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2010-11-23
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this Research Report to my Mother, Daisy, her Mother, Cikosi and her Mother Boseko. I am grateful to you, I am in awe of you.

I thank Olebogeng Lejowa and Botho Lejowa for their unwavering commitment to my wellbeing. I thank my aunt Simangaliso Sibanda for being my second Mother, and Amantle for her spirit.

I thank Mpho Lecoge and Bongile Lecoge-Zulu for the love, the supervision, the generosity, as always. I thank Nomhle Mokhosoa and Injairu Kulundu; you have been my pillars, my inspiration, my friends. I thank Kabi Thulo for walking with me. You have been a friend and a mentor, and you have been gentle and generous.

I thank Warren Nebe for the journey, I have grown.

I thank the casts of *Even as I Walk, The Wages of Sin* and *They Were Silent*. You are brave soldiers.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. it is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts in Dramatic Arts to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination to any other University.

.....	.....
Jessica Oreeditse Lejowa	30 September 2010

Shifting understandings of performance practice in an African context through auto-ethnography

A research Report by Creative Research and Written Report

By Jessica Oreeditse Lejowa

Supervisor: Warren Nebe

Date: 30 September 2010

In Partial Fulfilment of a MADA by Coursework and Research Report

University of the Witwatersrand

Johannesburg, 2010

Abstract

By critically analysing three pieces of devised performance, *Even as I Walk* (2008), They *Were Silent* (2009) and *The Wages of Sin* (2009), I argue that the concept of performance is not easily defined. Rather, it is an ever-changing phenomenon, which can become a useful platform for dialoguing about deeply personal and necessarily public and political subject matter. I locate myself and the theatre makers I worked with to create the three pieces, in the work by reflecting on and writing about the processes using auto-ethnography as a lens. The context within which I write, and within which my collaborators and I work, is that of our locations in very specific African, moral, cultural, political and creative impulses which we interrogate through the creative processes. Through the writing and reflecting, I arrive at various conclusions, including what I call 'the methodology of not knowing,' the importance of the group in facilitating the research and creative process, the necessity of redefining or renegotiation—for the purposes of both the research and the creative goals—our understandings of what performance is.

Key words: performance, transgression, ritual, women, methodology

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a political statement, and a gamble. It is difficult to read, to follow or to make sense of because it is written in a manner that reflects the processes that informed it: the processes were creative, lateral, politically charged, unpredictable, emotional and difficult in many ways. As a result, the findings of the processes are many and varied; the paper engages, therefore, with multiple and varied foci. I will speak at various points about the methodologies of the work as experimental, experiential and responsive. My discussion of the methodologies will be extensive, and it will emphasise the methodologies as central to the work I have made. I will also speak about the importance of the groups I worked with to create the work: the group as container of trauma and story, the group as primary resource and archive, the group as the facilitator of transgression. I will speak about performance from various perspectives: performance as negotiation, as relationship between collaborators, performers and audience. These are only three facets of the work, and they each constitute a significant portion of the thinking and writing. I cannot say that any one facet is more important than the others and thus is the focus of the paper. The focus of the paper is the work, and the work is constituted by multiple, varied and web-like strands or foci.

Additionally, the paper contains hardly any reference to contemporary theorists, discourses, practices and practitioners which may be used to concretise the claims that I make. This is a conscious decision which was informed and made necessary both by the processes I will write about, and by my reflection on those processes. The paper is a political statement also because I realise the gravity of weaving a sound theoretical framework and referring to specific and justified theatre practices in this academic exercise, as ways of contextualising

and theorising about my own work, and of demonstrating my understanding of theory, practice and their relationships. Yet I have chosen to construct a theoretical framework that comprises my own voice, my work, and the voices of my collaborators; this framework continuously references my practice, and in the same way, the paper continues to reference itself, and the voice of its writer.

For example, the title of the paper comprises several key terms which in orthodox academic writing would require deconstruction. I mention the renegotiation of 'performance', through an 'auto-ethnographic' mode as a 'black' 'African' 'woman' in an 'African' context. I also describe one of my projects as 'Practice as Research,' the literature about which has become abundant and detailed in the past two years. Through the paper, I manage only to raise further questions about what performance is; my understanding of 'auto-ethnography' is embedded in the writing, and it will become evident as the reader continues to read. Similarly, to be a woman, black and African are complicated terms, the complication of which is evident in the processes themselves. The complexity of the terms also reveals itself in the lived experiences that made up the content of the work. This also, is embedded in the writing of the work. By the end of the paper, I will have analysed my work in a way which demonstrates concepts and methodologies that characterise what is described as auto-ethnography, and what is described as practice-as-research; it will be difficult, then, and in a sense unnecessary to draw a distinction between the two.

This choice is not academic arrogance; it is the result of the work that I have embarked upon, it bears testament to the commitment that I have made to remain true to myself as a theatre practitioner, a black African woman, and a human being. I must remain true to my

work because my work is my life. I will speak further to each of the reasons why the paper is a political statement at different stages in the paper.

The work or creative processes that I refer to are three pieces of theatre that I directed/choreographed/facilitated over a period of two years, and each was guided by particular investigations or enquiries. While the projects were different in terms of content, aesthetics, line of enquiry, process and performance, they have become—through reflection and analysis—quite clearly connected as a body of work which reveals my development as a theatre maker and a researcher. The first piece, *Even as I Walk* (2008), did not have a research thrust. It resulted out of what I felt then was a burning need to tell a story about my feelings of discomfort in the world as a woman. It was a process of simply bringing a story to life by locating the story and the telling of it on the body, which for me was the site of struggle. I would describe the work as the process through which I woke up to the possibilities of experiment as a method of working, experience as a resource, and experiential experiment as a container for work. At the end of the work, however, these lessons or ideas had not solidified, and *They Were Silent* (2008) was an intensification of the lesson, an extension of a lesson in progress[1]. *They Were Silent* was the result of my collaboration with a Master's candidate whose research was about finding synergy between theatre and ritual by locating himself, a Sangoma, in the performance space of a theatre. I guided this process better than the last because its research questions provided a kind of starting point and contained the trajectory of the work. The final project, *The Wages of Sin* (2009) was my research into how theatre can become a forum for African women to subvert or transgress the moral boundaries which, we feel, make it difficult for us to exercise choice in our lives. This project, a final phase of what began with *Even as I Walk*, provided lessons

[1] By 'lesson,' I refer to the discoveries that facilitated shifts in the creative process, whether in the methodology or in the ideological stance of myself and my co-collaborators.

which were far more detailed than the first, and were similar to the second in their radical controversial nature.

I will suggest that each of the processes is driven by what I will call 'the methodology of not knowing.' This methodology encompasses challenges such as not knowing where to begin in order to make work, as was the case with *Even as I Walk*. I was angry, I wanted to tell a story through theatre, but I did not know how to distil the core of the story. Was I burning to express my anger, or did I simply want to choreograph? Did I want to talk about the impact of society on my life, or to talk about a specific event that hurt me? Was this my story or the story of 'women'? Because I did not know, I simply began. Similarly, the methodology of not knowing was a recurring factor in *They Were Silent*. Not being familiar with the language, codes, practices and rituals of spiritual healing enabled me to transform my role as director so that during the performances, I felt that I had levelled the ground and put myself at a status equal to that of the audience. Not knowing how to understand the liminal state of being of a Sangoma necessitated the collapse of the conventional directorial role. In *The Wages of Sin*, the methodology of not knowing brought into sharp focus the porous nature of the multiple mantles I wore as director, researcher, facilitator, woman, friend and student. It also emphasised the capacity of a group to formulate a knowing that is contingent upon the cohesion and the functioning of the group as a structure that contains our individual experiences. The magic and the usefulness of the methodology of not knowing will become apparent when I discuss the projects, which I will refer to as 'case studies,' in greater detail.

RATIONALE

My country of birth is Botswana, which has been considered globally as the shining beacon of peace and political and financial stability in Africa. There are a few unpleasant facts about the country: its small population has been struggling to deal with the high rates of HIV infection—most cases of infection apparently being women; also, in Botswana the death penalty is legal, and homosexuality is not. I grew up in this country. After my secondary education, I studied in Pennsylvania, USA for one year preparing for university or 'college,' as it is called in America. The school I attended had been a boys' school since its inception in 1885, and when I arrived, had been a coeducational school for about five years. At this school, some of my fellow students asked me if in Africa people drink milk, ride on elephants to school, or have electricity. They observed that I was black, but not black like the African American students on campus, of which there were about twenty in a school community of approximately five hundred. I was the only African student. A 'friend' of mine stopped in mid-air—he was going to give me a high five[2]—and stared at my hand, which I had decorated with Henna.

'OK, like don't touch me!' he said. Confused, I asked why not.

'Because you might, like, have a disease or something from Africa.'

'Like what?'

'Like rabies or something.' And so there was no high five. But we went to chapel three times a week as a school community. Missing chapel earned one a demerit. The school, being founded on Christian principles, was not forcing Christianity on anybody and did not discount other faiths, but missing chapel meant a demerit.

[2] A 'high five' is a meeting of two people's palms in the air, usually as a celebration, an expression of camaraderie, or a congratulation. My 'friend' and I were playing snow fighting with our other friends, and I had got in a perfect shot of snow which deserved a high five.

This was two years after the September 11 destruction of the Twin Towers in New York; when I got off the plane from 'Africa' in Pennsylvania, a long queue formed behind me as my suitcase was unpacked and I was asked questions about what I had come to do in America. Eventually, my suitcase and I were taken to a back room, where I answered the same question for thirty minutes. I would later get a stern letter from my bank, informing me that my account had been frozen and red-flagged for investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation because I had an address in Pennsylvania and another in Africa. At about the same time in Botswana, there was a spate of what the media dubbed 'passion killings.' A number of brutal murders—dismemberments, cutting of throats—were being reported regularly. Men were killing women for all kinds of reasons: the women were cheating, they wanted to break up, they rejected the amorous advances of the men. There was public outrage, but the killings continued, and they continued to be called 'passion' killings. I could not eat meat for a long time because the images of slaughter became conflated in my head. I wrote in my journal furiously, became involved in a theatre project which raised questions about why this was happening. I felt very unsafe, and worried for my mother, sisters, cousins, aunts, friends and neighbours[3].

In 2005, I came to South Africa to begin my undergraduate studies. That is when I was first able to process my experiences of race, gender and 'African-ness.' Living in South Africa, working and studying here have focused sharply the fact that the colour of my skin, my sex and my location in the African continent are the modes through which my lived experiences are mediated daily. When I walk across the Nelson Mandela bridge in Johannesburg to catch a taxi home—and this is something that would happen if I went to catch a taxi

[3] I worked with Warren Nebe, who had taught me only a year before in secondary school. His mentoring introduced me at that point to the necessity of ensuring the emotional and psychological safety of performers/researchers during a devising process of such intensity.

somewhere in Gaborone, Botswana—I am made conscious of my femaleness by the crass, sexist language that many men in the Bree Taxi rank area use to sexualise, intimidate and disregard my presence. This does not happen if I am in the company of a man.

When I go to see theatre I keep having to count the black women I know who are directors and choreographers, rather than those who are performers, because there is a paucity of women of colour who occupy those roles in South Africa. Even fewer such women exist in Botswana. When I watch the news on global broadcasting channels, or science or travel channels, the women I see tend to be starving in Ethiopia, or victims in Sudan, or a more tourist/anthropologist friendly template of dark, bare-breasted, and smiling into a rite of passage. These are the images that supposedly represent me in places outside of Africa. Yet very few of these women, of us women who are so often seen, described, studied, aided, donated to, are present in the making of academic discourse that pertains to us. This is also true of black women theatre makers.

I have outlined a series of experiences and situations in different places that have had an impact on me, as a way of providing the reader with a context for my studies, my work and its rationale. With that context in mind, I want the focus of the paper to be my own work. That said, I cannot ignore that as a black woman theatre maker in Johannesburg, South Africa, I am part of a minority. Nor can I ignore that my experience of playing the character of Long John Silver in the play *Treasure Island,* in an American private school is not the same as making sensitive, emotionally volatile work that has everything to do with being a woman in Africa. Moreover, I have to privilege my voice in the work that I do and the writing I do about the work, because my identity as a black African woman continues to

shift with the work. My consciousness of these facets of my identity has an impact on the work that I do, and necessitates a critical but self reflexive analysis of the work.

One reason why I want to write about my work is so that I can begin the process of archiving it. It is quite difficult to source literature by or about African women theatre practitioners in the Wartenweiler Library—which is the main and largest library at the University of Witwatersrand. There is very little such literature, particularly where African women of colour are concerned. In that sense, the academic engagement or the theorising and dialogue that one would hope should be inclusive of the work of African women happens in a circuitous and detrimentally informal manner. Part of the challenge is that when the work of women is written and theorised about, it is usually as part of the work of a collective, or as information that comes from a lecturer who has seen the work or who knows the practitioner. It is not enough, I think, to 'ask around' to find out who is practicing and what kind of work they are making.

Another reason I want to write about my work is that I want to attempt to give the work life beyond the stage in a manner that allows me to learn more from the work by way of retrospection. It is true that massive lessons arose during the creative processes, but these are becoming clearer, in a sense, as I write. While I understand that performance is volatile in that the magic of its impact is contained in the moment and cannot ever be relived exactly, I feel that there is a part of the magic that stays on in the memories of the creators of the work and those who are audience to it. Just as the immediacy of a live performance can unleash experiences for all those involved, I would suggest that the memory, in some instances, facilitates the efficacy, the beauty, the ugliness, the experience of (a)

performance. I am attempting, therefore, to archive both the work and my own memory of the work as parts of the same experience.

