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The Corpse Corpses:

Non-Professional Performers and Misperformance

Halfway through post's production of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, performer Mish Grigor drags a dead body across the stage. Mish delicately arranges the body, that of a volunteer performer who has been 'playing dead', into a kind of deformed *pietà*, cradled across the arms and lap of fellow performer Zoë Coombs Marr. Mish is supporting the back of the body's head, and stroking her arm lovingly. 'So the greats tell us that when you're dead', begins Zoë, before she is cut off by a sharp laugh from the audience.¹ She looks down to find that the body in her arms, trembling almost imperceptibly, has begun to smile. She tries again, 'that *when you're dead*', slapping the body lightly across the face, only to have the body upstage her once more by breaking into a wide grin. Zoë angles her head down and continues her line straight into the body's ear: 'it's just like being asleep. And dreaming'. The body behaves, the laughter dies down, and the show continues.

Less than a minute later, the body is in trouble again. In the strange, elliptical way of this show, Mish and Zoë are back riffing on Hamlet's famous line, 'to sleep, perchance to dream':

M. Wake up!
Z. Jeff.

This apparent non-sequitur is the last straw for the body. She scrunches up her face, desperately pressing her lips together. She begins to shake. But this time, Zoë too is struggling, holding the melodramatic pose with which she accompanied the word 'Jeff', looking anywhere but down at the body in her lap. The performers continue:

M. But one day, Jeff doesn't wake up.
Z. Because he's dead.

The image she invokes, of the skivvy-clad Australian children's entertainers, The Wiggles, serenading one of their number in bed only to discover he's dead, is the last straw for the body. The laugh that has been building within her since she was dragged centre stage and began to be manipulated by the performers is playing across her face. Zoë and Mish battle valiantly through their remaining dialogue, desperately trying to suppress their own laughter. Much as they fight against it, there is only one way this can end. The wave of laughter has passed from the body, to the audience, and back again. The body is convulsing on the floor now, shaking in Zoë's arms, when Mish leans down and yells in her ear:

M. Are. You. Dreaming?

The body screws her eyes shut, still shuddering:

Z. Perchance?

The floodgates open; the body breaks out into laughter. The corpse has corpsed. Zoë and Mish look at the body, out to the audience, back at each other, wildly around the space, until they too burst into laughter. They drop the body back onto the stage, and take up their next position. As the audience continues to laugh, Zoë and Mish attempt to compose themselves. The lights change. The show must go on, after all.

Introduction

Programmed by Belvoir and the Sydney Festival in 2014, *Oedipus Schmoedipus* was post's leap onto the Australian mainstage. Although they had produced two previous shows in mainstage venues, 2010's *Everything I Know about the Global Financial Crisis in One Hour* at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre, and in 2011 *Who's the Best?* at the Sydney Theatre Company, this latest show was their first appearance in a company's flagship subscription season. Known and celebrated for their anarchic style and apparent disregard for the rules of well-made theatre, it was always unlikely that *Oedipus Schmoedipus* would look or feel like standard subscription fare. Even by post's standards, though, the decision to have a new and different chorus of twenty-five non-professional performers on stage for each performance was unprecedented. The young woman who played the role of the dead body on the night I saw the performance, as described above, was one of these volunteers. One of a motley crew of friends, relatives, interested strangers, and frustrated wannabes, she had been given three hours of rehearsal, been fed some pizza, and then been shoved onto one of the most prestigious stages in Sydney. Once there, all she was required to do was enter, walk downstage right, collapse, and play dead. Somehow, though, she found herself interrupting the action.

