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## Realism/Terrorism: The Walworth Farce

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Realism/Terrorism: *The Walworth Farce*  
By Kim Solga ([ksolga@uwo.ca](mailto:ksolga@uwo.ca))

Around the twenty-minute mark I was fully prepared to walk out of Druid Theatre's production of Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* (at World Stage in Toronto, October 2009). The pace of the dialogue (incredibly quick), the accents (Galway; thick), and the stylized histrionics (part clown, part improv comedy) all combined to produce what my students would describe as "over the top"; I simply had no idea what was going on. But I was wedged in on both sides, I'd paid good money, and no way was I getting up to see the whole of the Fleck Dance Theatre looking at me. So I stayed.

Then, as I settled into the rhythms of the production, I began to realize that the work in front of me was "farce" in name only. In fact, *The Walworth Farce* turned out to be the most theatrically complex, and meta-theatrically loaded, production I've seen in a long time. It's a play about the fickle performatives of memory, about the ways in which the theatre both enables and disables the drive to remember. It's also a play about performance as a vehicle for terrorism: for both *Grand Guignol* violence as well as the small acts of horror that make up a shared life. And it's a play about trauma, about traumatic re-enactment and the limits of the theatre as a site for such. Can theatre, it seems to ask, really allow us to stage, to purge, to deal and then to move on? Because nobody in *The Walworth Farce* moves on – although every character plays to survive.

Here's what the World Stage program has to say about the "setting" of *The Walworth Farce*:

It's 11 o'clock in the morning in a council flat on the Walworth Road in London. In two hours time, as is normal, three Irish men will have consumed six cans of Harp, fifteen crackers with spreadable cheese, ten pink biscuit wafers and one

oven cooked chicken with a strange blue sauce. In two hours time, as is normal, five people will have been killed.

Here's the demystified version: Dinny (Michael Glenn Murphy) is Sean (Tadhg Murphy) and Blake's (Raymond Scannell) dad. Dinny left Ireland more than a decade ago after a fight with his brother over their mother's estate. During this fight he appears to have murdered his brother, and his brother's wife. The boys followed him to London; since then, the three men have spent every day of their lives (*every day of their lives*: think about that) replaying this domestic history. They perform a carefully edited version of Dinny's leaving story – one that exonerates Dinny, makes him a sort of folk hero, and earns him the family “acting trophy” every time. (There's an actual trophy: it stands on a shelf in the truer-than-life living room.) Blake plays all the women; Sean plays the hapless brother. Dinny plays himself. Blake, who idolizes Dinny, clearly suffers from Stockholm syndrome; Sean, meanwhile, seems normal enough to be sent to Tesco's every day to get what he calls “our food for the story” – the edible props the men consume during their performance. On this particular day, though, something goes wrong: he talks to the Tesco cashier, Hayley (Mercy Ojelade), and then takes the wrong shopping bag home by accident. As a result of this small mischance, two extraordinary things happen: Sean begins to resist the production in which he, his brother and father are trapped; and Dinny becomes slowly, and dangerously, aware of Sean's resistance. At the end of Act 1 Hayley arrives with the correct shopping, becomes Dinny and Blake's hostage, and is subsequently enslaved in their household theatre. The damage is done, though: the real has crashed in, and it's a crushing blow.

As scholars of performance, we tend to believe in theatre's power as a force for good in the world. Notwithstanding Diana Taylor's groundbreaking writing on the theatrical workings of state terror in *Disappearing Acts* and her later *The Archive and the Repertoire*, I would wager that we all, on some level, have faith that performance holds the keys to unlocking institutional abuse. The stage can always be turned back on the terrorists, can always be used to expose and prevent what the carefully choreographed performance of hegemonic control has enabled. Further, when it comes to history – to the complex workings of human and cultural memory – we argue ever more stringently for theatre's critical agency: on stage, as Herbert Blau teaches us, we replay history first as tragedy and then as farce, donating our blood and sweat to the exposure of human folly and to the promise that such folly might play out differently next time. *The Walworth Farce* fits this bill perfectly, perhaps too perfectly. It is tragedy and it is farce, all in one blow; it stars four actors whose characters become, by the end of the evening, literal "blood donors" (Blau qtd in Diamond 3). And yet, even after that bloody ending, the final moments of stage light reveal that there will be a next time (that there will *always* be a next time), but it will never look different – not really – from what we saw tonight. This piece of theatre starts, and ends, with a memory play that is always, and only can be, an act of terror: folding in on itself, consuming its witnesses.

