

Fiona Wright

Some thoughts on the performance 'On Lying', as performed for 'Sinergia' the 5th International Festival of performance works by women, as part of the International Women's Day events, 7th March 2008, Girona, Spain. Organised by Denys Blacker for Gresol Art.

A subjective view of a particular performance.

She's lying on the stage, surrounded by what looks like the aftermath of a backstage party. We are in a theatre space. There's a blue spangled dress (empty), a mike stand, a half drunk bottle of wine and various other props, scattered about her body. On her back, knees up, she gazes up and sighs loudly several times. I have missed the start of the piece but as it is scheduled to go for up to two hours I figure I can catch up. But I am already struck by the difficulty that the artist is facing. The piece seems doomed to fail.

Let's rewind for a moment. This performance would normally take place in front of a large, seated, English speaking audience. This time it's different. This time we are in Girona, the principal city of the Catalan region of Spain. Not many folks round these parts speak fluent English. Furthermore, we are attending a performance event celebrating Women's Day 2008. Fiona Wright was facing quite a challenge – a feminist performance event in a foreign language may not exactly appeal across the board.

Her audience, at first, sat expectantly like good theatre-goers, in their neat rows of seats. Gradually the realisation dawned on them that this was a two-hour event and that this performance could, and looked like it would, go for the duration. Many of them began to drift away. Onstage, she is up on her feet. Hands on hips and resplendent in a Ramones T. shirt, is talking to us about rocker Eddie Vedder, about Pearl Jam. Wright's interest in/obsession with Vedder is central to this performance. At first, she raps in a way that seems ironic but her words soon reveal a train spotter's attention to detail and take on a slightly obsessive quality. Wright's onstage persona reveals that she is not just interested in Vedder; she is immersed in him, and has invested him with almost mythic qualities. It is like she wants to somehow 'be' Vedder.

Suddenly, someone is screaming outside – the sound of the cry invading the space as it does, serves to remind us all that this is not a performance in which you can forget yourself. This performance is one that generates a self-consciousness that will grow in intensity. Starting to feel slightly uncomfortable, I leave to investigate the source of the screaming. There are five other performances taking place simultaneously, in different parts of the building. The sounds bleeding into Wright's work emanate from one of the other 'Sinergia' artists, Nieves Correa. Hers is a performance exploring the impact of time on the female body – this is quite another world in itself, but encountering this very different work serves to reiterate the problematic nature of the solo female in performance. She is always an awkward creature, troublesome and anomalous because she wilfully puts herself on display, not for the pleasure of others but in the assertion of her authorship. Yet, in her train she brings with her all those ancient ideas that equate the

female with the muted object, a thing to be seen but not heard. The solo woman in performance always, always means trouble because she absolutely confronts this.

When I return, a recording of a Pearl Jam concert is playing – Vedder's drunken, pre-song pre-ambles resounds as Wright rhythmically strides in large circles around the space. This pacing is a motif that repeats throughout the performance. She swigs from the rapidly disappearing bottle of wine, she talks to the audience, she makes jokes, she strides some more. The audience has now dwindled down to a silent few, hiding in the dark, plus the ubiquitous gaggle of photographers. Her jokes are drowned out by the silence that meets them. The pause, the gap she allows for the audience to step in with their contribution, what one would imagine is the usual response to this work, is a gaping void. She holds these pauses for as long as she can bear to, but it has to be filled, something has to take its place. The space is dead quiet now, tense even.

For many performers it would seem like an impossible and unrewarding task to continue and they would simply finish up and leave quietly. The work, as a piece of theatre cannot succeed in these circumstances so it has either to end in failure or to change. If it changes or adapts it isn't theatre anymore but something else, something like performance art. I am not sure whether Wright intended this piece as theatre or performance art but the distinction became moot as she, to her credit, took the performance into an extraordinary place. She worked those silences, accepting them and using them. Rather than resisting the lack of understanding she became more physical, more abstract. Instead of succumbing to the difficulty of the situation, she acknowledged it and played with it. This is where the element of unpredictability came into play, hence the sense that control was precariously balanced. The more structured parts and specific movements of this work, by necessity, became interwoven with the unpredictable elements. Observing Wright orchestrate this was fascinating. At times she would repeat a specific movement – dance-like and beautifully expressive – then she would tell a joke to the largely unresponsive audience, engineering another awkward silence, in which we were all acutely aware of our selves and the setting. She both took us into a space of theatrical representation (in which you temporarily lose your sense of self as you watch) and out of it again (in which you immediately become very aware of yourself).