In this article, I examine post's use of non-professional performers in *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, and examine in particular the non-professionals' failure to perform to the standards expected of performers on the professional stage. In so doing, I am following Nicholas Ridout's contention in *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* that 'theatre's failure, when theatre fails, is not anomalous, but somehow, perhaps constitutive' (2006: 3). In the case of the non-professional performers in *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, it is their very misperformance that is constitutive—the volunteers fail to perform properly, as they were always supposed to. In fact, as I outline below, the dramaturgy and mechanics of the piece are designed to ensure their failure. It is here that the wider implications of *Oedipus Schmoedipus* lie in framing and discussing the use of non-professionals in contemporary performance. I argue below that misperformance is an essential element of working with non-professional performers, and that their failure allows for unique meaning-making possibilities. I propose that there are two dominant, linked meanings of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*: a critique of the exclusionary tragic canon; and of the seeming universality of death.

In the first section of this article, I discuss post's history as an ensemble, and outline some of the threads that have driven their work prior to and including *Oedipus Schmoedipus*. I then provide a longer outline of the show itself, including semiotic and phenomenological descriptions of the moments key to my later analysis. In the second section, I turn to some of the previous theoretical explorations of theatrical failure, including the work of Ridout, and Sara Jane Bailes in *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (2011). Conceiving of failure, as they do, as 'intentionally productive' (Venning 2012: 246), I connect these misperformances to ideas of authenticity and the real, following Carol Martin in *Theatre of the Real* (2013). The final section

brings together the two previous strands, and reflects on how the use of non-professional performers invokes misperformance to produce or claim authenticity. I explore this claim in relation to *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, as well as other recent work by Gob Squad and Ontroerend Goed.

post Presents post

post are a self-described 'collaborative performance ensemble' (post n.d.) made up of Zoë Coombs Marr, Mish Grigor, and Natalie Rose. They have been making work together in Sydney, Australia, since their first piece in 2005, *Idle Hands Wake Up With Fleas*. They received their first grant from the Australia Council for the Arts – the country's federal government funding agency – in 2007, and have since been regularly supported by the Council through one-off grants and commissions. While this places them amongst a select number of contemporary performance groups to have found regular support from the Council, their funding has not to date progressed beyond one-off grants to achieving Key Organisation status. This makes them reliant on commissions from major theatre companies for co-productions; as noted above, since 2010 their work has been made for and with the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) and Belvoir, the two major subscription companies in Sydney. This places post in the company of other collaborative performance ensembles such as the Melbourne-based queer theatre collective Sisters Grimm, who are similarly positioned as edgy outsiders guest starring within a mainstream company framework. For the major companies, post represents an investment in risk-taking work that still has the flavour of the fringe and independent scenes. Commissioning groups like post and Sisters Grimm fulfils a strategic aim for the major companies to invest in the development of Sydney's wider performance ecology. This embrace by the major companies, though, is a double-edged sword for these groups: while it ensures a degree of financial stability for their work, it also necessitates potential compromises in style and a smoothing of rough edges.

In the biography they provide on their website, post assert that 'we find ourselves on a borderline' (post n.d.) between the avant-garde and mass media. In the performances made for the major companies, post has found itself not only filling the companies' desire for avant-garde fare but also attempting to ensure their work is palatable enough to each company's subscriber base to ensure a follow-up commission. This points to a tension that post's work has to negotiate; perhaps another iteration of the 'borderline' on which they find themselves. The Australian professional mainstage has long been dominated by illusionistic performance. However, part of post's mission is to disrupt and critique this style, utilising a pointedly non-illusionistic style much more prevalent in the independent, non-subsidised sector. It is precisely this mission that is enacted through the use of non-professional performers, as I explore further below. Although post has a body of work that dates back to 2005, I concentrate here on their two most recent pieces in order to contextualise the style and concerns of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*.

Everything I Know about the Global Financial Crisis in One Hour (hereafter the *GFC* show), first performed in 2010, featured post's trademark deadpan style and the acts of linguistic and physical endurance that have characterised all of their work. At the start of the *GFC* show, performed by all three members of the ensemble, the performers launched into an extended esoteric word association to demonstrate just how little they understood about the GFC:

ZOË. So we all know basically what happened. [Pause] It was something in America. Something to do with mortgages. For whatever reason, a whole lot of people couldn't pay back their mortgages. And then the companies that had invested in

those mortgages went bust, and had to be bailed out by the government. Companies like Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae.