What does it mean to suggest that theatre might hurt us, and badly? That performance might augment and reproduce, rather than rehearse in order to assuage, the traumas of the past? These notions run counter to everything I believe about the theatre – everything I've been taught, and everything I teach my own students, about performance as a political, social, and deeply communitarian act. But if I'm honest, I'll admit that the

edges of my scholarship have always been haunted by the possibility I might be wrong, by the possibility that the theatre, more often than we care to admit, may do very little good, or even do real harm. While *Walworth Farce* suggests implicitly – in its willingness to stage the terror and confusion of Dinny’s family memory play; in its articulation of Sean’s growing uncertainties; in the arrival of Hayley’s “real” – that performance can “out” even the most mundane, localized, personalized acts of theatrical terror, its finale offers absolutely no comfort to those of us who want to believe that “out” is where these characters will end up. Hayley’s arrival spins the plot out of control: as Dinny expends effort to manage her place in his performance framework, he begins to reveal the extent of his tyranny to Blake, the most vulnerable among them. Blake kills Dinny, then tricks Sean into killing him in turn. Brutalized by what she has seen, Hayley walks out of the flat, numb; Sean, however, does not leave. He locks himself in with the bodies and begins to play the story over again, incorporating the events of the day into a fresh mythology. He is damned, not freed. Theatre is his sentence, not his salvation.

And then there’s one more wildcard to play in this madcap parlour game: good old stage realism. Hayley ushers real life through the flat door, but that does not represent the first or only appearance of “real” here. The set of Druid’s production is intensely Naturalist. Spectators look head-on at three picture-perfect rooms: a living room at centre stage, a kitchen stage left, and a bedroom stage right. The closet doors open, and there’s stuff behind them. The kitchen is fully kitted out; the stove works. We even get a suggestion of the “fourth wall” via broken bricks built up at the front of the proscenium. The play-within is styled as wild camp, all crazy wigs and flailing limbs, but when the actors fall out of it they fall into Stanislavsky. One might argue that Dinny, Blake and

Sean play their play to escape the mundane of their real lives, but one might also argue that they are trapped *within* that real, stuck not in Southeast London council flat hell but in the strictures and conventions of a particular form of performance practice from which they plan a flawed, and failed, escape. Does *Walworth Farce* represent Theatre That Kills, or does it stage the deadening, hardening effect of a particular *kind* of theatre, particular spaces and tropes of entrapment (Hedda's hated parlour; Julie's tight little kitchen; Brick's disgust-laden bed) which, by now, performance scholars know all too well can be killers?

I find this conclusion too easy. In the end, *Walworth Farce* tells us nothing clear about any of the theatrical forms it engages, although I'd argue it complicates our relationship to all of them. In its obsessive clutter the production nods (somewhat parodically) at stage realism, but it doesn't level judgment. Realism frames this farce, but it also enables its tragedy, and forges its unraveling. It makes Hayley's entrance possible and it activates her escape. It traps Sean anew in the end. Realism isn't really the villain here – but nor is some other, more lauded form of performance the saviour. *Walworth Farce* ends in a gray zone, where a play is at once Sean's safe haven and his predator, perhaps even his grave. For me, this gray zone compels uncomfortable questions about the limits of the theatre as a site of witness, and prompts me to wonder how we might better engage theatre's formidable relationship – across all genres – to pain.

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