To archive the work—which comprises my voice, the voices of the performers I have worked with, and the voices of our audiences—is also to insist that the experiences we shared through performance can no longer be considered as peripheral. In any way. Thus, writing about the work offers an opportunity to locate it—and its various theoretical, academic and practical transgressions—in the centre of our academic and social discourses.

I am particularly interested in how I have navigated the grey area that lies between my personal interest in the kind of work that I have done, and my practice. Part of my struggle has been to decide where the emphasis of my paper should lie: should I focus my writing by placing my personal motivations, growths, and challenges at the centre, or should I focus on my development as a practitioner? Which of the two trajectories is more appropriate for academic study? These questions have been important in that the struggle to decide what to do became the revelation of what to do. I want to assert that there cannot be a separation between the practice and the practitioner, myself, as a person. The lessons of the work include a fundamental one, which is that my work is my life and I do my work in order to live. I shall speak to this later in the report.

The report will present three case studies, each of which was a creative process that can be described as 'Practice as Research'. In each of these projects, I played the multiple roles of director/choreographer/researcher/facilitator. I will assert that these projects are solid examples of the various lessons I have learned about performance, about directing, about theatre as healer and theatre as ritual. I will describe the processes in as much detail as is

possible, and then make comparisons between them in order to identify common threads, insights, conflicts and other important material.

It is important for the reader to get a sense of the processes that we embarked on, and the relationship between the process and the 'outcome'. This may facilitate a better understanding of *how* the work unfolded, and *why*. I have therefore written in detail, and in a style which will reflect the working atmosphere of each of the projects. Additionally, I have described each case study as separate from the others, with the intention that the parallels between case studies will become more and more apparent as the reader engages with each case study. I have also provided a summary of the common themes, in order to give the reader a solid set of themes, to which they may add if they recognise more.

THE CASE STUDIES

Chapter 1

Even as I Walk, 2008

This piece arose as an extracurricular project that I pursued while I was completing my honours degree. Working collaboratively with a group of women—drama and music students at the Wits School of Arts—we devised the piece over a period of about six weeks, exploring the broad theme of the ways in which as women we encounter our metaphorical and sometimes literal deaths, and still carry on walking. Our different identities and backgrounds made us a resource-rich company: three Batswana and three South Africans, one woman was born in Swaziland and another's family lived there, three women with drivers licenses and three without, two women with straight hair, one with relaxed hair, one with an Afro, one with curly hair and the last with dreadlocks. We all spoke at least four languages between us and had all travelled to at least eight countries. Some women were avid readers and others were writers, some were musicians and others were dancers.

Much of the devising process aimed at enabling the performers as co-creators: they wrote stories, brought stories, brought music, and brought and made pictures. As a director-choreographer, I shared the task of constructing a vocabulary that had meaning for the performers; we sought to synergise the movement with the narrative: the movement was the narrative, the movement was the text, and the text was the bodies of the performers. Additionally, we worked to identify some ways in which to engage the audience: we placed them in the performance area with the performers, let them experience the performance

from the vantage points of the performers, let them hear and feel the performers breathe, sweat, move, and speak.

The lessons from this experience were similar to those in the previous projects: the audience's behaviour during the offering was a part of the offering. They reacted with shock, fear, embarrassment and delight to be plucked from their seats at random and led to the benches onstage where the performers sat and performed beneath stage lights. Because the lesson recurred, it is important to raise a question which will also form part of the theorising around my work: if the behaviour of the audience is part of a creative offering, can that behaviour be regarded as 'performance'? And how then would I define 'performance'?

Methodology: The Rehearsals

Even as I Walk was difficult because it was the first piece of devised choreographic work that I facilitated/directed/choreographed for performance by other collaborators, and it followed the only piece of devised work that I had put together as a solo work. I was not sure that I understood choreographic technicalities and concepts enough to try and devise an entire piece for audience engagement. I was not even sure that I had enough creative devises and emotional strength to facilitate the process. What pushed me to do the work was the anger I felt at the time: I felt a lot of fury because my relationship with the world around me felt strained by my having to sacrifice parts of myself—that is, to silence or stifle some of my desires, interests and identities—in order to remain an acceptable woman. I was also seeing other women around me struggling with the same kinds of challenges: how to negotiate what they want with or out of their lives, with what society expected from them. At this stage, my thoughts on these challenges had not become specific enough to

engender the kind of rigour that was characteristic of *The Wages of Sin*, which would come later as quite an intense process.

The rehearsal process was a constant discovery on my part. I devised exercises with particular objectives in mind. As an Honours student, I was just getting introduced to Dramatherapy: issues of ethical practice, the physical, psychological and emotional safety of the facilitator and of the participants and so forth. I was very preoccupied with these issues, because I also felt incredibly strongly that myself and my cast had a lot of anger and hurt feelings, which it was possible to address through the rehearsal process. I was not attempting to give therapy to the cast, but I hoped that the creative process would give us all some relief at the very least.

One of the rehearsals that followed about two weeks of getting to know each other, sharing stories and building trust, was particularly useful, and I used it again in *The Wages of Sin*. We had been having discussions about what we understood as 'the walking dead', the people we had seen who looked like they had died and were just walking shells, the music or literature we had encountered that spoke to the fury we all acknowledged we felt; the cast was growing increasingly edgy about how the process was forcing them to confront issues that they felt they could not possibly dig up and still function afterward. I asked the cast to each imagine a woman that they felt could handle any kind of pain, pressure, fear or trauma that they themselves had or might experience both in and outside the rehearsal space. They imagined what this woman looked like, how she spoke, what she wore, where she lived, how she walked. Can this woman, I asked them, stand in for you when you cannot take what you are going through? Can she experience things for you, and keep them with her when you feel like you don't want to or cannot deal with those things? Everyone

seemed relieved to have someone like that. They continued to each draw their woman, and I found it interesting to see what kinds of characters emerged. There were women with massive ears who could listen and listen for hours without getting tired, who had wings and could fly away when they were not inclined to stay in a stressful situation, there were women who had green and blue scales on their bodies to keep them calm and centred; ugly green and blue scales to repel any kind of pressure to be beautiful or feminine or soft. We agreed that every time we went through an emotionally or psychologically taxing exercise, the cast would allow their women to step in for them.

The exercise worked beautifully. The cast shared in agonising detail their anger, their experiences of feeling like they were dying in bits and pieces, their secrets, the pain of trying to come up again from the dead to join the living. And each time, somebody would say she was glad her woman was nearby, because her woman could handle anything.
We spent another three hour rehearsal investigating how it felt to be dead. I was very, very nervous about this exercise. I was going to ask the cast to die, and then expect them to be alright afterwards. While it was a risky exercise, I also felt that it was very necessary for us to know what it means to die, if we were so angry that we had been forced to kill off parts of ourselves. The cast all lay in a circle, heads and shoulders almost touching, and called on their women to travel with them. I asked them to raise their hands if they were not coping with the exercise at any stage of its development, and I would wake them. I asked them to breathe in and out slowly, easily until they were comfortable to breathe that way. Their bodies would now become very heavy, so heavy that they would begin to sink into the floor, through it, and down a long ladder. The bottom of the ladder would lead into a fermenting mixture of vomit, blood, faeces, urine, pus and spit. And that would be the home

of the walking dead. There was no exit from this dark place, and the ladder had disappeared.

While I guided the development of the 'nightmare', I observed the cast. One cast member, usually very beautiful with creamy yellowy brown skin, started to look very pale very quickly. Her body looked very heavy indeed, and her toes kept jerking at random. She explained later that she was trying with all she had to wiggle her toes, but they were too heavy. Another cast member eventually ended up lying on top of another, explaining later that she didn't want to raise her hand to stop the exercise, but she needed the support of someone else. Just as I was waking them up, one cast member started to cough and choke. I was terrified. I touched her, to let her wake up slowly. Her body was unbelievably cold to the touch. After I reversed the exercise, when they had climbed up the ladder and come up through the floor to the light, and when they had released their women from 'duty', I gave them each a strawberry to smell, touch and taste before they opened their eyes. I hoped that the strawberries would be a beautiful thing to experience after such an ordeal, and it would wear down some of the trauma immediately.

The feedback they gave was to be very useful to us personally as a kind of healing experience, as testament that we faced our various deaths and came out on the other side, and it was instrumental in directing the trajectory of the work. The woman whose skin turned pale during the exercise explained her journey. She had felt like she could not breathe, there was too much filth and she was mortified to see that the ladder was gone and she could not leave. Every instinct was to wiggle her toes to remind herself that she was alive and not dead. By the end of the exercise she had stopped trying to wiggle her toes, she had realised that she needed to allow her entire self to die in order to acknowledge the

effect that her relationship with her absent father had had on her. And so she stopped fighting. What I saw while she was lying on the floor was her entire body slumping further into the floor. Even her eyeballs stopped moving then. When she came up and smelled the strawberry, she said she felt she had a great deal of power, which had come from surviving the repulsive conditions. Eating the strawberry made her laugh for a long while. The woman who had gone very cold to the touch and started choking was amazing to listen to. 'Jessica, you don't understand. This means that there is nothing in the world I can't do!' She is laughing uncontrollably. She is realising that she died and came back. 'I'm so traumatised! But I think I'm going to need to go back there again.' She said that when she began choking, she had lost all control of her body, and so the spit that she had not swallowed was building up in her mouth and sliding down her windpipe. She felt that she was very dead, and she felt sorry she had to die in those conditions. Once she decided that she wouldn't die forever, her body started functioning, and the choking happened because her lungs were now responding to the saliva that had slid into them un-expelled.

The exercise was very difficult, and when I was alone in my room later that night, I had to ask myself whether I had been reckless with the cast and put us all in serious danger. I had taken the cast through an intense exercise which could have become very unsafe: I did not have other people or external mechanisms to help me contain any situation that might arise; I would have faced a major situation if a cast member did not lift her hand when she felt herself going to a point she could not bring herself out of. And then I started to also interrogate the positive aspects of the exercise. The cast had all come out of it very shaken, but with a sense that they had walked through a baptism of fire and had come out of it alive. They had evaluated what they had originally meant when they said parts of them were dead: they were not using these words flippantly, they understood what it meant to die.

Additionally, I was encouraged by the resilience of the cast: they all knew that they had to raise their hands if they felt overwhelmed by the journey. None of them did, but all of them gave in to the exercise. There was something profound about the cast going knowingly into uncertain territory, and allowing the journey to shift their positions regarding the subject matter of the work. I resolved to use the exercise again, but this time with even more safety mechanisms built into it, for my own piece of mind and for the safety of the group.

In some rehearsals I would ask the cast to bring their writing, other literature, music, pictures, objects and other things that for them, spoke to the idea of living death, of being a woman who is missing parts of herself. In this way, the work ceased to be a general depiction of a general issue that is generally about women. We developed material based on the stories we had heard, the things we had seen, the music we listened to, the objects that represented all kinds of experiences. Even as we worked, deaths happened all around us: one cast member lost two friends in a car accident, another was mugged right outside of campus, and a third drove through a shoot-out on a highway. We lost a cast member after she sustained a knee injury in rehearsal, and the group struggled to find cohesion after this.

At the same time, my uterus and fallopian tubes became very inflamed, causing excruciating period pain. When I got to the hospital, I was asked if there was a possibility that I was having a miscarriage, and I said no. They made me have a pregnancy test anyway, which they charged me for, and the doctor shoved his hand inside me, causing me to scream in pain. When he finished, I asked him what he was doing, what he was looking for (because he had not explained the role of hurting me with his hand in the curative process). Very shortly and condescendingly, he replied as he turned his back and walked out of the exam room that he had done ‘a pelvic exam’, and that was the end of the explanation. He did not even ask my name, or the nature of the pain that I was feeling, or for how long it had been there. I paid R1000 for a pregnancy test I knew I did not need, a

painful and insensitive ‘pelvic exam’ and the decision to shield my mother from the pain she would feel if she knew about the experience.

Out of our reflections on these events and on rehearsals, came most of the text that held the physical expression of the work together. While the deaths I have just mentioned were not specific to the women in the group, they formed part of the complex web of events and realities that the women felt they had to deal with everyday and in a gendered manner. As a woman, the cast member who lost two friends could not cry for her friends because it was such a ‘feminine thing to do’, and because she felt she had to be strong for her other friends. At the same time, by not shedding tears she was seen as masculine and cold. Meanwhile, the cast member who injured her knee felt unsure about her response to the pain. She cried, she scrunched up her face, she whimpered. The attending radiologist accused her of being spoilt, of not behaving like a lady.

One of the solos that arose out of the death exercise was one of the more powerful pieces of work that I have been able to help create. One of the cast members was a woman with a big, soft, round body contained inside smooth, dark brown skin. Other people would describe her as ‘fat’, and that fact formed her engagement with the entire piece. She felt that many, many people, even those who were close to her, lost sight of her entire being by seeing her weight as her identity. She felt that the rest of her was dying because nobody bothered to get to know her. She felt that everything from her sense of humour to her generosity and her interest in music and writing was atrophying because all people saw was her weight. ‘The weight issue’ affected her relationships with her friends, with the people she was romantically attracted to, with the people who were her teachers, with strangers. This was a multi-talented woman: a serious musician and student of music, she also writes, sings,

teaches, is an actress, a friend and a woman. It is disturbing to me that not even I would have thought of casting her in a piece of physical theatre because of the way her body is constituted. But I am also amazed that I was the first person she approached in order to demand a place in the cast. We discovered together that she is also a dancer, and we are now working on our third and fourth projects together since *Even As I Walk*.