MISH. Yeah. Something happened in America. Something big. It was like a storm.

NAT. Yeah. Like that one in Queensland when bananas got really expensive.

ZOË. Cos if you think about it, bananas and money are actually very similar.²

The insanity only rises from here, and the association culminates in a wild dance routine. After this, we return to Zoë's first line above, which is delivered more and more desperately and breathlessly as the show goes on (the 2014 revival upped the ante still further, as the performers drank real champagne throughout the show and so had to perform through not only their physical exhaustion, but also their increasing drunkenness). Throughout, the performers remain in character as 'themselves', standing in for a set of everywoman figures trying to navigate their way through the confusion of the GFC.

In 2011's *Who's the Best?* post set out to settle the question of which of the three of them was 'the best' using as many different methodologies as possible, ranging from personality quizzes and psychological tests to subjective arguments about who has the better face. At the beginning of the show, Zoë nominated the ten categories in which they would be competing, and the piece was loosely divided into sections that examined each. Between these sections, there was a repeated dance sequence to Rihanna's 'Only Girl (In the World)', a purportedly empowering dance anthem in which the singer exhorts her love interest to 'make me feel like I'm the only girl in the world / like I'm the only one that you'll ever love'. Each repetition was faster than the last, forcing the performers to throw themselves around the stage in an increasingly manic style. The task of establishing a clear winner amongst them was made even more difficult by the fact that Natalie Rose was unavailable to perform.³ For the Sydney Theatre Company season, her part was played by guest actor Eden Falk, who was dressed identically to Zoë and Mish, complete with a long brunette wig to match their hair. Despite Eden speaking throughout in his identifiably masculine voice, he was addressed in the piece as if he were Nat, and related her experiences in the first person as evidence of her (and his?) case to be the best.⁴ Ultimately, the performers turned to the audience to settle their debate, although we of course proved every bit as indecisive and inconclusive as they were, and ended up instead celebrating their differences and perceived failings.

In summary, then, there are three trends in post's recent work that help to shape *Oedipus Schmoedipus*. Firstly, there is the dominant mood of what critic Keith Gallasch, reviewing *Who's the Best?* for *RealTime*, identified as 'daggy amateurism' (2011: 18). This mood was established through the two shows' free-wheeling styles, and the choice across both to include loosely choreographed dance routines that went beyond the physical capabilities of the performers, especially as the routines increased in speed. The concentration on seemingly improvised wordplay, including awful puns and laboured punchlines, further heightens this impression of amateurism, consciously invoking the spirit of the 'Dad joke'. This bathetic humour is linked to the second shared characteristic: a deliberate erasure of the line between actor and character. The performers appear matter-of-factly on stage as themselves, which creates a stage environment where we accept their weaknesses and various failures to perform as simply part of 'who they are'. Finally, both shows have a dominant orientation to the audience. That is, rather than concentrating on complex dialogue or interactions between the performers, the vast majority of both shows are played straight 'out' to the audience. Indeed, even when the performers are addressing each other or accepting offers to extend a joke, their delivery stays directly to the audience. Taken together, these choices create the impression that we are seeing the real Zoë,

Mish, and Nat on stage, and it is this deliberate connection to the real that post both explore and exploit in *Oedipus Schmoedipus*.

A Democratic Theatrical Extravaganza!

When it was announced as the first show of Belvoir's 2014 subscription season, the form and content of *Oedipus Schmoedipus* was described as: 'take several hundred of the greatest plays of all time, pick out the death scenes, mix them all together (in a cunning and clever way) and then – well, there's the surprise...' (Belvoir, n.d.). The work was credited on Belvoir's website, and in the booklets that were sent out to their thousands of subscribers like this:

Oedipus Schmoedipus

By post (ZOË COOMBS-MARR, MISH GRIGOR & NATALIE ROSE)

after Aeschylus, Anon, Barrie, Behn, Boucicault, Büchner, Chekhov, Euripides, Gogol, Goldsmith, Gorky, Hugo, Ibsen, Jonson, Marlowe, Mayakovsky, Molière, Pirandello, Plautus, Racine, Seneca, Shakespeare, Sophocles, Strindberg, Voltaire, Wedekind, Wilde et al.

