *Don't Go*. At the beginning of the show, actor Jono Eiland informed the audience that four people had been chosen to be included in the duration of the show. These four people, Pardis, Bill, Matt, and Ahmaud¹ in this performance, remained on stage for the entire show. The performance was divided into three sections: a lighthearted act in which the four civilians answered questions about themselves, a passionate retelling of the story of Antigone, and a guided discussion between the four non-actors about themes from the story. In each section, the non-actors clearly retained their status as non-actors despite being incorporated into and often the main focus of the performance.

The beginning section was designed for the four chosen non-actors to get to know each other. Eiland described to the audience that the scenario was both real and unreal—that the conceit of having these four people interact in this way was completely unrealistic but that the answers they gave were real and unscripted. In this way, directors Rohd and Zaleski created a strong distancing effect between the performance and reality. The four answered questions about where they were from, what they did for fun, as well as more poignant questions about how they hoped their friends viewed them and what they valued. Non-actor Matt shared that he disliked speaking in front of large crowds, a particularly fun moment of distancing as the audience recognized the absurdity of sharing this thought in front of a large crowd. The four were taught a dance and even went on “vacation” together by traveling around the stage and viewing projections of faraway places. While I doubt that any of the four were completely at ease on stage, by the end of this first section they at least seemed to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts whenever prompted.

This comfort with their agency on stage was clear as the actors began a performance of *Antigone*. The actors periodically instructed the four non-actors to repeat lines to other characters, creating witnesses to the scripted events. Most moving was an exchange between *Antigone*, played with brutal vulnerability by Sara Sawicki, and non-actor Pardis. *Antigone* asks Pardis for advice on how to forgive her uncle Creon. Pardis' sincere answers about a time she had chosen to look past difference in the name of love, along with Sawicki's skilled improvised responses, created a strong emotional response in the audience. Because Pardis' status as a non-actor was so clear, the exchange was heightened; audiences knew that the moment was improvised and so each response from Sawicki carried more meaning and sincerity. The distance created between actor and non-actor deeply engaged the audience. Later, when Creon, played by Bobby Bermea, instructed Pardis to tell *Antigone* to dig up her brother, Pardis broke the pattern of repetition and told Creon that she would not do so. The audience waited on the edge of their seats to see how Bermea would react. Each moment of unscripted interaction created an uncertainty that heightened the drama.

After *Antigone* dies by suicide, the final section of the performance revolved again around the four non-actors. Seated around a game of Jenga, the four were instructed to play while discussing questions that related thematically to *Antigone*. The conversation focused largely on the themes of government responsibility and ability to create a just and equitable society. The four agreed generally that the current way society functioned was not working but came to no conclusion about how to best fix it. The conversation was rich and thoughtful (though their skill at Jenga questionable). While the distance between performance and reality was less heightened in this section, it served as a calming denouement to the heightened action and emotion of *Antigone*'s story. Sojourn Theatre states that this show was designed to “blur[] the borders between theatre and civic participation,” (Sojourn 2021) and it clearly did so with riveting effect. The clear and specific use of non-actors within the play allowed audiences to reckon with the plot but also with larger, real-life questions.

In both *Don't Go* and *Healing Wars*, the directors incorporated non-actors into the performance as a way to distance the audience from living only in the fantasy of the world of the play and instead reckoning with the real-life implications of the thematic elements. The lack of clarity around Dr. Brown and his role as the Vet caused *Healing Wars* to be unsuccessful in its aims. By creating a clear delineation between actor and non-actor in *Don't Go*, the performance forced the audience to acknowledge the risk and reality present on the stage, leading to a more genuine emotional audience response. The respective failure and success of these shows in their use of non-actors highlights the importance of specificity around incorporating non-actors and interactive elements into theater. Simply having a non-actor in a show is not enough to guarantee the desired distancing effect for audiences; but with care, the choice can have captivating results.

Endnotes

¹ As these four people were not listed in the program, I have made an educated guess of how to spell their names.

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