We had a series of rehearsals where it was just us. I gave her a thin bench and asked her to do all the clever tricks she could do and which made her feel clever and special, on it, with it, around it etc. She balanced on it, and became excited when she saw that it was not going to break under her weight. She did splits, and became excited when I commented on how flexible and agile she was. She pretended the bench was a base guitar, and played it and danced with it. Something very sensual began to emerge: her movement was utterly indulgent, and completely unself-conscious. She sat on the bench and appreciated her skin, her curves, the weight of her breasts, the strength of her dreadlocked hair, her tiny hands, and her back.

The next rehearsal was about her revisiting the death exercise, but this time she was allowed to take the bench and her woman with her. When she reached the slime and the filth, I was not surprised to see that the bench became a weapon with which she defended herself from what she later called 'the fuckers who keep saying I'm fat'. She got angry, she cried, she screamed, she became powerful, she was weak. When she came up the ladder, she felt that while it was unpleasant to die, and to constantly have to deal with people calling her 'fat', she felt that she had discovered a small source of strength from having confronted 'the fuckers' in an environment that she was familiar with and they were not. The filth was her turf, and that gave her an advantage. To some degree, I felt that I was also

being taught a lesson: she had had to come straight at me to demand that she be cast in the piece before I could see her as a competent performer who could move. I was witnessing her vulnerabilities, and I was privy to the discussions where she unpacked the reality of being a big woman, particularly in the performing arts. I found myself crafting our rehearsals together in such a way that I became 'a fucker' and I could undergo the process of shifting how I 'saw' her.

We eventually began a debate about what she should perform in: a costume or her skin. She liked the idea of performing nude very much, was feeling more and more at ease with her body. I felt that the space we had been allocated for the piece was too large, and we had no control over who the audience would be: it was a festival after all. I had wanted to move the seating onto the performance area in order to close the gap between the audience and the performers, and in order to make the space as intimate as necessary for the cast to share what they had in relative safety. I was not allowed to move the seating, and so a massive space lay between the audience and the performers. I suggested that perhaps she perform in a nightie, as a start, to gauge whether she could withstand and respond to the voyeuristic gaze of the audience in the first performance.

The Offering/Performance:

There were four women onstage, each sitting on a small bench. The four benches were the set. The four women wore outrageous looking sleeping garments: short sleeveless dresses with hearts, flowers and lipsticks on the satiny fabric. They wore ridiculously red lipstick, with pale powder on their faces, legs and arms[4]. They each had some kind of picture drawn onto their bodies, but a picture which was symbolic to them: symbolic of life, of death, of

[4] Please see the attached cd entitled 'Photos: *They Were Silent, The Wages of Sin, Even as I Walk*' for the folder entitled '*Even as I Walk*.'

womanhood. And on their heads they wore even more ridiculous sunhats that left their faces in shadow. These they kept exchanging, putting on and taking off, using them to hide, to fan themselves into calmness, to stress their points. The lighting was a pale blue wash, and stayed the same for the duration of the 45 minute performance.

The piece opens with the four women sitting on separate benches, stretching their muscles and fixing their attire in the dark, only to be exposed by irregular flashes of light. When the constant blue light has finally faded on, they are arranged prettily around one bench in the centre, where it looks like they are having a picture taken while they are at their weekly tea gathering. The light is glaring, they look pale and silly with their big hats and night dresses and ugly red lipstick. At once they explode:

> You fucks!
> How dare you sit there and watch us
> As if this is not what you do daily
> You there, in the front row,
> You're licking us with your eyeballs
> Stop!
> Woman 1[5]: Stop! Give her back. You are trying to take her, you're trying to inhale her, walk away with her in your hair. I said stop, dammit!
> Woman 2: I'm leaving.
> Women 1, 3 &4: I'm leaving. I'm climbing down the ladder to search for myself in piss and shit and when I come back
> Women 2&4 : And when I come back...
> All: And when I come back...(threatening). (*Even as I Walk*, 2008 p.1)

From the start of the piece, with the first line, there is a sense that these women are insane and they are capable of anything, and in fact we know them because we see them every day. It is a shock that they are capable of *anything*. 'You fucks' is not that person in the

[5] I have avoided placing the names of the performers in the paper to protect their identities.

front row. Everyone who is watching the piece and judging and looking, is a fuck. Thus the audience stopped being an amorphous concept made up of 'people,' it became a group of individuals who were watching, gazing, seeing in very particular ways. Just as quickly as they got into the pose for the 'photo', the women onstage were carrying one of them on a bench as if in a coffin, and they kept pouring her out of the bench and into the audience like a pail full of dirty water:

> All: Dearly beloved, a woman was lost while
> All-Woman 1: She cooked supper and met deadlines and kissed him
> Woman 1: And had a hand squeeze her left buttock and steal something of hers
> All-Woman 1: And was told she should smile more, while they took and took and took and took
> Woman 1: And never gave back
> All-Woman 1: while she soiled the family's honour and ate sand everyday so her chest wouldn't be so flat.
> All: We are so sad (*Even as I Walk*. 2008. p.1)

It was very interesting to see how the eight to twelve members of the audience who were picked at random by the performers and led to sit on the benches for the rest of the performance responded. There were expressions of shock, of fear, embarrassment and confusion. Nobody who sat onstage wanted to do so initially, and those members of the audience who were not picked were clearly relieved that it 'wasn't them.' In that way, we redirected the gaze of the audience from the performers to the audience members who were sitting on the brightly lit stage. Suddenly there were people on stage to be watched, and the performers could finally be engaged with rather than watched because the spectacle was the audience themselves.

The vocabulary of the piece was layered with references to death, to fighting, to being defeated, to being invaded. There was a duet where two women became a puppet and a

ventriloquist, manipulating each other until it was impossible to decide who the puppet was and whom the puppeteer. They played with their hair, pulled it, shook it, and held it back. This sequence came out of a rehearsal where the cast pointed out that so much of the behaviour of women is controlled by society through the way our hair looks. Our hair, we were arguing, has stopped being ours and has become a text that can be read, and which we doctor in order to be read as normal and acceptable. There was a duet where two women played a torture game of touching each other in ways that were invasive but also supposedly affectionate. They forced themselves on each other, they struggled with the conflict. At some point in the duet they simply stood there and slapped each other repeatedly. The audience drew collective breaths, some laughed uncomfortably, and others looked away.

The only part of the work to be done in silence was the solo on the bench, where the woman whose identity was being destroyed by what people thought of her weight took great care to express every detail of her creative process. She used her breath to power her movement, to bring back the feelings of fear and loneliness that came from having to negotiate social relationships based on her weight; she mastered the raw power that came from being able to lift the thin but heavy bench and spin around and around to ward off any invasion of the space she was enjoying right then; she basked in the joy of playing with her own hair, of letting her back move in slow, sensuous rolls, or seeing herself as beautiful in a public space where she would not have considered it before. All that could be heard from the audience was the breath of the performer: coming in powerful exhalations that were excitement or anger, retreating in sudden and sharp inhalations that were fear or delight.

The process of building *Even as I Walk* was hinged on what I will call the methodology of not knowing. We did what we felt was appropriate, because we did not know what to do to communicate the intricacies of our stories, to bring them to life in performance. And I will suggest, also, that working in the dark became useful for the other two case studies. Working in the dark is a multilayered concept: we worked in the dark because we used our intuition to guide us, we worked in the dark pits of our own anger, we worked in the dark as a way to confront what we know, what we have experienced, and what we feel. This is similar to having ones eyes closed in an unfamiliar space, and having to navigate this space with the remaining senses—which are heightened because one sense has been temporarily disabled.

Chapter 2

They Were Silent, 2008/9

They Were Silent arose out of a collaboration between myself as the director, and Kabi Thulo as the performer. As his Master's research, Thulo sought to find ways to generate synergy between performance and ritual; as a newly initiated healer and a theatre practitioner, he was interested in an exploration of the tensions embedded in locating theatre within ritual, and, conversely, placing ritualistic expression in a theatrical space. The creative project eventually became an attempt to blur what has become a tripartite division between the 'all-knowing' director figure, the experiencing performer and the receiving audience.

When one is a Sangoma, or a healer of a Shaman, one lives a complex set of realities. On one hand, boSangoma is a sacred ancestral gift, which one receives by heeding the spiritual calling. This means that the healer is in constant communication with his or her Ancestors and other Spirits. The process of becoming a Sangoma is different for different people, but all Sangomas undergo a kind of initiation process which introduces them to their practice: how to communicate with the spirit world, the work of healing people's bodies, minds and spirits, the work of reflection on themselves and their practices as healers and human beings. On the other hand, boSangoma, being a sacred calling, necessitates the Sangoma's involvement with the public: that is, the community within which he or she lives and works, and a withdrawal from the public. The withdrawal is the space for initiation processes, prayer, reflection and privacy to be with oneself and one's Spirits.

That said, there are various ceremonies of boSangoma which are dependent on the involvement of the community—the healing of which is the responsibility of the Sangoma who has been called by the Ancestors for the very purpose—and there are ceremonies which are open only to specific people: patients of the healer, their families or people who are being initiated into boSangoma, and so forth. In that sense, *They Were Silent* speaks directly to the role of the audience in facilitating ritual. When I met Thulo, we were both studying, he had just come out of the initiation process, which for him was a physically, emotionally and spiritually taxing process of learning[6].

Methodology: The Rehearsals

The rehearsals for this piece were very difficult. I began them as an individual with no prior experience or knowledge of what it means to be a healer, and even less experience or knowledge of the implications of being a healer in social spaces—including the theatre. The entire process became not just a creative process, but a process of learning for me. Given that the impetus for the making of the piece arose out of Thulo's desire to explore his own story, that his performance of it happened whilst he was in a state of liminality, and given that as the director I was working to grapple with and make sense out of subject matter with which I was not familiar, my role became more and more of what I saw as an ideal audience experience. This became part of the answer to the question of what kind of access and how much of it I should, as the director, afford the audience. I realised that the audience had the same capacity as I did to labour through and create their own methods of decoding the offering. Just as the performer was labouring to reconcile his spiritual gift with his artistic reality, the audience could not be robbed of the opportunity to process what they were seeing.

[6] I am indebted to Kabi Thulo, his Ancestors and Spirits, for allowing me to write about his Practice as a Sangoma, and for sharing his knowledge and experience with me.

At that stage in the work, I did not know how to articulate, through performance, the multiple and concurrent spaces or realities that exist in the life of a healer. I understood that Thulo lived in the world of the living, where ordinary people perceived him as another ordinary person; yet he also travelled in his dreams, and on an ordinary day could meet and converse with spirits who occupied a different realm. These concepts are even now, quite abstract for me, and I wondered how I might communicate their complexity without turning them into fantasy and lore that would alienate the audience and Thulo from each other. Additionally, it was also a challenge to imagine how to engage with these abstract spaces, whilst also engaging with the spaces that Thulo occupied as a performer. That is, the theatre space, the space of 'performing' and the space amongst the audience as another human being.

Moreover, I knew that we would also have to talk about how Thulo realised he had a calling, and how this influenced the trajectory of his life. We would at least have to retrace his steps, even if only for rehearsal purposes, even if none of that material became part of the offering at the end of the rehearsal process. Thus, I also had to consider how we might weave in constant journeys between the past, present and future of Thulo and the spirits with which he spoke. In a conversation before the creative process began, Thulo had attempted to explain to me that temporality is radically different in the worlds of the spirits from how we understand it in our everyday life. We were building an offering that, by virtue of its biographical content, made the expression of spatial and temporal considerations complex. Even more challenging was how to negotiate the complexity of the space time relationship in the life of a healer, with the space-time relationship of a healer who is also a performer, and who is therefore also occupying the spatial and temporal reality of the performance space.

In the second rehearsal I focused our enquiry on the different locations or spaces that Thulo has occupied or which he is constantly travelling between. As in the first rehearsal, Thulo burnt *impepho*[7] in the space, and called on his ancestors and my ancestors to give us the way to begin rehearsing, to allow us a productive rehearsal, and to watch over us as we worked. We then began to hum softly, and to touch the walls around us in order to warm up the space. I took some string, stuck it on the floor and constructed three large concentric circles in the centre of the room. As a warm up exercise, I asked Thulo to imagine that the room was the neighbourhood where he grew up. As much as it was a warm up exercise for him, it was a starting point for me. He would then walk or run around the space which surrounded the outer circle, talking me through the number of houses, the neighbours, the churches, the colours, the landscapes that were his childhood. He would direct me to a particular landmark if I requested it, 'walking there' as he did. In this way, I got a sense of the child who grew to heed the calling to be a healer, and the complexity of the context within which he lived.

The second stage of the exercise allowed me to see Thulo in a manner that I would not normally have had access to, as someone who is not an initiated healer. I asked him to imagine that the three pieces of string were the boundaries separating or merging the different worlds that he could inhabit. The innermost and smallest circle would function as the world of the departed, where the spirits and our ancestors lived. The second circle would function as the dream-world, where the spirits and ancestors might have visited him. The largest and outermost circle would function as the space in everyday reality where the spirits and the ancestors might visit him, resulting in a heightened state of being that

[7] This plant, when burnt, has a very strong aroma, and is used in South Africa by healers to call on or invite ancestors and other spirits.

observers might call ‘trance.’ The rest of the space would function as whatever we might need along the way.