Directors ZOË COOMBS MARR & MISH GRIGOR

Further down in the description, there is another hint to the curatorial logic of the piece: 'fed up with white men staging the deaths of white men in plays written by white men, the white ladies of post have pirated the theatrical canon' (Belvoir n.d.). As if to prove their point, the 2014 season featured productions of *Hedda Gabler* and *Oedipus Rex*, and the post show opened barely a month after Belvoir's well-received 2013 production of *Hamlet* had closed in the same space. The promised premise was a simple one: post would present a kind of 'mash-up' of famous death scenes from across the theatrical canon as an exercise in part designed to critique the under-representation of marginal voices therein.

A final clue to their intentions was in the final sentences of the show's description, where post claimed that they have 'turned the juiciest stuff over to seven hundred – that's right, seven hundred! – collaborators. Death: it belongs to everyone!' (Belvoir n.d.). A small note on the sidebar of the website, or at the bottom of the page in the physical subscription booklet, offered slightly more information: '**Want to be involved?** *Oedipus Schmoedipus* will be looking for lots and lots of volunteers – no skill level whatsoever required!' (Belvoir n.d.), and provided an email address for prospective volunteers to register their interest. As the show date approached, a new link was placed on the Belvoir website, which offered:

Who are we after?

We want you, your nan, your cousins and their cousin's work friends. Absolutely everyone.

You don't need any experience at all. In fact we'd rather prefer you didn't.

You will rehearse with post on the day of performance.

You won't need to memorise anything.

There is a whole range of roles and you won't be asked to do anything you aren't comfortable with.

All participants will be provided with a light meal and one complimentary ticket to the show.

I return below to the preference for non-performers expressed in these documents. However, the descriptions also reveal more about the 'democratic' nature of the show. While there are no hints

about how these volunteers might be used in the show, the emphasis on their recruitment suggested that they would be integral to the eventual production. At the same time, the emphasis in each of the descriptions on how low the stakes would be for any potential volunteer—while perhaps designed not to scare anyone off – seems to run against this idea. What is made clear here is the focus on real people, as opposed to just performers, who make up the category of ‘everyone’ to whom death belongs.

Having read all of this information, it is something of a surprise to find when the show opens, only Zoë and Mish are standing on the stage of the Belvoir Street Theatre. Wearing all white ensembles, against a semi-transparent white scrim bisecting an all-white playing space, they begin the show by staring out at the audience. Zoë smiles, holding the expression for slightly too long. Mish looks apprehensive. Slowly, carefully, Zoë removes a gun, hidden in the back waistband of her skirt. She points it at the front row of the audience, the smile now tipping into full psychotic mode. She moves it to her temple, smiles once more, and without warning pulls the trigger. A blood pack goes off, spraying both performers with blood. Mish stands for a second, disbelieving, before she removes her own gun, places it in her mouth, pauses, and shoots. Another blood pack sprays across the scrim as she falls to the stage. The two performers lie motionless. Slowly, Zoë raises herself up to a sitting position, her back still towards the audience, and smiles again at us across her shoulder. Contemplating Mish’s prone body, she takes a vial of poison from her pocket. Softly, piano chords start playing through the theatre. Zoë throws the lid of the bottle across the stage, drinks the poison, and stares out at us again. The music reveals itself to be rapper Eminem and Rihanna’s collaboration ‘Love the Way You Lie’: ‘Just gonna stand there and watch me burn / but that’s alright because I like the way it hurts’. Zoë is now crawling across the space, convulsing, spitting blood across the white stage floor. She shudders to a stop. At the same moment, Mish’s body re-animates, and she crawls over to Zoë. The soundtrack has reached Eminem’s verse: ‘I can’t tell you what it really is / I can only tell you what it feels like’.