Eddie Vedder

Now she is pacing fast. She stops to remove her clothes. Deliberately, one piece at a time she removes her T. shirt, her skirt, her knickers. Then she puts them back on. She repeats the pacing, takes off all her clothes and puts on the blue dress, a sparkling moment of glamour in an otherwise grungy scenario. In this sequence, sometimes she is naked and sometimes she is wearing only a few odd items. She seems unable to decide. The wine is nearly all gone. Standing there in just her T. shirt, she creates an image that is part punk defiance and part pathetic. To my mind, none of the undressing has come across as titillating. However, as I contemplate this thought, I am distracted by the frenzied snapping of the photographers clustered at the foot of the stage. This reminds me that all things are subjective but none more so than performance.

Accordingly, I make no claim to be objective. Indeed, I had no idea of what to expect from Wright's piece, nor did I see the entire work from start to finish. These are my impressions of the work, uninformed by any information or history. In a work like this, it seems to me, that one cannot objectively address the self-conscious state it activates. I feel that Wright is performing uncertainty in this piece. Here, in Girona, in this particular performance of the work, the uncertainty is real.

When her jokes fall flat and she's hanging onto the performance, she is utterly alone up there. The handful of viewers who drift in and pause, then pass through, cannot really be called an audience, in this classic theatre space. In their transience, they serve to amplify her onstage solitude. Similarly, exposure of the body in this way serves to enhance the vulnerability of the performer. This half-naked, wannabe rock god, standing there in her bra and boots, facing rows of empty seats, is achingly alone and excruciatingly exposed. She could leave but we all know she will go on. Rock stars always go on. Rock stars have to play gigs like this. It is part of paying your dues, part of the myth, part of the romance of rock 'n' roll. Fortunately, Wright is compelling in her failed attempt to appropriate the rock star persona and, barely perceptibly, the emphasis of the performance shifts onto failure itself.

So exactly what is Wright doing in her nerd like admiration of Vedder? It is clear that she doesn't want to sleep with him but does she really want to be a rock star? I think it is more complex than that. I think she wants to be the boy who wants to be a rock star. The thing she has been avoiding throughout – the missing element – is the boy in her, the only aspect of Fiona who can truly be an Eddie Vedder wannabee. To *be* Vedder she would have to be a boy. The uncertainty, the dressing and undressing, the nerd like attention to Vedder's details, the drinking (the wine has been gone for a while now), the stamping about in boots, then the sparkly dress and the naked exposure of the woman's body masquerading as a boy, all of this seems to be a circling, (like the pacing) around this nebulous idea of masculinity that she has constructed. She has set herself up with an impossible task. She can only ever get close to being Vedder by assuming an aspect of masculinity – in this case the wannabe boy fan. But to do this she must relinquish an aspect of her femininity. This she fails to do, because she gets naked, puts on a dress, because of her body. She fails to fail herself.

It's just different for girls. It is almost impossible for us to positively address the issues of failure and control. In the black and white, patriarchal schema of language, with its elevation of the masculine principle and negation of the feminine, a woman can never truly succeed because she always fails to be a man. If success can be understood as the control and defeat of failure, then it follows that if one is always conditioned by failure, then one can never control it. In other words, control is something women aren't supposed to have in the first place so how could we understand or address its mechanisms? For a woman who performs, who gets up onstage and makes a spectacle of herself, these are tricky issues to address and still be taken seriously. Especially if she gets naked and downs a bottle of wine. What can she possibly know about control, one might ask? Wright managed to demonstrate exactly that by choreographing the increasing chaos of the performance with incredible poise. She engaged us and her deft negotiation of such tricky territory was truly impressive.

Screams from Nieves regularly punctuate Wright's performance. Wright rolls her eyes but gets on with things. Even if she does manage to create a reciprocal relation between herself and the audience, it will always be disturbed and the spell broken by another woman's performance. The whole thing seems impossible. Emptiness, screams, the effect of the wine, apparent uncertainty and extreme self-consciousness, the stark exposure – surely she should be losing control. Perhaps she never was fully in control of this piece but for me that unknown quality was its bravest aspect.

How could she reconcile the desire to be the boy who wanted to be Vedder? If she did, where would that leave Fiona? These questions compelled me to return again and again over the two hours. I had to find out what happened – not in the narrative – but how she, Wright herself fared. The ambiguity about control and failure in this work, the excruciating moments when the jokes just hit dead air and hung there interminably, the heightened vulnerability of Wright herself as the work progressed, and difficulty of enduring the performance in long periods,

should have driven me away. Instead, I watched until she finally picked up her props and unsteadily exited the stage. And I waited until I was sure she wasn't coming back. Awesome.

Anita Ponton
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