In the smallest circle, Thulo stood very still, an invited guest. I watched as he slipped into heightened consciousness and began to vibrate. His legs were rooted in the same spot, while his torso swayed from side to side. He clasped his hands together, as if holding onto the edge of a cliff, and began to flex his muscles very, very slowly. As his body became freer, he would move out of the circle into the next circle without realising it: the boundaries between his worlds became more and more porous and indefinite, more and more like meetings or transitions rather than boundaries. He walked back and forth as if being called from different directions, as if hearing many voices at once. Where I sat I could feel the energy in the room changing, I could feel the room warming up. After about twenty minutes, he slid onto the floor, on his hands and knees and began to travel around in circles. He was dripping with sweat, and his body was jerking arhythmically. Sounds came out of his mouth, loud and raw and unintelligible: it sounded as if he was choking and gagging and retching at the same time, but even then, these sounds were a language. I could not understand this language, but I recognised it as a language.

Thulo began to travel back to the illness that he had suffered before answering the calling. Here, he writhed on the floor, whimpering. His face, stuck to the floor, was twisted, as if he had had a stroke, and like this it remained until he left the circle. After ten minutes, his body froze completely, and I could see him struggling to unlock it. He struggled like this, sometimes managing to raise a leg or his torso, for another fifteen minutes.

Below is an extract from the journal that I kept for our rehearsal process. In another rehearsal, I recorded my response to the physicality and electricity that Thulo generated while he was in the smallest circle, his consciousness in an intense state of liminality:

> -how will you hold the performance? [His state of liminality was so intense that I worried he would not be able to maintain a performance]
> -*What* is going on? What are you seeing? [It was clear that he was interacting with entities that I could not see, and the interaction was intense and other-worldly]
> -stillness of face is terrifying; a rising of body and energy
> -vocal vocabulary wide, inaccessible; intensely disturbing, adds a deeper strangeness to performance landscape [Here I recorded my own feelings and reactions to what I was seeing and hearing]
> -how to make inner world [inner circle] accessible to audience? Should we?
> -is that a realistic goal? A desirable one? (Lejowa, 2008.Journal notes)

We eventually decided, as I will elaborate later on, that it was best to let the audience struggle through the content in the same way that I had, without attempting to mediate their experience.

In the second circle, the dream world, there was another clear change in the energy. Thulo explored it with delight. He lay on his back, looking quite relaxed and at peace. After a few minutes he sat up and examined his body as though it was something new or strange. His movements were gentle, contemplative, and dreamlike.

When he finally managed to roll into the outer circle, he tuned in to how it felt to be resistant to crossing between worlds, whether into the circles or out. On his feet, he walked and ran around and around in the circle, his indecision apparent as he negotiated with the spirits. By this time, his clothes were soaked with sweat, and he had not rested or had water

for over two hours. Because he was doing this work as a healer, he rehearsed wearing the beads that connect him to his ancestors and spirits. One pair of beads on one of his ankles snapped, and beads fell and rolled everywhere. Even as I felt gooseflesh on my arm because of the possible implications, I felt another shift in the energy. The room was full of tension: I could see that he was speaking with beings who were very present in the room, but I could not see them or understand their presence. He attempted to step out of the circle, but his right foot appeared to be stuck in the circle. When he did leave the circle, it was with one arm dragging the rest of his body on the floor.

I waited for a few minutes before I spoke to him, thinking he would be exhausted buy two and a half hours of physical and spiritual work. Instead, he began to reassemble his beads, and this took twenty minutes, because the beads kept falling off of the string. By this time, I was terrified: I did not know what the implications of the broken beads were, I did not know how I would give audiences access to what I had just experienced, and I was not sure how to continue the rehearsal and unpack the exercise. We sat down, and I asked him to talk me through the various stages of the exercise. When he described the spirits he had met, and the ensuing interactions, I became acutely aware of how the changes in energy and in his physicality that I observed corresponded quite closely with his experience. I also began to understand that the audience would need to undergo the same journey that I had undergone: I could not digest the material for the audience in the effort to make the work more accessible. I had had to rely on my own sense and my own willingness to decipher what I experienced, without Thulo having to explain to me what was going on. We had shared a journey and lived it in different ways, and that would have to suffice for the offering.

In another rehearsal, I added more 'spaces': areas of the performance space which would function as locations and periods of time in Thulo's life. This rehearsal was based on our conversation in a previous rehearsal where we traced the events that led up to 'the moment of truth,' the moment when Thulo realised he had been called. I took more of the string, and we set a corner that would function as the space where he feels most comfortable with being a healer: a space of peace, reflection and complete submergence into the spiritual. Another corner would function as the area where different aspects of his identity merged, conflicted or were shed in order to accommodate his spiritual needs.

He spent forty five minutes in the first corner. In the second corner, Thulo changed completely. His back curved into a convex shape, and he leaned low on one side. He started to walk with a swagger, one arm slung behind his back and the other swinging low. This is the classic posture of a Pantsula[8]: constantly prepared for attack, but also intimidating. He began to dance: a set of slick movements that are also associated with Pantsula. While he moved, he started to speak to some unknown person, to threaten this person, to retreat from them. I eventually realised that he was retreating from himself as a young Pantsula, and slipping into his relationship with Christianity. He began to sing a church hymn: 'O re ke tsamaye, moya'[9] and to stomp and clap rhythmically. Just when the tempo of his song and dance were reaching climax, he jumped nearly half way across the room, from the 'conflict corner' right into the smallest circle of the original three. I could not believe my eyes. While I understood that he had made the transition to a heightened state of being, I had not realised that it extended to his physical presence. There was no way that he could have

[8] Pantsula is a South African word which describes, for lack of a better term, a youth subculture which places importance on a particular political ideology that is made manifest in a dance genre, a language, dress code and so forth.

[9] The lyrics of this song are multilayered. They literally translate into 'The spirit wants me to go'. This can be red in several ways: The Holy Spirit of the Christian Trinity might be present, but at the same time, an ancestral spirit might also be calling.

managed that leap in normal circumstances. When he finally concluded the exercise, he could not remember that he had leapt across the room, and when I asked him to leap, he could not do it. For the rest of the rehearsals and the performances that followed, 'the leap' became one of the indicators of what kind of spiritual state Thulo was in.

In a rehearsal that I asked him to prepare and facilitate, Thulo asked me to sit in the centre circle, and to cover myself with one of the cloths that were part of his spiritual dress. I sat there in silence for about twenty minutes, feeling quite bored and impatient for 'something to happen'. I would recall this feeling during performances when audiences began to fidget uncomfortably because the 'action' took so long to unfold. I began to feel strongly that Thulo had disappeared, but there was somebody else with me. I did not wait to see who this person was. I got so terrified that I threw the cloth off and got out of the circle as fast as I could.

Thus, my approach to directing became audience-like, that is, receiving, questioning and responding, rather than constructing, editing and representing a specific reality or concept. I made a strong commitment in this process to take increasingly larger risks by following the nuanced changes in the energy and intensity of the rehearsals, an approach that far outweighed the traditional directorial use of theatrical devices and the like. *They Were Silent*, then, had become a paradigm shift for informing a way of working which acknowledges the performer and the director as valuable internal resources for the process of making work, and which highlights the expression of identity and soul.

The Offering/Performance[10]

[10] Please see attached DVD entitled '*They Were Silent*: Performance.'

I would spend an hour with the production crew to set up the space for the offering. Thulo and I had decided that we would invite the audience into the performance area, to give them access to the energies that could change subtly during the offering, to the heat and the sound that was generated there. The crew and I created three circles in the centre of the space, and covered them with rich soil. At the two 'corners', we placed screens, behind which Thulo performed. The screens were aesthetically interesting because they cast shadows and silhouettes that distorted Thulo's figure, but they were far more significant than their aesthetic value. I had felt during the rehearsal process that while Thulo could share with me as much as he could what it meant to walk the journey of a healer, I always experienced his journey in shadow. I could never see the whole picture, or appreciate his experience entirely because there were aspects of it I could never understand. And so the screens were the membranes through which mine and the audience's experiences were mediated.

In the three areas between the screens and the circles, we placed three sites for audience seating. The chairs were placed in a staggered pattern, so that everyone could see a part of the stage at any given time. The audience that sat close to upstage right had a direct view of the screen at downstage left and the three circles in front of them. They only managed to peek through the two screens at downstage right, which was where Thulo began the offering. The audience who sat at downstage centre had a direct view of the three circles in front of them, and parts of the screens on either side of them. The audience who sat at upstage left had a direct view of the two screens at downstage right and the circles in front of them. They could only see a small part of the screen at downstage left. In that sense, the audience got to experience the clarity and the shadow in Thulo's journey.

Once the crew and I had set up the screens, lit the candles that surrounded the space, placed the Allstar sneakers that represent Pantsula culture and placed the water that Thulo would wash himself in, we left the space to allow him the time to warm the space and call on all our ancestors for support. Before they entered the performance space, audiences washed their hands to cleanse themselves of any negative energy. I ushered every audience member individually to a seat of their choice, all the while making sure that the space was still correctly set up.

Hardly any audience members could tell when the offering had begun. They focused on the central circles and waited for the entrance of the performer. Thulo would begin quietly in the downstage right hand corner, moving very slowly and deliberately, easing himself into a heightened state. Behind the screen and behind Thulo would be a stage light, creating a silhouette that was larger than him. I made it a point to sit at various places in the audience throughout the run of the piece. And depending on where I sat, I could see him in shadow, I could see him and see his shadow at once, or I could see him without the shadows. He would spend twenty minutes in that corner, sometimes longer. After ten minutes most audience members would begin to fidget, to become uncomfortable with the silence and the lack of 'action'. Meanwhile, Thulo would take his time, as if being born, and eventually slip out from between the two screens.

Still in 'trance', he would begin to run around the circles, talking the audience through the directions from his house to church, as he had done for me earlier. He would arrive at church, quite late, and begin the hymn 'Oa ntaela, Moya, oa natela, Moya. O re ke tsamaye, Moya'. He would begin to sing and dance, and to wash himself in the water that represents church. But while he does this, he would make a literal leap out of church into the centre

circle, where his interaction with the Spirits is the most intense. And here is where Thulo's physical vocabulary was at its most disturbing, beautiful, heartbreaking, strange, familiar and honest.

There would then be another transition, this time leading us into the Pantsula phase of Thuo's life. Here, he goes back to the 'conflict corner', where he puts on his Allstar sneakers, changes his posture and transforms his language into a whistle and about five words in total. He becomes quite a menacing character, taking time to stare down and intimidate the person we later realise is himself. Eventually, the Pantsula character breaks down into tears, finally accepting the implications of his ancestral calling. Thulo is 'reduced' to a babbling child, calling for his mother as he sheds his Pantsula dress, becomes completely naked, and begins the symbolic work of donning earth, beads, and cloth. And for the last time, he travels around the circles. This time, the boyish trotting has been replaced by a powerful stomp and a resonating singing voice.

In the performance, Thulo employed the vocabulary that had come out of our intense rehearsal process: the slow, precise stretching, flexing and relaxing of his muscles, the clapping and stomping that echoed the dances that healers engage in for various ceremonies, the slick and suave movement characteristic of his *Pantsula* background, the humming and singing of the church hymns that he had grown up with. There was a clear sense that the work was autobiographical, but at the same time, a sense that Thulo was asking the audience to share in his journey of becoming a healer. During the performance, he made eye contact with various members of the audience and travelled between spaces of consciousness and heightened reality; this translated into a serious spiritual vulnerability which required the audience to actively engage with him.

By the end of the performance, audiences would be singing and clapping with Thulo, as an effort to cement what he called 'communitas', the coming together of a group of people on an emotional, psychological or spiritual level.

The lessons from this production were many and varied, but I will highlight some of the more monumental ones. First, the methodology of not knowing was crucial for this process. I committed myself to feeling my way through the process, and to responding to the material we generated as it unfolded. I had no prior experience of boSangoma, and so an important result of my preconceptions was fear of the work. The fear facilitated a kind of caution in my approach, but the need to create an offering facilitated the impulses to 'just try, experiment, do.' Secondly, the responses of audience members were many and varied. There were audiences who *felt* repulsed by seeing Thulo's body jerk and sweat and spit and growl; they *felt* that his traversing of alternate realms in the performance space was inappropriate, a display of private cultural and spiritual practices. Other audience members *felt* a strong presence of their own spirituality, and were glad for a chance to begin confronting their own issues of spirituality and healing. But most audience members shared one thing: they did not, or could not, discuss their experiences immediately after, nor could they be alone after the experience. The second phenomenon that audiences shared was that they *felt* before they could, or in order to, understand the offering. There were many individuals who waited a few hours, days, weeks or even months before they sought myself and Thulo to unpack their experiences. But all wanted to unpack their feelings and responses. The lesson was that audiences can engage with work, provided, once again, that they have full access to it. Full access is a subjective concept, and even more so in this context where much of the vocabulary was abstract and Thulo's own experiences in the performance were beyond the 'understanding' of those of us who are not healers. Yet the

sight of his body, the sound of his voice, the feelings that the audience grappled with, gave them a deepened perspective. It was a worthwhile experiment to allow the audiences to grapple with the material without making the work more accessible, and thereby dictating their process of making meaning.

The third lesson was that 'performance' is a very subjective concept. Some audience members felt that what they saw was not a performance, because it was Thulo's real story that he was sharing, and because ritual can never be a 'performance'. How then, could I claim to have 'directed' something that is not performance? Other audience members raised the point that ritual is performance to some degree, and some practitioners felt that theatre in and of itself is a sacred practice. This debate was useful as another way of highlighting the necessity for renegotiating our understandings of performance; it is no longer useful for theatre-makers and audiences to sit down in a theatre and accept what follows as a 'performance': the making of meaning is no longer a simple thing. This is particularly pertinent in a country like South Africa, where the history of colonialism and apartheid has created multiple experiences for individuals and communities, so that meaning becomes subjective and relative.