From there, their interactions grow into an orgy of melodramatic death scenes. Mish poisons herself by kissing Zoë’s lips, each of them kills themselves with an array of ever more outlandish weapons, Zoë cuts out Mish’s tongue before cutting off her hands. The deaths are all histrionically ‘fake’ – we see Mish not quite get the false hand on quickly enough, Zoë place the fake tongue in her mouth – but there is no time to reflect on this as the deaths get quicker and bloodier. All of this action is set to the soundtrack of a rap song that at best is a graphic account of violence done to women (‘If she ever tries to fucking leave again / I’mma tie her to the bed and set this house on fire’) and at worst glorifies domestic violence (the female voice in the song repeatedly asserts ‘That’s alright because I like the way it hurts’). Finally, both Mish and Zoë struggle to their feet, and rip open their shirts to reveal suicide bomber vests. They raise their hands up, simultaneously with a loud bang, and the lights and music are both extinguished. The audience applauds, and as this noise fades away, the lights come up on a now empty stage space, covered in pools, spatters, and streaks of blood. What appear to be the stage manager and her assistants, clad in stage blacks and wearing headsets, emerge and begin to mop the space clean. An opera duet, perhaps the nineteenth-century equivalent of the emotional overstatement of the twenty-first-century rap, begins to play. This continues for almost five minutes, until the stage manager, having done her best to return the space to a pristine white, pulls across the scrim. A number of performers, dressed in their street clothes, are standing stock-still and staring out at us. The promised chorus have arrived. They begin to chant in unison, describing each of the deaths that we have just watched Zoë and Mish enact.

At the conclusion of this choric section, Mish and Zoë arrive back on stage – still clad in their blood-soaked white costumes. The remainder of *Oedipus Schmoedipus* develops into the kind of

extended stand-up routine familiar from post's previous work, albeit with the support of a twenty-five-strong chorus. A typical section of the show follows the kind of anarchic logic shown above, like this exchange early in the show:

M[ISH]. The theatre, the great plays. Great works of literature written by great people.
 Generally men. White men.
 Z[OË]. The great whites. The great white plays.
 M. The great whites ... Not the sharks.
 Z. Not the sharks.
 M. Although we can learn a lot about death from great white sharks.
 Z. If you meet one, you're probably not coming back.
 M. Even if you're lucky, you'll get very close.
 Z. To the tunnel
 M. White tunnel
 Z. White light
 M. Great white
 Z. Plays
 M. + Z. Playing dead.
 Z. Which is what you should do if you see a great white.
 M. Or poke it in the eye.
 Z. Just like Oedipus.
 CHORUS. Oedipus is dead!

The movement between each section of the show is marked by some choric action, including some choreographed sequences, absurd costume changes, and slapstick routines. In the final section of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, each member of the chorus walks on stage, assumes a set position such that they are arranged in a number of rows, and announces their imminent death to the audience ('I'll die', 'I'm going to die', 'I'll die too' until 'We are all going to die'). This is followed by a kind of over-choreographed dance routine—to a speeded-up remix of 'Love the Way You Lie'—in which the chorus, awkward and embarrassed, are joined by Mish and Zoë, who have for the first time changed out of their blood-soaked costumes. Together, they dance in celebration of their great good fortune to be alive.

In 2014, Belvoir marked their season as driven by a particular reading of the nature and importance of theatre: the first page of their season booklet for subscribers read:

I regard theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.
Oscar Wilde [sic]

Misattribution aside—it is in fact a quotation from Thornton Wilder from the *Paris Review* of Winter 1956—the implication from Artistic Director Ralph Myers and Belvoir is that the rest of the season will interrogate this statement. It seems fitting that, throughout the piece, post's critique of the male-dominated Western canon is sharpened. The old argument that the classics reflect back to us ourselves, or what it is to be human, is directly invoked by the performers near the end of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*:

Z[OË]. We are all alive. We are all born, we all die.
 M[ISH]. These themes are universal.
 Z. We all get married – we all have children.

