SPEAK BITTERNESS

"The thing which holds it together is the sense that the performers are, through the medium of the confessions, measuring themselves against the possibilities of human misdemeanour and wayward behaviour - from the largest political crimes to the most banal of daily errors" (Etchells et al).

Janine Ramlochan
11.15.2022

Image: Livestream from Berlin (10.18.2014), garnered an audience of 3800 from around the world with a parallel dialogue running on twitter. Used a different script (mentions of using Google translate for example)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgwAQ_-VwWY

tim etchells / forced entertainment
Sheffield, UK

Tim Etchells (1962–)

- artist + writer (performance, video, text, installation, fiction)
- contemporary identity + urban experience
- recognized for writings about contemporary performance + art installation work

Forced Entertainment - experimental + innovative theatre

- draws from movies, internet, stand-up comedy, dance, bad tv, performance art, music culture
- shows performed around the world, seen as timely, insightful and nuanced

"At the centre of many of my projects, there is a fascination with r**ules and systems in language and culture**, in particular with the way these systems can be both **productive and constraining** ~ Tim Etchells

Speak Bitterness

about –

- directed by Etchells, collaboratively written by company, staged in 1994 (recorded performance, ICA London Dec 1995)
- theatre + marathon version (6 hours)
- cultures of confession – chat shows, churches, show trials

development –

- use of video to hone improvisations, scripted sections derived from these
- script evolved with tech + times (in content, stage platform, audience engagement)
- livestream from Berlin (2014) garnered audience of 3800 globally (deeper engagement w/ twitter)

The *Speak Bitterness* stage play highlights the theatre company's appreciation for melding theatre with media and tech influences – **high-brow** (theatre), **mid-brow** (political-news comedy TV) and **low-brow** (the internet) – arguably elevating its ability to **resonate** with contemporary audiences

"It comes out of a culture where the chat shows and the radio call-ins are filling up with people spilling the beans—weeping, laughing, stumbling for words—telling the truth about what they saw and what they did and how they did it, and why" (Etchells et al 213)

jumping off ...

stage

set-up like a **conference room** –

- metal table top conference tables and chairs
  (**greys, metals**), against a (**royal blue**)
  curtain-backdrop
- "SPEAK BITTERNESS" in white lettering on curtain
- **grey** chairs - shift around the table, moved to the
  back of the stage, later return
- sheets of paper (**cream**) - lined up in piles across
  table length; referred to, read from, removed from
  the tables, later brought back

lighting –

- overhead, lit table surface, performers while sitting
  or standing, light dissipates towards back of stage

Colour palette – combination of greys, royal blue, muted tones, brightly lit faces and cream-coloured paper against a darkening recessive backdrop creates an **ominous atmosphere** that contributes to the performers' **conveyance of stress** when confessing

performers

seven performers –

- four women, three men
- five are dressed in similar grey suits, white or black tops; two are dressed in black suits/ dress suits
- fit and sheen of attire connotes (cheap) store bought suits, connoting **lower** managerial levels

movement –

- individual movement – tense, under duress, impatient, always coherent
- group movement – sat on one side of the table facing the audience
- alternating sitting, standing, moving chairs, shuffling papers, moving to the back of the room, abruptly, angrily interrupting each other
- change in clothing – removal of jackets, rolling up sleeves, informality of kneeling on floor w/ arms on table, resting head on folded arms

Connotes a long work session – many **hours stuck in a room** with co-workers trying to solve a problem or make progress on a project; over time, **formalities in dress begin to be dispensed with**

voices

confessions –

- oscillate between mumbling, whispering, reading, angrily yelling, delivered with a laugh or with trepidation
- range of expression – sincere, guilt-ridden, bitter, preposterous, absurd, etc
- vocal signatures = managerial style (under duress)
- defensiveness + anger = comedic, elicits empathy
- over time – more settled, less defensive, confessions evolve to mere explanations or revelations (+ soft piano)

Britishness –

- accents, references, observations, manners and mannerisms of confession, anger and forthrightness = reflect culture/ societal norms

The performers' defensiveness and anger are not only **comedic**, but also denote the level of **professional command** – those without skills of **discernment and deflection** senior management/ leadership are convincingly fluent in

Global impact of the combined elements is underscored by the **Britishness** of the stage play – makes a statement on the **constraints** of a rigid social hierarchy and the manner in which the **social stratification plays out**, particularly in **guilt-ridden behaviours**

media/ theory

interaction design –

- **willing complicity** of engagement vs. passive reception
- choice of when to engage deepens the emotional experience

extending life of a work –

- drawing on media + tech to:
    1. inform the content
    2. redefining the contours of the experience
- gives the work add'l legs geographically

2nd screen issue –

- countering **fragmented attention** = greater monetization potential

By choosing to continuously livestream this production (something they've done since 2008), the theatre production takes on characteristics and conventions of screen-based media, which are increasingly measurable at a more granular level

discussion questions

1. Confessions are an individualistic experience (rooted in culture, religion and other aspects of the societies we group up in)... how did the confessional approaches in this work resonate with you personally? empathetic, moved or indifferent?

2. How do you feel about: how *Speaking Bitterness* borrows from contemporary media and trends? how they increasingly interweave technology and theatre in the audience experience? how they meld high, mid + low brow?

3. Towards the end of the play, there is a scene comparing the mens' confessions of dubious behaviour to that of children, like boys play acting until they were found out. There's a change in the play of women dictating the revelations from the back row while the 3 men stand at the front of the stage holding hands. What does this scene say about the gendered roles in society? Are there indictments, gender-skewed accountabilities? Do you feel it suggests women's roles as the moral compass in society?

work cited

Etchells, Tim, et al. "Certain Fragments : Texts and Writings on Performance." Taylor & Francis Group, 1999.

Etchells, Tim. "Speak Bitterness: Our Catalogue of Confessions." *The Guardian*, 16 Oct. 2014.

Gardner, Lyn. "Tweet Bitterness: How Forced Entertainment Took over Twitter." *The Guardian*, 20 Oct. 2014.

"Speak Bitterness." Forced Entertainment, https://www.forcedentertainment.com/projects/speakbitterness/.