Chapter 3

***The Wages of Sin,* 2009**

Evolving out of a Practice as Research module in the first semester of my MA studies, *The Wages of Sin* was my work with a group of women to explore how performance can be a platform for subverting and/or transgressing moral boundaries which dictate our lives detrimentally. As director-researcher, I again sought to enable the performers as co-researchers and co-creators so that they could create their own individual, unique vocabularies for performance[11].

In one of the earliest rehearsals, I asked the participants to each imagine a woman who had the capacity to withstand any challenges that might arise out of the process. This would be the woman who would help them to process the ugliness and the beauty that would inevitably come out of the process. Participants drew women who wore billowing, multilayered dresses, who were made of wax and could be reshaped or fortified by being put in a microwave oven, women who were made out of words describing the family, children and experiences of the participant. Unlike the women generated from *Even as I Walk*, these women were fragile and vulnerable in obvious ways: the billowing dress was not protection from anything, the wax woman could be crumbled or melted beyond recognition, the woman of words could be silenced. In these fragilities I saw that this group of participants were acknowledging their own fragility, but in the context of the massive trials they had withstood as everyday women with everyday capacities.

[11] The Wages of Sin clarified for me as a director/facilitator/researcher that I had placed value on collaborative processes. As I write about this work, I realise that for me, the following words are interchangeable: collaborator, co-creator, co-researcher, performer, and participant. All refer to the democratic nature of the work, and to the equal creative status between the facilitator and the group.

By the time we staged the offering, we had already experimented with the death exercise. I asked the performers to sit comfortably in their chairs: in a straight line so that they could experience the death as a private and unique matter, but they could see each other through their peripheral vision, and this maintained the sense of a shared experience. If anybody felt that they were reaching territory from which they did not feel like they could return, they would raise their hand and I would wake them up. Nobody ever raised their hands, and we did this exercise countless times after the first time. I asked them to slow their breathing and to deepen it, and then to let their bodies become so heavy that they sank beneath the floor into a dark hole filled with soil. Watching them respond was again very interesting. They began to sink into their chairs and lose control of their limbs. I watched them struggle to come back to life: I could see a few fingers twitching, could see a chest heaving, but nobody left their seat. I used the video setting in my camera to record some of these moments, in order for myself and the performers to interrogate the experiences in more depth. Initially, they could not wake themselves up. I usually let them stay in the 'Zombie Women' for about seven minutes before I woke them. Eventually, they learned how to travel to that dark place together, and to come out of it without my help: they would shake each other, touch each other and whisper into each others' ears to assist with a smooth waking up process. In this way, we learnt to look our 'immoral' desires and thoughts in the eye, and to understand fully the deaths that we suffer because of inflexible moral standards and cultural values. We learned to wake up from our daily nightmares and have a healthy giggle because we had helped each other to cope with dying, once again.

Below is an extract from the critical essay that arose after the practice as research process had been 'concluded,' and after the exam was over. It is an especially useful extract because it reveals two important parts of my theatre making experience. The first part is the way in

which some of the methodologies I used in *The Wages of Sin* were related to or inspired by the methodologies that I used for *They Were Silent*, and before that, *Even as I Walk.* In a sense, the *Wages of Sin* was a crafting of some of these methodologies, and another opportunity to take further risks. The second part is related to the way in which I wrote about the process of creating/devising *The Wages of Sin*, as a method of recording the process, of critical reflection, but also as a method of observing myself in my practice and amongst other theatre-makers. The writing is critical, yes, but simultaneously personal and informal. It is an unorthodox type of academic discourse, as is true of this report:

> **Methodology: The Rehearsals:**
>
> In the early stages of the process, I had planned a series of rehearsals for the first phase. These would be the logical building blocks for a second and a third phase. The principal objectives of this first phase included the building of trust and complicity between participants or cast members, and their robust engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of the research; I imagined that the participants needed to engage with some of the material that I was interrogating for the theoretical framework of the process. In that sense, my status as facilitator/director/researcher was at par with that of the participants; they would read some of what I was reading, watch some of the film material that I was watching and listen to some of the music that I was listening to. Additionally, this first phase would provide the space for participants to share their own material, ranging from books to music to their own writing as a way of locating themselves in the process and the research question. In this way the rehearsals, carefully planned well in advance, would be structured enough to provide me with consistent focus, while at the same time remaining flexible enough for spontaneous discoveries. This approach changed fairly quickly into the process, but I shall speak to that at a later stage.

Thus far, the process has been methodologically rich: I will describe my approach as experiential, experimental, collaborative, and multidisciplinary. At different points in the first half of the process, I invited the participants to spend an entire 3 hour rehearsal listening to music that is transgressive and or subversive in some way, and made by

women who are of Africa in some sense. Additionally, we listened to the music for its transgression of performance conventions. Listening to the Malian Rokia Traoré, South African Brenda Fassie and Simphiwe Dana, Nigerian Sade and many more had a strangely calming but inspiring effect, so that the participants physically gravitated toward each other and by the end of the rehearsal were all piled on top of each other in a corner of the room. Another rehearsal was spent watching film; *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, S. 1985), and *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash, J. 1991). In this particular rehearsal, we watched how fictional women characters 'performed' their transgressions. Outside of rehearsal, participants read extracts from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) and Anne-Marie Du Preez-Bezdrob's *Winnie Mandela, A Life* (2003). Part of my commitment to an interdisciplinary approach was to encourage the participants to renegotiate their ideas about what performance in theatre is, and about the role of participants in the research process; it was necessary for the participants to embark on the theoretical, intellectual and academic journey in addition to the practical process. The robustness of these engagements differed with each participant for various reasons, one of which is that as a group we are at different levels of academic study; this has not necessarily been a disadvantage. I will speak more to this when I interrogate the experiences of the cast.

Because my question speaks directly to disruption and reconfiguration, I maintained a collaborative approach. Whilst the impetus for research is located with myself as the researcher, the research question implies that transgression in this context is a hugely personal process, such that each participant has been telling her own stories and pursuing transgression as and for herself. That said, the importance of a democratic process became more apparent the more discoveries we made about the sometimes undemocratic nature of moral systems. If we intended to make performance the platform for transgression, then each story that was told needed to be afforded the same status as all other stories. In one rehearsal, we took turns to tell a story of transgression that we experienced or witnessed. In these stories, transgression may not necessarily have occurred, or it did with various consequences. Each participant offered a part of their body for the rest of the group to write/draw/record their story as they told it. The process was long; stories were deeply buried and caused much pain on remembering, and participants struggled to share or to tell. Yet we listened to each other, and wrote these stories with patience and in detail. Some participants chose not to partake in this offering, and their choices were recognised

and acknowledged. The following quote from Kershaw's writing on coming out speaks clearly to the process:

> Stories of suffering, surviving and surpassing...speak...of a deep pain, a frustration, an anguish...They speak of a silence and a secrecy which may need to be broken...a need for action—something must be done, a pain must be transcended. There is a move....towards a major change: therapy, survival, recovery or politics. Often harboured within this epiphany, a crucial turning point marked by a radical consciousness-raising. These are always stories of significant transformations. (Plummer. 1995. p. 50)
> (Lejowa 2009:2-4)

I would like to interrupt this extract in order to draw attention to the voices of the performers and to the content of their stories. While we told and wrote stories, I recorded our stories on paper. Below, a woman who was in her very early twenties when she had had a child outside of wedlock spoke slowly, deliberately:

> I think my story begins when....Naturally I fell in love with him. Even if I was listening, I couldn't hear. I pursued a feeling, I defied my parents. I fell pregnant; my father kicked me out again[12].
> How could he up and leave, leave me with a child? I developed this hatred for white women. I had to rely on neighbours to feed my son. I can't stand it. I have this hatred; this messed up idea of white women having control and power over black men. Situations can make a strong man fall. I want to free myself from this hatred. My child has become my moral boundary. The results confirm the rightness of the boundary. I feel compelled to see him as a punishment. (Lejowa 2009. Journal notes)

And another woman who also was not married when she gave birth:

[12] Please see the attached CD, and the folder entitled 'Written on the body' for pictures from this rehearsal.

> It was nice when he was fucking me, and he knew that he came and left it in me. If I can make him suffer and see it I'll be o.k. (Lejowa 2009. Journal notes)

One of the performers, a gay woman, told her story:

> I'd cut during break, come back happy. For two years I never wore short sleeves. When it started bleeding it was my *deep breath*. I pretended to be straight. There are so many levels of accepting being gay. I'm going to hell. You! Why are you wearing Axe?[13] The disgust. I'm comfortable and dirty at once. I feel like I need to break. Completely. Secrets and lies: hiding blades, stash, glances, blood. The silly things that girls do (Lejowa, 2009. Journal notes).

What I wrote in my journal during rehearsals reflected a great deal of what went on. I must emphasise the importance of the performers and myself as the primary and most significant resources for the process. I want to also draw attention to the nature of the stories above: they are stories of transgression, of pain, of having to hide how we feel, what we think, why we do certain things. The process, I will argue, allowed us to build a platform where our stories were legitimate, true, legal and worth listening to. We afforded ourselves and each other this legitimacy.

The extract from my critical essay continues. I draw on this work extensively because it speaks directly and coherently to the research:

> Furthermore, the necessity for deconstructing my role as 'authority' made itself apparent from the start; I have been very conscious to consult participants about major decisions, to ask very clearly their feelings about

[13] Axe is a brand of deodorant that is marketed for men, the advertising campaigns highlighting super masculinity and the ability to attract women as benefits for the user.

what happens in rehearsal and to engage them fully when they disagree or are uncomfortable about the process. This also has presented challenges for the process of facilitating the participants' confrontations of self, for the devising process, for maintaining the process of research. Again, I will speak further to these challenges.

Another facet of the methodology was constant experimentation. Whilst the first few rehearsals were fairly easy to plan—trust building exercises, listening to music, talking—the greater part of the process became less and less 'structurable well before hand.' This is the part of the process where the personalities of the participants were revealing themselves, and alongside were their fears, resistances and preconceptions about performance.
Interestingly, these became deeper with the process, so that more and more I could only plan a rehearsal once one had happened, based on what happened the rehearsal before and the threads that were revealing themselves across rehearsals. The only way I could meet the participants halfway was to experiment and be very conscious of what was happening during the experiment: their responses to exercises, my responses to their responses, whether I should create a new trajectory in the moment or keep the experiment I thought up the night before. A participant who is a very rational being, whose life she insists must be governed by 'her systems' and who is very averse to touch and lack of self control had been struggling to 'let go.' Previously we had had a 'transgression competition', where she and a partner would out-compete each other with taboo conversation and physical contact. Where her partner told her that 'my boyfriend fucks me in the ass,' this participant's most shocking response was 'you're obsessed with sex!' I imagined that a way in was to address this politeness and control, but I could not imagine how to do it. During a rehearsal that was planned, I experimented with literal physical distance in order to help her spontaneity. She and a partner stood at opposite ends of the room, and communicated only with gesture. By the end of the exercise her partner had coaxed her into shaking her body, throwing her arms out and shouting. I did not expect to

see the intimacy that spanned across the room to connect them, and then an indulgent letting go[14].

The overarching method of working, however, has been experiential. When we told our stories and the group documented them on our bodies, we each told a story that has not had an audience, or at least a sympathetic audience. In that sense, we experienced what it was to be listened to while we said illegal words and revealed illegal acts and feelings. Furthermore, we experienced a literal archiving of our stories in and on our own bodies. One participant said that going home with the 'sordid' story of the father of her child on her back, she was unsure how her present partner would respond. Her partner read the story back to her, and she felt a pain that she had forgot; yet it was a pain that was leaving her because when they washed her back she felt a cleansing as she saw the ink draining away. She experienced a renegotiation of pain, and experienced a closeness with her partner that arose out of our collective storytelling transgression. More and more during the process participants have brought memories to the surface, and dug their heels in where other memories were concerned. Participants are experiencing their angry selves and their affectionate selves for the first time in a while, or the first time ever; the more transgressive our rehearsals, the more the participants' responses become disparate because their lived experiences outside the rehearsal room are bringing them into contact with new moral boundaries.

I think it is important to give the reader a sense of how rehearsals unfolded, within the context of how they were planned and the projected outcomes/objectives. Additionally, an understanding of the rehearsal processes will give the reader clarity of the relationship between the methodology explained above and the material that was generated. The idea

[14] My understanding of the nature of this work was clarified further by reading Guilermo Gómez Peña's article, Culturas-in-extremis: performing against the cultural backdrop of the mainstream bizarre, to be found in Bial, H. 2004. *The Performance Studies Reader* (ed). New York. Routlegde. He makes very distinct the difference between mainstream bizarre performances and performance art. In that sense, the research process and the performance are not striptease or hysterical rant-rave efforts. Rather, an audience has been carefully selected for a performance which has commitment to content through form. These are politically motivated acts, rather than spectacular capitalist driven impulses.

was to use these experimental, experiential processes in rehearsal to generate material for a performance of some kind; the research question called for a performance to happen in order to stage simultaneously the transgression that we have been pursuing.

One rehearsal process in the early stages was aimed at approaching the transgressive act from a historical perspective and also from a literary point of view. This rehearsal, as well as those where music, film and literature had been engaged with, were an attempt to broaden the scope of 'performance of transgression' for participants. They were also an attempt to encourage the participants to locate their personal stories in a broader historical, social and artistic context. Participants brought an object which spoke to a particular African woman—from any time in history—her story of (potential/foiled) transgression, and the moral boundary that was concerned. Participants would get a chance to present their findings in whatever way they would like to present. Then the presentation would be followed by a discussion with the group where thoughts, questions and impressions could be shared.