- M. We all want to meet a man who will kill himself if we die.
 Z. We all kill people if they marry that man.
 M. If our wives cheat on us, we strangle them.
 Z. We would all want our fathers to kill us if we're raped. Immediately!
 M. We all disguise ourselves as boys when we go into the forest, for safety.
 Z. We all believe in God.
 M. We all love seagulls.
 Z. We all want to go to Moscow.
 M. These things are universal – the Greats have told us so.
 Z. The Greats have said it all already, it's all laid out for us.

This thread of the performance is a gentle sending up of the perceived self-importance of classical theatre, and even perhaps of the companies who program these works and assert their cultural universality. At the same time, though, post's use of a chorus of non-professional performers makes available another strand of meanings. In the following section, I explain how their misperformance was anticipated by the structure of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, and in fact served to reinforce some of the meanings the piece made available to the audience.

Failure Works

Throughout these later sections of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, the non-professional chorus are asked to perform in ever-more virtuosic ways. Burdened with elaborate costumes, asked to hold extreme physical poses, and searching desperately for more instructions than are being provided, the chorus members almost inevitably fail to perform in manifold ways. On the night I saw the performance, one chorus member tripped over in the middle of the stage, another repeatedly slipped out of his costume, and a third continually looked around her for some kind of guidance only to end up at least one step behind her fellow performers. On one reading, these failures to perform disrupt the performance. However, as Sara Jane Bailes notes, 'failure works. Which is to say that although ostensibly it signals the breakdown of our aspiration or an agreed demand, breakdown indexes an alternative route' (2011: 2). In this section, I argue that this 'breakdown', which is inherent in the use of non-professional performers, becomes constitutive, and makes available new opportunities for meaning-making. Crucially, these are opportunities not ordinarily available when practitioners work with professional, trained performers. After all, one of the key elements of any training is to attune performers to working through crisis, as I have written elsewhere (see Hay 2014). The argument here is further linked to authenticity, and the claim that precisely because they lack the capacity to cloak their misperformance through reliance on training, the use of non-professional performers on stage can produce an 'irruption of the real' (Ridout 2006: 135).⁵ I explore each of these claims in turn, before turning to the profitable association of misperformance and metaphorical death. This final observation is used as evidence of post in *Oedipus Schmoedipus* harnessing the capacity of non-professional performers to strengthen the meanings made available by their work.

Missing from the account of the show in the previous section are all of the moments where it didn't work, where the non-professional performers failed to perform and risked bringing the entire enterprise to a grinding halt. One of these moments was discussed at length above in the prologue, and it provides a useful case study. In the moment of corpsing, when the actor loses control of her performance, 'it is impossible to tell whether this is the appearance, the sign of laughter, or laughter itself' (Ridout, 2006: 131). In the context of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, the actor playing the corpse is misperforming within the fiction of the piece—her laughter proves that she is undeniably, remarkably alive. As well as the kind of minor errors listed above, the performance invites an

amateurish over-performance: in allowing ‘your nan, your cousins, and your cousins’ work friends’ (Belvoir n.d.) on stage, post risk (or perhaps encourage) unleashing the inner Olivier in each of their chorus members. This kind of histrionically bad acting, with some non-professional performers booming their lines and pausing theatrically between words while others mumble them toward the lighting rig, expands the range of misperformances in the production (especially when compared to Mish and Zoë’s relaxed, laconic style). Where the pleasure in their earlier productions mainly relied on the absurdity, and the circularity of the humour, here it is the misperformance itself that becomes pleasurable. As Ridout asserts:

because the audience-actor relationship is a *mise en scène* touched with more than a little sadism and masochism, the audience may ... wish to prolong the pleasurable spectacle of the terrified wreck or to indulge itself in the infection of the corpse, to feel the liquids overflow the stage and splash into the auditorium (2006: 143).

