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## On Reckoning

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## On *Reckoning*<sup>1</sup>

By Kim Solga

What does it mean, *really* mean, to bear witness at the theatre? I ask my students this question at the beginning of every semester, and by the end I hope we have, together, developed some tactics to help us become more critically aware, empathetic, and informed audience members. Fittingly, then, as the academic term was closing in April 2016, I had the rare privilege of attending a performance that demanded I bear witness to a very specific, urgent set of experiences: those of Indigenous survivors of Canada's residential school system, their families, and others touched by the official process of truth and reconciliation that took place between 2008 and 2015. That work was *Reckoning*, created by playwright and actor Tara Beagan and designer Andy Moro and produced by their company, ARTICLE 11.

*Reckoning* is composed of three short pieces: a dance-movement performance with recorded sound ("Witness"), in which John Ng performs the role of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) commissioner coming steadily more undone as he encounters the brutal testimony he is meant to synthesize; a realistic scene ("Daughter") in which PJ Prudat, as the child of a former teacher accused of rape, seduces her father's accuser (played by Glen Gould); and a truly hilarious, incredibly poignant monologue ("Survivor") delivered by Jonathan Fisher, who plays a survivor recording a note for his family as he prepares to commit suicide on the steps of parliament in an act of protest against the insufficiencies of the official reconciliation process.

[insert image 1 – promo shot of PJ and GG]

These are the bare bones. *Reckoning*'s power, however, resides in the ways it asks us, over and over, to look again—to look deeply into and engage

thoughtfully with seemingly spare scenes. *Reckoning* is elegant, gorgeous to watch, expertly composed. But it is not at all beautiful—and in this contrast its truth lies.

[image 2 – NG facing open briefcase]

In the first scene, Ng's witness enters his office slowly, nervously; soon, he begins to contort as the language of the commission's official documents (transmitted through the theatre's sound system) hits him in his gut, snakes across his body. He removes pages of testimony from his briefcase only to feel, too, their violence; he grabs his task lamp and turns it into an angry eye, staring hard at words that could scarcely be more viscerally draining. The virtuosity of his movements contrast sharply with the brutality he takes into his body as he dances with the cruel, bright light. His body bears literal witness to the emotional demands of bearing witness to the material we are all encountering together. He trains us in the act of witnessing, preparing the audience to continue *Reckoning's* journey.

Prudat and Gould have an even greater challenge: to act "natural" as they embody two people whose experiences of the residential school system continue to affect them on multiple levels. Prudat's character was born at a residential school, her mother a student and her father a teacher; Gould plays a survivor preparing to give testimony to the TRC. When the scene opens they have just had sex; they then begin talking—and drinking. Prudat's "daughter" has been torn apart by the accusations against her father, who has died since the accusations were made. She has ostensibly invited Gould's character to her home in order to see him in the flesh, but also hopes that he will evoke her father's presence and that she will be able to demand both men witness her attempted suicide in the face of his accusations, her loss.

The realistic set-up of this scene makes it gut-wrenching: as always with Beagan's plays, naturalism is here a vehicle for profound intimacy on stage that goes

painfully awry, and that requires audiences to squirm through the anxiety and discomfort that witnessing others' exposed bodies can impose. Here, I found myself fascinated by Prudat's gorgeous physicality, but also pulled sideways by the sheer complexity of her character's lived experience as a child *of* the residential school system. This is a woman trapped by her love for her father despite the wreckage of her origins, able to see both sides of the TRC's work (supporting survivors, but also accounting for the rights of alleged perpetrators) and yet unable to see her way clear of the implications of the Commission for herself, her family, and her future. Even as they ask us to revel in Prudat's beauty and Gould's charm, Beagan and Moro require us to look beyond them, into the ugliness of their colonial present, and to recognize the process of "reconciliation" as uneven, inadequate, ugly, damaging.

[image 3 production image of PJ and GG]

"Daughter" ends with a moment of violence aborted, and a glass of wine flung sideways. When the lights come up again, Jonathan Fisher enters to mop the deck, makes light of the mess, and allows everyone (at last) to laugh, to unburden a bit. The performers all pitch in to change the sets from piece to piece, and at the performance I attended Prudat caught a chair as it nearly fell from the platform stage. This became our opportunity to applaud, since applause had felt quite wrong at the end of her and Gould's performance. I found this accident instructive, powerful: is applause the appropriate response when one bears witness at the theatre? Applause is an acknowledgement of actors' virtuosity in their craft, a declaration of approval. When we clap, we thank the actors for *their* labour and then we put it to one side. Witnessing human experience, human bodies in pain, requires something very different: when we do *not* clap after performances like "Daughter," it is (I hope) because we are doing our own work, prompted by the work of the actors and

production team to labour ourselves alongside them.

Fisher's closing monologue was, like Ng's piece, an exercise in virtuosity; so damn deadpan-funny I had to keep reminding myself that he was recording a suicide note and I wasn't supposed to be enjoying it—or, was I? Fisher's survivor obviously wanted the loved ones for whom he was recording his message to feel both his joy and his sadness, to hear his funny as well as his hurt. How do we live with two contradictory emotions at once? Can the pleasure we take in a performance be more than “culinary” (as Bertolt Brecht might say)? Can it enable our political engagement?

Near the end of his recording, Fisher's character makes us all get up: he DEMANDS, with acute vocal force, that we stand to sing, with him, Canada's national anthem. For the purposes of his note this is a deeply ironic gesture: our anthem is laden with assumptions about who owns Canada, who owes Canada allegiance, and who Canadians are (sons, not daughters, according to the lyrics—“sorry, ladies!” Fisher deadpans). This is the one moment when *Reckoning* calls on spectators to use our physical bodies to meet the performance; it's easy for those of us sitting in the dark to forget we have bodies, unless the seats are especially uncomfortable, or the bathroom beckons. Strangely, however, in this case none of us seemed reluctant to get up. Fisher's script required him to boom out his demand that we stand, but it wasn't really necessary. We were all already on our feet.

Something about this work, this process through which it had taken us to arrive at this moment of song, had made us all well aware of, and also prepared for, the need to rise and meet Fisher's voice and eyes. (And our voices he insisted upon: none of this lip-sync pretending, he scolded.) When we, as citizens of a contemporary settler-colonial nation, are able to meet survivors' eyes with our own eyes, open wide

and searching for more than we think we already see and know; when we are able to meet survivors' voices with our voices, ready to speak of the atrocities, the cultural genocide, on which this country is founded, and ready to speak toward a better shared future: that's not reconciliation, but it's the first step towards a proper reckoning.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this review first appeared on Kim's teaching blog, *The Activist Classroom*, on 20 April 2016.