One participant brought a blanket that is traditionally (colonially) associated with the black African home and the black African mother figure (in the Southern African context, at least). It was the very soft blanket, usually in green and red, red and blue or blue and green chequered patterns with thick tassels on the edges, which can be bought in down- town Johannesburg and used by mothers to carry their babies on their backs. She wrapped an imaginary baby in the soft blanket and placed it in a dustbin. Her African woman became general, and the specificity of the transgression located across time. We proceeded to talk deeply about abortion and its implications. Another participant brought a pot and a ladle. She proceeded to cook skilfully while her mouth was shut and covered beneath a black cloth. After cooking, she checked that her husband was not in the vicinity, before eating hurriedly out of the pot with a clear sense of enjoyment. When she was done she replaced the cloth over her mouth and covered the pot carefully. The participant had based her presentation on the superstition that women should not eat out of pots, or else they would never find marriage. She

acknowledged, as did the rest of the group, that the superstition was useful in that it spoke to the lack of hygiene and consideration for others that came out of eating from a pot where the meal is shared. The problem, she explained, was that growing up she was never allowed to ask why girls should not eat out of the pot, and why there was no corresponding pronouncement for boys. There was always an order that she must be quiet and get on with whatever else she was doing. She saw this silence as disabling, and also counterproductive to the intended function. Additionally, she found issue with that the threat of never finding marriage firmly entrenched the superstition in sexist and gendered language which perpetuated expectations about how women should behave. The secret eating out of the pot was hugely subversive[15].

Another rehearsal aimed to encourage the participants to imagine transgression in concrete images. While they did this, I hoped that they would come to a point where they are very critical and specific about the moral boundaries that they speak of or have encountered, so that rehearsals did not become general moanings about general society versus the individual. Participants as a group created three separate images that could move and that spoke to the biggest possible transgressions of morality that they could imagine as a collective. This was a challenge for them because it automatically established a comparative approach to morality and moral transgression: which sins are the worst, and how do we arrive at that conclusion, when we each have complex and varying moral systems? One image was particularly striking. One participant stood in a priestly Jesus-like position, obviously a religious patriarch. The rest of the participants knelt in single file before this figure, kissed its crotch and walked backwards out of the 'church' to a position where either their eyes, ears or mouth were covered, precluding their witnessing of other women kissing the crotch of the figure. This was a hugely transgressive image, and deep down I felt panicked that I had facilitated this blasphemy and I would be punished for it.

[15] Please see the attached DVD entitled 'Video Clips' and the clips entitled 'eating out of the pot.' This material became what we later developed for the National Arts Festival in July 2009.

Our discussion of this image was very thorough indeed; the multiple metaphors, the upsetting of established religious and patriarchal images, the references to upset perceptions of dominant sexuality...the list was endless. The degree of transgression of this image, as well as the intensity of panic that I felt as a result hinted to what Baz Kershaw would call the relationship between crisis and efficacy. (Kershaw. B. 1992: 27). If at some level the performance offends the audience to a point of crisis, it is possible that the ensuing debate will open up the very possibilities that we are seeking by transgressing. Additionally, Kershaw uses Richard Schechner's understanding of ritual and the role of the audience in it, to arrive at the suggestion that performance, 'being real and not real' at once, is 'an ideological experiment in which the outcome has no *necessary* consequence for the audience' (Kershaw. 1992: 24). In contrast, the performance we intend to share necessarily operates in *real reality*, so that the audience must make a conscious political decision about whether to facilitate the efficacy of the piece. They choose whether, how and when they will engage or disengage with the piece, as well as act on their impulses. The efficacy of the piece is the responsibility of the audience.

In another rehearsal, a participant was asked to stand in the centre of the room, and be very conscious of her thoughts and feelings while the rest of the group invaded her personal space with touch and words. The rest of the participants were also asked to be very conscious of how they felt as they invaded and harassed. They squeezed and stroked and breathed and slapped and grabbed. When the invasion became dangerous, she asked, as I had told her she could and she must, to stop the exercise and we stopped. Speaking with the 'abused' participant revealed a great deal about her. I asked her to retrace the experience, and then upset it with a vocal expression. Because she is a music student, I asked her to let her voice do everything that was not musically correct in order to reclaim the 'invasion.' She sat with her arms crossed for an hour, suppressing her voice and trying to deal with her experience logically. I imagined that it was necessary for me to facilitate some sort of letting go of that experience in order for it not to become a trauma. She happened to be sitting on a chair with wheels and I started to

push it and spin it at high speed across the room: she squealed with laughter and delight! I took advantage of that rare moment of abandon, and asked another participant to engage her in conversation based solely on gesture from across the room. By the end of that, the participant had screamed and shouted and shook her body free of the invasion and her carefully constructed self control. In the reflection she spoke of rarely feeling so invigorated, so carefree. She said that this is what she had feared, and now she craved to be free.

In the same rehearsal, two other participants engaged in a gestural conversation while at two ends of the room. I asked them to 'discuss' what they had done by invading the space of the one participant; how had they felt? What were they reminded of? This conversation developed so richly that at the end of the allotted time, the participants were thrusting their hips, grunting, resisting, enjoying, moaning, sticking their buttocks in the air, grabbing and stroking their crotches, making abject, and making beautiful the act of sex. When we had a showing, the rest of the group sat as an audience. These participants rose, indulged in their transgressive portrayals of their experiences of sex, and sat back down to be normal again like other members of the audiences whose existences as sexual beings are kept tightly controlled by morality.

The objectives initially had been to facilitate an experiential process where participants would look at the transgression that arose from having one's own boundaries transgressed: how can a violation necessitate a transgression of legal structures and or behaviours that are expected from a female victim? What came out of the process was a close interrogation of how silence can be normalised: silence normalises the desexualisation of women by forcing us not to express our relationship with sex. Additionally, the existence of moral systems forces some of us to confront our hurts in a logical, controlled manner that will not contravene the expected moral behaviours of women. As the process developed, it became apparent that the aim of the research required that we renegotiate the conventions of theatre: the transgression and

subversion of boundaries spilled over to the disruption of 'normal' theatrical conventions.

At the exam, the audience members were all invited, so that all were women. The performers spoke directly to the audience, explaining that they had only fifteen minutes to perform, as were the exam requirements. Various performers undertook various activities at different places in the performance space (which was not a theatre but a class room), at the same time. The audience thus had to choose where to locate their focus, understanding fully that there was a great deal going on elsewhere in the space. Performers invited the audience into conversations and the smoking of cigarettes, and then commented on each other's performances. When it was time to end the offering, one performer reached for her cell phone and explained to the audience that fifteen minutes had passed, and they had to stop. All in the room were conscious of these disruptions, subversions and transgressions. Yet the largest transgressions were the sharing of the performers' stories of transgression with the audience. It was clear to the audience that all the performers were telling their lived experiences; there were no costumes and no lights. Performers wore the clothes that they wear every day; they spoke in the way they speak every day.

The Offering/Performance

On a Friday evening, an invited, all-female audience gathered to receive our offering. We had been rehearsing all this time in a nondescript rehearsal room in the Drama department; this is the room where we established the process, found safety, shared and discussed various parts of our lives. And so we shared our offering where we had prepared it. The audience comprised all women except two men: the first was an official respondent to the work and the second, the cast and myself had invited because he had been an important part of our process. He had come in to take a rehearsal focused on the 'death of the performer as a way of facilitating complete immersion in the subject matter', had been the stage manager and had been in discussion with us at various stages of the process as an academic and a friend, outside

the rehearsal space. We invited only the people we felt safe with, and all turned out to be women, except our stage manager.

In the room, there were candles lit and placed everywhere around on the floors, window sills and chairs, which we had placed in a long oval shape. In the centre of the oval were a desk and two chairs, where two of the participants would sit. During rehearsals when these two first began to interrogate language and conversation as transgression, they sat at this desk and wrote notes—about what they were discovering, about my feedback, about what they were thinking about, what amused them and irritated them. Other participants would gravitate to this desk quite naturally, and we ended up having some of our reflections around that desk. Outside the space, the audience had waited to see the offering, but they were not aware that the other women who were waiting would be the 'performers;' everybody entered the space at the same time, and all participants but the two at the desk sat with the audience in the oval. I framed the offering briefly, mentioning the research question and other major questions which had arisen out of the research, and how we had attempted to address these questions.

One of the participants at the desk asked the others if they were ready, pulled out her cell-phone and started the clock. Her partner then proceeded to explain to everybody that she had been looking for a good way to begin the conversation, and had decided that since a great part of our subject matter had boiled down to sex, she would focus the discussion around that. And so the conversation began; the audience was addressed, asked questions, invited to partake in the talk about masturbation, lesbian sex, how many times and ways a woman can orgasm, why some women in heterosexual relationships cannot orgasm; the audience was invited to join in the talk about why we cut ourselves, about the participant who now was eating out of a pot and gyrating her hips, whimpering and begging in a manner that was ambiguous: was she enjoying the sexual act or suffering for it? We watched as, distracted by the banter, she rose to silence the two women at the desk; they continued to comment on her offering more kindly this time. We invited the audience to transgress with us, to be our companions in this.

Meanwhile, another woman walked around the space, unobtrusively at times, talking to individual audience members. She had post-it notes with all the questions and comments she had been dying to address to different people in her life: parents, friends, partners, flings. Audience members then became people who could hear her questions, understand them, respond to them. Her questions were many and varied: 'why can I not be naked in front of you without you subjecting me to your sexual thoughts?'(a question that arose because she had wanted to explore nakedness, and I had asked her to think about how her body—a white, slender female body—would be received, particularly when it was automatically comparable to the bigger black female bodies around her); 'Don't you like me?' And on she went, the whole offering through, whether there was a story being told in the oval or not. At this time, the women at the desk had rolled tobacco and marijuana in Rizzler paper, and were smoking these happily. The connotations of this action were monumental: participant's families were present and saw for the first time that participants were smokers; participants were smoking inside university property where tobacco smoking was apparently prohibited; participants were smoking an illegal substance, and if they were smoking it they knew how to obtain it and how to consume it; the smoking was a statement which was not necessarily related to any narrative plot. Audience members, myself included, rose during the offering to ask 'for a drag.' There was no 'plot'; participants were sharing parts of their lives which were inextricably linked to the pressures that they dealt with daily. We had invited our guests to come and witness as we said, thought and did 'illegal' things.

Another participant, in all this 'chaos' spoke the same words over and over again 'Ga ke batle!' 'I don't want to!' She did not want to go to church and ask for forgiveness for conceiving a child out of wedlock; she did not want to be forced to capitulate to the cultural codes that the parents of her partner were imposing on her, she did not want to 'confess' to any wrong doing and she talked directly to the audience. The last participant spoke back to her systems. Wearing an army jacket because she had been in the army before university, she explained to the audience that she could not do what the other

participants had done. Her systems held everything together so tightly that there was no room for the chaos that would result out of transgressive behaviour. The other participants questioned her arguments and the audience was invited to participate, though few did. Just as the debate was becoming interesting, the timekeeper shouted 'time!', and her partner explained that 'we only had 15 minutes.'[16]

My experience:

The process has been very difficult for me to focus, plan for and sustain. The difficulties arose out of the reality that I wore different mantles in and outside of the rehearsal process. On one level, within the rehearsal process I was simultaneously the facilitator, the director, the researcher, a student, a staff member and a woman. Challenges arising in the rehearsal space often spoke to several roles at once, and my possible responses to these challenges from the various perspectives of the mantles I wore would often conflict. For example, a participant became very angry during our last rehearsal when I suggested that she and I focus on her naked body as a transgressive act. At the start of the process I had asked each participant to begin thinking about one transgressive act that they would like to carry out in the rehearsal process and through to performance. At intervals I kept reminding them to keep thinking about the act, its oppositional morality and their motivation for choosing that particular act. Throughout the process I kept picking out a recurring thread with this participant: that she was uncomfortable with her naked body and at times was so repulsed by the thought of sharing parts of her body with the group that she became quite uncooperative. So I began to imagine that perhaps the interrogation of this situation might help her to start appreciating her body (this notion already transgressive in light of the social standards for beautiful bodies in this historical era), or else to understand why she felt that way. This was one possible trajectory that she could follow from this point on in the process, there were others. When I suggested this to

[16] The reader may have noticed that there was one participant missing. In the week before the offering, she had an emergency at home, and had to pull out of rehearsal. We did, however, feel that her contribution to the process helped to bring the process to life. We met with her and gave her an account of how the offering went and was received. The group is so accustomed to sharing and analysing as a group that when one person is missing, they get an update by default.

her, she became very angry, and accused me of picking on her, making her, out of everybody else, do what she doesn't want to do, and disappointing her by not making the process what she thought it would be.

I told her that it was merely a suggestion of where she and I could go, and that I would not even think about that option if she did not want it to happen. What, I asked, would she rather engage with? Would she suggest something that would be beneficial for her? She felt, she said, that I was putting her in a corner, and how could I expect her to think up something off the top of her head like that? Plus, she didn't want to limit herself with just one thing; she felt like I had already made the decision before rehearsal; why was I using a topic that I knew she was averse to? I tried to explain that it was because she was averse to it that I thought it might be liberating to explore the aversion, but again, it was alright, I respected her decision so mightn't we at this point hear what she would rather explore? And on the argument went. At different points I felt that as a facilitator I had saved the situation by not losing my temper, and by constantly answering her questions with clarity: I gave her my motivation, talked her through my thinking process, stated clearly that we would only work with what she felt was acceptable.

Also I asked questions which could have been triggers for more difficulty: you say that you have been hating your body your whole life, are you going to continue hating it for the rest of your life; why have you not thought of a transgressive act as I asked at the start of the process? As a researcher I was excited by this rupture; I was seeing the extent of the participant's resistance to transgression, and I was seeing in front of me the constructed morality of beauty—where one is punished for not meeting certain standards, and internalises those projections of ugliness—and the depth of its psychological entrenchment. As a director, and even as a facilitator, I felt angry. It was very inappropriate for a participant to bring the rehearsal process to a standstill. She was also disregarding my commitment to a collaborative process—to consulting participants when there were decisions to be made. In the end I responded only as a facilitator, and asked her to go back and

think some more about the trajectory she would like to follow, for the next rehearsal.

It has also been difficult to carry the process in terms of the stories that we have shared. Participants have revealed painful, bitter experiences with family, partners and friends. There have been tears and words of fear and hopelessness that in some instances have been very heavy. The participants are excited to carry the process through to a performance, but there are anxieties about what lecturers, family and friends will say, do or think once they have witnessed the transgressive offering. Ken Plummer, writing on stories of 'coming out,' crystallises these anxieties: 'Many issues appear here: of privacy, of lying, of passing, of defences , of exposure, of deceptions, of transparency....to tell all, for all to be known, can render people extremely vulnerable.' (Plummer, K. 1995. p.56). I did imagine that the research question, through the process, would elicit emotional and psychological baggage, and I have built safety mechanisms into each rehearsal—'de-roling'[17], debriefing, group reflections, participants' journaling and stopping and starting in rehearsal processes to assess the state of participants. I understand that the process is not about me counselling the participants because firstly I am not qualified to do so and second, the aims of the research are clearly not psychotherapy, even though a sense of relief from baggage might be a result. I believe that at this stage I should find some kind of debriefing process for myself because facilitating the debriefing of others has been so taxing for me.

An interesting challenge has been to understand what role(s) the participants and myself would like our invited, all female audience to play. One of the answers to that is the reason our audience is invited and all female. Jill Dolan writes that while postmodernist avant-garde theatre practitioners as such have successfully deconstructed character, narrative and authoritative meaning—which in many respects has happened during this research

[17] I place the word in quotes because a great part of the time, there is no assumed role for the participants to step out of; they retell and re-interrogate as themselves. We acknowledge that they are not the same people they were in the past, and that this is bringing to the fore questions of the nature of identity.

process—these theorists have left 'gender bias and gender difference un examined and un-deconstructed' ((Dolan, J. 1988: 42-43). Thus we are looking to invite the people who are likely to have experienced difficult reactions from society when they have contravened moral uprightness and, in a sense, might be inspired to exercise their agency in a performative manner. Additionally, the focus of the research lies with women (we are not disregarding the challenges that men may grapple with in the face of moral systems); and the absence of men as well as the fact that audiences and transgressors occupy the same seating and performance space, remove any separation or dichotomous dynamic. Moreover, the women we have invited are academics, performers, parents, friends, lovers, teenagers, middle aged, black, white. We have appreciated that not all women everywhere are the same and will respond the same to all stimuli. But what do we want the audience to do with what we offer them?

There is no specific thing that we want any audience member to do, apart from engage with the offering and give us feedback. Their engagement, even if we frame the offering in a way that directs the engagement, needs to be a conscious choice. Dolan asserts that 'the whole structural reality of the performance exchange between the producers, performers and spectators is ideologically marked.'[18](Dolan.1988:41). The invites must state one idea: that the work the participants and myself have brought forward is hugely political and that the audience will make a political choice by engaging or disengaging. It is a political fact that this work has come from women who in a sense are privileged to understand performance, the politics of morality and gender, and the implications of *staging moral transgression* and *transgressing staging*; these women are cademics and performers working in an academic setting, though in some respects academia is responsible for the entrenchment of the conventions of performance which we are laboriously trying to transgress, and also to justify such a transgression. We are conscious that this work might be necessary beyond the relative safety of the

[18] Interestingly, Kershaw also explains that 'a performance can be most usefully described as an *ideological transaction* between a company of performers and the community of their audience' (Kershaw. 1992. p. 16)

academic world, and that in reality the processes by which transgression can occur are not safe and controlled under the close scrutiny of a facilitator who is ethically bound to protect the wellbeing of the transgressor.

Another part of the answer to the research question reveals itself thus: if performance is to be a site for transgression, then the conventions by which performance is run and understood must be implicated in the areas that must be broken down, renegotiated, transgressed. This work cannot happen in the casings of dated conventions, rules and modes of communication. The process, then, has raised many important issues around performance and the efficacy of it, the function of character, narrative and meaning in performance as well as the processes through which performance can become a site for transgression and transformation.

The Feedback

Academic feedback:

At the end of an exam, there is usually a discussion/interview/feedback between the examiner and the student, where the work can be spoken about further. There was a respondent and an examiner present. When the piece ended, the examiner asked if we could open windows, and then left the room in apparent anger. I was not privy to why she was angry, and she never explained this to me or to the audience and cast who stayed for the discussion/feedback session. She asked that we move to another room, even though myself, the participants and the audience preferred to remain in the room where we had prepared and shared the offering in the safety that we had created for ourselves; she did not explain why we should move to another space. I cannot claim to engage with any academic feedback because I received none: the examiner did not speak to me or to the work.

In the discussion, the respondent commented that he thought the offering needed to have been addressed to what he called its target audience, and this would be ‘men’. He queried ‘the exclusion’ of men, and I explained again that it was not an exclusion of men but a measure for our own safety, given that not all the invited female audience were people who each participant

was familiar with[19]. Referring to the Plummer quote that I use in the introduction of this critical essay, the respondent queried whether the offering was an attack on men that ignored society, and I clarified that it was necessary to read the quote and then further, to appreciate that I viewed morality as a function in various aspects of society such as the family, religion and so forth[20].

Feedback from audience:

Different members of the audience, who were not necessarily academics—participants' sisters, friends, women I did not know who barely knew the participant that had invited them, fellow students—came to me to give feedback after the discussion session. We sat outside on benches, and the discussion was informal. I find it very interesting that they only felt like they could speak once the examiner and respondent were no longer present. An audience member said 'things changed for her as she watched the stories of other women unfold,' while another said 'she had to think back to the way she was raised, and a lot of things became clear;' one woman said the offering 'felt like a huge slap in the face, a wake-up call.' Still another said she felt so drawn to the offering that it made her realise she was more enlightened than she thought she was. Another woman thought that what we had done with this offering 'was very brave;' there was someone who had been asked by the post-it participant to remember the time she lost her virginity: they had chatted for a bit during the offering, and she had been delighted to revisit the summer day when she had made the decision to do what she was not allowed to be doing.

The Findings:

I found that the offering rested partially on our process of deconstructing and transgressing performance conventions: this is what allowed the participants to reach the audience, who giggled and burst into deep laughter at various

[19] At that time, this essay was a shorter framing document, guiding my supervisor, the respondent and the examiner through my process before they saw the offering.

[20] The respondent later submitted written feedback where he again outlined his concerns about the exclusion of men, the inadequacy of the candles as lighting, and what he described as being 'harangued' by the woman with the post-it notes.

comments made by the participants. There was no stage, no clarity from the beginning who the 'actors' were. There was no cleavage between audience and performers. Performers were conscious of time, observed it on a cell-phone that would have been answered had it rung. Tobacco was lit and shared with the audience while various other important things went on. Additionally, I found that while the offering went quite beautifully, not all the participants had undergone a process of personal engagement with transgression; yes indeed, 'performance,' if deconstructed and renegotiated, can be a platform for transgression. But it cannot serve that function for all women, as one participant demonstrated. Thirdly, the offering also benefitted from our deconstruction of our concepts of the audience. While conventional theatre tends to regard the audience as a lump of identical eyes and vessels, we needed to acknowledge that each audience member had a different impact on each participant. Some participants felt that the audience could only witness their transgression and do nothing more, while other participants invited women that they thought needed to be encouraged to transgress certain boundaries; another participant felt that the audience were people who could listen and respond to everything that she had needed to say but could not because there was nobody to understand her. As audience members, a family member is not the same as a lecturer or a friend, and they know very different aspects of the performer. Thus our audience gained bodies and histories which were more useful to us than identical eyes.

It appears that the offering resonated very strongly and positively with non academic members of the audience, although some came from a theatre-making background. These are the women who had to leave before the discussion session but squeezed in a word of feedback, or who came to me after the session was over. They responded to the offering from an emotional, possibly psychological and intellectual impulse. The academics who were present clearly struggled with the piece; one invited academic left before the discussion session and has not given feedback (I am writing this essay four days after the offering), and one said she did not see the offering as a performance. Perhaps, she said, it was performative, but it leaned more to experiential workshop format. This is interesting, because this is a debate

that the cast and myself engaged with endlessly toward the end. She complained that the smoking was not really contextualised 'they smoked on stage, so what?' I think that she missed the nuance in the manner through which we had sourced and treated the audience[21]: the smoking was hugely significant because the people who were not supposed to see us at it saw us; she did not engage with herself as an audience member, and treated herself as a pair of eyes in a lump of other, identical eyes.

I think it is useful also to engage with the response of the examiner. She was clearly upset, but she did not voice her feelings or thoughts. Part of her role as the examiner was to give feedback, which would influence the writing of this essay; she gave no feedback. In giving feedback, she would have needed to speak directly to me as the researcher, and perhaps to the participants—who responded very thoroughly and incisively to the respondent's questions. She did neither. While I do not know why she was upset, or why she asked to move the group to a new space, I imagine that the offering pressed a button of some kind. What was interesting was that it seemed that she had responded like the other audience members—with impulse and feeling—but had, like the other academics, chosen not to follow through with dialogue. It was possible, during the offering—because of the form we had chosen for our offering, and because of our blatant transgression of performance conventions—that the examiner could open the windows, request that the windows be opened, that the tobacco be put out or, to explain why and leave.

The audience and the performers were at equal status, and our construction of the space and the offering could not have created any authoritative pressure for anybody to remain uncomfortably in the space. Perhaps my suggestion is that even for a seasoned academic, the process of transgression is not easy, and requires a reflexive involvement with the self, consciously

[21] We emailed and smsed the women we wanted to invite, and the message read: 'we invite you to be present at a demonstration of illegal expressions of women. Our work is sensitive, and your feedback is critical. Due to space constraints, entry is by invite only.' We hoped to send the message that coming to see the offering and engaging with it were very political choices, and we needed the feedback of witnesses in order to see our way better.

> and constantly. The offering was difficult for the examiner, and the examiner is a human being.
>
> In conclusion, the process of facilitating transgression has been a challenge both for myself and the participants—emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, ideologically and otherwise. In the same way, the offering that eventually came out of the process was difficult for some individuals in the audience, but apparently necessary and welcome for a great many others. We have scrutinised the politics of gender in performance by breaking down performance conventions and then affording our audience an individuation that is not usually a given. We have layered our enquiry by transgressing those boundaries of ours which perpetuated our repression, transgressing the boundaries of our art and transgressing the moral boundaries that began this enquiry. And we have found that performance in a renegotiated form can be a space for the transgression of those moral boundaries that we as women feel are not conducive to our growth. Performance cannot satisfy this function for all women, but what is important is that many others can benefit from it. (Lejowa 2009:4-22)

Some important lessons came out of that process. One was that the concept of 'performance' was so rigid for us that we had to disrupt it, and instead consider the 'performative' rather than performance. And the possibility, followed by the reality that we *could* in fact define what performance was, for ourselves and our purposes, was most exciting. Another lesson was that we had to begin to understand an audience as a group of individuals, each with very particular values and experiences which will inform their experience of a creative—and very subjective—offering. When we invited our audience, the performers and myself each invited the people that we either felt safe with, or wanted to address directly in the 'performance'. All of these people turned out to be women: our sisters, friends, colleagues, parents and so forth. In that way, every audience member was there not just as a consumer of theatre, but as someone who fulfilled a particular function in

our lives. This, for me, gave every audience member a very specific experience because they had full access to particular parts of the offering that others did not. By virtue of who they were, they could not help but engage with the work.

The third lesson from this experience was that there is a radical difference between the responses of practitioners and academics in the field, and those of audience members who are not necessarily practitioners or academics. This difference might be explained by the obvious fact that academics and practitioners approach the engagement with work in ways that are necessarily different from the engagement of non-academics and practitioners. I would argue that such an explanation is simplistic, and I am interested in delving into it further, but such an investigation is beyond the scope of the essay.

Lastly, I learned from this experience that writing about one's own work is a complex process of self reflexivity, subjectivity and negotiation of ideology. It requires time, it requires a thorough understanding of the current theory—that is, the external world of scholarship—and at the same time requires a thorough understanding of one's own work—the internal world of creative work. The body of work that I have interrogated lies tentatively between the two: it does not reference current theory, but it also challenges current theory by not referring to it. The work is introspective, but is concerned with the world 'out there' by virtue of its introversion.

Chapter 4

Locating myself in my practice

As I mentioned before, it has been interesting to navigate the grey area between the personal and the practice. I think it is important to speak in more detail about how my work has become my life, in order to connect the different roles of director/researcher/facilitator/woman/black/choreographer/African. These multiple roles can be applied to the co-creators, and in turn to the audience who have engaged with our work. In that sense, multiple identities are an important contemporary phenomenon, which plays itself out in particular ways in Johannesburg, Gaborone and other locations in Africa and around the world.

The three pieces described above all came from some sort of personal motivation. *Even as I Walk* and the *Wages of Sin* share particular themes, and can be described in some ways as extensions of each other. When I began the process of devising and crafting *Even As I Walk*, I had massive personal concerns about the ways in which as a woman I was dealing with different traumas in my life. I was experiencing a serious depression which was informed by what I believed to be a rupture in communication between myself and my family. We had had an argument about homosexuality, where I believed that I had the right to choose who my friends were, irrespective of their sexual orientation. My family felt that the moral standards under which I had been brought up were compromised by my association with people who were not heterosexually inclined. The rupture arose because I felt that I could not push the argument and my perspective without hurting my family, and they were not prepared to accept the kinds of choices I had made. I felt that I had to let the

'conversation' rest even though it was, for me at least, unresolved. So I carried on living life, but with a feeling that something of myself had died: the freedom to make choices for my own sake. *Even as I Walk* came as a direct response to my process of shutting down my desires in order to ensure the wellbeing of my family. The devising process therefore was characterised by discussions and interrogations of the death of the self as a sacrifice, as a condition upon which the social acceptance of women lay. I was not surprised to find that the women I worked with on the project had had experiences where they had to 'kill off' a part of themselves in order to live in their familial, social, religious and academic societies.

Similarly, the *Wages of Sin* became a deeper engagement with the moralities which we as a group of women identified as detrimental to our development. Again, I was not surprised to find that this group of women had encountered situations that caused them to choose between parts of their lives which they felt they could not live without. We interrogated the ideas of obeying, of being 'allowed' to do certain things and not others, of double standards which placed us as women at a significant disadvantage compared to men. While I write this, I am beginning to see that a strong thread in *The Wages of Sin* and *Even as I Walk* is the concept of choice. What kinds of women are allowed, legitimately, to make choices about how they want to conduct their lives? How do moral standards, apparently designed to maintain order in human interaction, work in such a way as to assert the importance of choice while at the same time ensuring that particular choices remain punishable?

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Tracing the threads

Risk

The parallels between the three pieces of work are interesting. I did not read any academic texts while I worked on the three pieces. In the case of *The Wages of Sin*, I made a conscious decision to consult all the texts that I had held important in my life as a woman, and these were also the texts which I knew intimately. I read the *Color Purple* for the first time when I was about 12 years old, and I read the biography of Winnie Madikizela Mandela for the first time early in 2009. The music that I listened to came out of years of meeting friends who recommended the music, or simply meeting the artists by accident on my own. In the same way that some of these texts—music included—helped me through some very difficult times, the women that I worked with in *The Wages of Sin* also brought material that was as important to them. We read, watched, and listened to the texts that we had engaged with critically for years, and that we therefore felt safe with. Similarly, *Even as I Walk* was a result of the pooling of the texts that we as a group felt were relevant to our work. The texts that we generated— written, verbal and physical—during the process became more important and more appropriate than what we could have sourced outside of ourselves. In the same way, I decided early on that I would not consult scholarly writing for the process of devising *They Were Silent*. I knew that Thulo was reading deeply and widely for *They Were Silent* because it was his Master's report. I felt, however, that his work was autobiographical, and we had both played in the theatre enough to understand how we might need to bend the rules in order to accommodate the telling of his story.

Additionally, as with *Even as I Walk* and The *Wages of Sin*, I believed strongly that the cast was the largest and most significant resource: we would draw from ourselves and each other in order to tell our own stories. This is not to say, however, that other texts are not useful, or that we prefer to make work in isolation. Rather, we are acknowledging that sometimes the impulse to tell a story also comes with many varied and complex impulses of how to tell the story. I find myself in a very difficult position as I write. I have read very little scholarly writing for this report, and it is an academic report at Master's level. I can either find a theorist and claim to have used his or her theory to guide my work, or find a different theory and claim that my work is radically different from theirs, or even find theorists and/or practitioners and claim that their work paved the way for the kind of work that I make. All of that will essentially be false. I took what I knew at the end of my final year of undergraduate study—which was very little, and tried to make theatre.

What resulted were incredible processes that built myself and my collaborators into theatre-makers. I also took my experiences of making theatre, of being a woman, of seeing theatre, of being the middle child at home, of wanting to help other people to feel better about themselves, and made theatre. I am not sure what difference it will make to the processes, the offerings and this report, whether I write about what theatre makers before me did, or what feminists currently think of 'feminism in Africa'. I want to say that I do not want to write about other people's writing or about other people's work. Rather, I would much prefer to write about my own work and my own writing. The largest reference in this paper is my own writing. In that extract, I did reference a few authors. I have had some time to reflect on the three case studies, and one of the points of clarity that arose out of this reflection has been that I have not felt a need to create theoretical and practical frameworks that comprise the work of other thinkers and practitioners. Their work is neither relevant

nor necessary for several reasons. The first is that my work has been informed by the lived experiences of myself and my collaborators, most of whom have been women. Our multiple and varied political, cultural, religious and other experiences gave us a context within which to work. Our lives have unfolded in Africa, we have met each other in Johannesburg as we have moved from other places on the continent. We are all performers, and we study at a university. That is our context. We did not feel bound to reference academic work in order for us to initiate, sustain and reflect on our processes. Our collective experiences gave as a context that we felt was specific to us but also broad because our point of convergence is a result of the meeting of different trajectories.

Additionally, *Even as I Walk* and *The Wages of Sin*, particularly, were critical engagements with the ways in which rules and accepted practices dictate the power dynamics where women are concerned. Even the legitimising of stories, of the ways in which stories are told, is a political process which we found was disadvantageous for us as women. The stories that we told, for *Even as I Walk* and *The Wages of Sin*, were stories that were not allowed to be told or heard anywhere else, the telling of which put us at great risk. That said, it became difficult for me to reference the work of others as a way of legitimating my academic career and my practice. Contemporary debates around what we mean by Practice as Research, Ethnography, and Performance have not fed the process. The reader might then ask, how can one use these terms in a report, if one is not concerned with what contemporary scholarship has dispensed? How does one renegotiate what one does not know? I have not got a perfect answer for those questions. I do not know that the core of my paper would be different if I did not know that what I was attempting to do was an auto-ethnographic reflection of my work. In the same way, the experiments and experiences that arose out of the three case studies had the same impact on us as theatre makers, as they

would have if we had not known that we were breaking theatrical conventions. What makes this work important is that I am making a conscious decision to reference myself, my work, the voices of my co-collaborators and their experiences. This is our contribution to scholarship: we are placing ourselves as a minority in the centre of academic discourse, and giving our voices legitimacy. In that sense, I want to argue that I know my work better than anybody else.

Aesthetics

The second thread that joins the three works together is the aesthetics. The most complicated set of the three was that of *They Were Silent*. The complication came out of necessity, rather than out of the need for an aesthetically pleasing set. I am interested in making theatre that does not distract the audience or the performer from the matter at hand. In the case of *They Were Silent*, the set was not a distraction. It was part of the matter at hand. There were screens, which brought attention to the veiled nature of the spirit world and the spiritual calling of healing. These phenomena are veiled even for the healers who have deeper contact with the world of the departed than individuals who have not got a spiritual or ancestral calling. The three circles emphasised the unlimited possibilities of alternate or parallel realities that Thulo has experienced and is yet to experience. Additionally, the earth that we used to create the three circles, and which Thulo used to adorn his naked body, was another tribute to the earth within which the spirits exist. *Even as I Walk*[22] had very simple lighting, a bare stage with four benches and four ridiculous looking women. I made a decision to count on the performers to embody their own pain, rather than hide from it using lighting, props and costuming. I wanted the bareness of the

[22] I remember a fellow student telling me that he liked the piece, although I wasted the opportunity to make it an 'exciting' experience with lighting and other special effects. I felt at the time that the only thing I would have changed if I could, in terms of the concept, would have been to place the entire audience in the performance area. I remember telling him that I could not bring myself to put special effects on death. The complication that I had sought lay in the subject matter: death.

stage to facilitate the purging that would take place, but also to give the performers a chance to move, live and exist freely in the world that we had created together. *The Wages of Sin* happened in a nondescript room, inside an oval with no costuming or make up or sound effects. The chairs were blue plastic, the kind that is bought in large numbers by schools, universities and community halls. The walls were painted white, with grey carpeting, and the floors were also grey[23]. Everything was as it usually is, except that we had invited guests to gather with us for the offering.

Methodology

The methodologies I have used in these creative processes are similar in many ways. Firstly, I have come to regard beginning a process without knowing how to do it, what in fact is being investigated, and what the investigation will yield, as a methodology. I began *Even as I Walk* with a vague I idea, but I did not know how I would dramatise the idea, nor did I know whether the process would yield anything that could be engaged with robustly for its theatricality, its concept, its subject matter. In the same way, I began *The Wages of Sin* with a great deal of fear. I struggled to articulate my research interest in class because I struggled to focus my enquiry. In that sense, I went into the process with a very broad research question, and I did not know I would ensure that the findings of the research process were apparent in the fifteen minute offering that was required. I did not know how to begin, and when I had begun, I did not know how to continue. I was forced to begin and to continue because I had to try, experiment. *They Were Silent* was not different from the other processes. I knew very little about Sangomas, and I had to acknowledge that what little I knew was based on preconceptions and misrepresentations. I had never directed

[23] When we reworked the piece for the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, 2009, all we had onstage were seven chairs and odd props: a large rope, a pot, a scale, two saws, a violin, a towel, a water bottle and 14 sanitary towels. The stage, the wings, the flats and the performers' costumes were all black.

work that was autobiographical. How would I negotiate a synergy between ritual and theatre, if I had so little understanding of this particular kind of ritual? And how would I negotiate autobiographical material, which consisted of nearly 'fantastical' material, in a theatrical space? I had, once again, a great deal of fear and uncertainty.

The methodologies are also similar in that they were experimental and experiential. In all the pieces, I made a commitment to experimenting with different factors in the creative process: I made up exercises to suit the specific needs of each production; I pushed performers to try, to put their toes in very cold water; I experimented with configuring our performance spaces in a different way, and in a way that would allow the audience to be as present as the performer; it was an experiment to ask other women to share their lives and hurts and strengths with me, and then with an audience. It was an experiment to place a Sangoma in a theatrical space, and to share his rituals, his spiritual identity with an audience; it was an experiment to embark on a choreographic process with a woman who was generally considered 'too big' to move; it was an experiment to smoke tobacco and marijuana in front of our friends, colleagues, families, partners. Many of these experiments, and the ones that I have already described, were very, very risky. They had massive implications for us as performers, as human beings with vulnerabilities like others, as women, as students, as theatre makers. We took big risks knowing that reactions would not be uniform, and would probably not be what we had hoped for. For our experiments, my collaborators and I received robust criticisms, anger, relief, joy, confusion. In a sense, the experimental nature of the work is what gave the work its shape, its identity, and its impact.

Additionally, the work has been characterised by experiential methodologies, which were effective in part because the work has also been consistently collaborative. In *Even as I*

Walk, we spent a great deal of time sharing stories and brainstorming. Each of the performers brought a part of themselves to the work, so that the vocal and physical vocabularies arose out of our collective expression. For example, the text that was spoken came out of the writing of the performers over the course of the rehearsal phase: we took our issues, our stories, and found a common thread, and it became the two extracts quoted earlier. The solo that happened in silence was a result of questions going back and forth between me and the performer: she offered suggestions, I offered different approaches, but I could not change her story. *The Wages of Sin* nearly came to a standstill on several occasions, as I wrote before. We were so committed to a democratic and collaborative process that at times we took quite a while to resolve our challenges. Yet because of these challenges, the women that I worked with became very protective of each other outside of the rehearsal space, and unflinchingly supportive during particularly difficult rehearsals. We all survived the writing of our stories on our bodies because we all participated, and we handled each others' stories and bodies with sensitivity. Moreover, we recognised each other as gifted human beings: the music students would lead exercises that were predominantly about sound or music; the performers who were design students brought their expertise, anybody who brought food shared, the writer in the group oversaw certain exercises, we discussed details like whether to invite the audience or let anybody in, how we should set up the performance area and audience seating: every decision affected us all and this was the reality in every minute of the process.

Performance

It is impossible to give a definitive definition of what performance is. I will offer instead, a tentative working guide for what I discovered as I worked. The devising processes I embarked upon with other theatre-makers were auto-ethnographic. We were conscious of

our pasts and out present as we worked, we reflected on ourselves as parts of a profession, of communities and of cultures. Additionally, we created the work and renegotiated the platform within which we located the work—performance—to reflect and accommodate our context in a contemporary African setting—Johannesburg. In *The Wages of Sin* and *Even as I Walk*, the performance was located in what we did wrong, or what was not conventional. We placed audiences onstage, performed on a bare stage, spoke with the audience and smoked marijuana. We kept track of the time on cell phones and allowed multiple narratives to unfold simultaneously. Similarly, *They Were Silent* did not dictate the audience's experience by providing a language with which to decode the content: we allowed the audience to feel their way through the offering, rather than to think through it. This generated multiple, varying and sometimes discordant interpretations of the content. The performance was, in all three pieces, also located in the relationship between the performer and the audience: *Even as I Walk* treated audiences as co-performers, *They Were Silent* highlighted the necessity of the audience for any kind of offering—ritual or ceremony; it highlighted the community that is the audience, performer and facilitator. The *Wages of Sin* approached the audience as a group of individuals who could fulfil a function for different performers, as a group of individuals, whose unique backgrounds and lived experiences could contribute to an enriched dialogue.

Performance, and writing about performance have therefore become practices which can be negotiated, re-negotiated, disrupted, ritualised, gendered, interpreted, stripped, put in shadow, made fugitive, made safe, made awkward and transgressed. And for that, my collaborators and I are grateful.

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