As the above extracts from the show’s publicity specify, the volunteer non-professional performers are given a mere three hours of rehearsal before going on stage. Given this is scarcely long enough to memorise a basic dance routine, prompts were provided to the chorus throughout the show on television monitors hung from the lighting rig. These specified both what was to be said or done, and which chorus member was to say or do it, as well as reminding the chorus of the actions in the choreographed group sequences. However, because of the angles at which these screens were hung, and the need to mask them from the audience’s view on an adapted thrust stage, the chorus spent a great deal of their time on stage squinting upwards searching desperately for instruction. The collisions and wardrobe malfunctions that proliferated on stage, then, were assured not only by the inexperience of non-professional performers, but also through the production choices throughout *Oedipus Schmoedipus*. As reviewer John McCallum notes, ‘naturally they end up being themselves’ (2014); his colleague Jason Blake suggests that ‘each person unavoidably transmits something genuine’ (2014). In the final moment before the dance sequence that closed the show, for example, the chorus were instructed to find someone they knew in the audience and make eye contact with them. This gesture was of course calculated to cause maximum self-consciousness on both sides: on the night I saw the performance, the youngest chorus member (a teenage boy) made eye contact with his mother sitting next to me and mouthed “I’m sorry”. This self-consciousness too was double-edged: for some chorus members it slipped into embarrassment, while for others it was more joyous and reassuring. In these moments that call out the construction of the fiction we are watching, ‘the stage or the theatrical act itself collapses into some kind of oblivion’ and ideally a ‘festival of mutual enjoyment kicks in’ (Ridout 2006: 142–43). In *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, this ‘oblivion’ is productively aligned with its thematic focus on death.

She’s Dying up There – And So Are You

In his account of the ‘constellation of bungled, missed or difficult encounters’ that constitute modern theatre, Ridout documents the association of various forms of misperformance with metaphors of death (2006: 15; 132–34). This association, which is illustrated by both corpsing and stage fright, is particularly pronounced in the language performers use between themselves. In employing phrases that suggest another performer is ‘dying’ on stage, performers suggest that misperformance—whatever its cause or however it manifests on stage—is a metaphorical death. More specifically, stage fright has been associated with ghosts (Ridout 2006: 39) and described as ‘morbid’ (Kaplan 1969: 60–61). Corpsing, as discussed above, can be read as the death of character, allowing for a glimpse of the real actor behind: Ridout explains ‘it is the character that “dies” in such moments, thus precipitating a perhaps unmediated experience of this encounter between actual people’ (2006: 146).⁶ Here, he points to the duality, perhaps contradiction, that

lies at the heart of this metaphorical association, noting that corpsing is both 'intentional and unintentional, has to be connected with death, as well as with the irruption of the real' (2006: 135). Not only does this kind of misperformance invoke a metaphorical stage death, but it also allows for the life that animates the stage figure to shine through. In these moments, the stage figure can be seen as '[n]ever undone, but always undoing. Not dead, but dying. Dying, but staying alive' (Ridout 2006: 146). This evocative description links misperformance to the real and the presentation of authenticity on stage, as it provides 'direct fuel for the truthful presentation of human emotion in the theatre' (Ridout 2006: 39).

In the case of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, there is an effective doubling going on, where the theatrical meaning of the performance is reproduced by the authentic misperformance. Carol Martin provides a useful conceptual framework for what is happening in these moments: '[p]erformance of the real can collapse the boundaries between real and fictional in ways that create confusion and disruption or lead to splendid unplanned harmonies in the service of the creation of meaning' (2013: 10). As noted above, one potential meaning of *Oedipus Schmoedipus* is a (perhaps facile) celebration of the unpredictability of being alive, and the moments of misperformance serve to reinforce this. The random allocation of volunteers to particular lines—they are designated in the script simply through numbers—ensured this very unpredictability. On one night I saw the show, for example, one of the biggest audience laughs came from the oldest volunteer, a woman perhaps in her eighties, gleefully declaring 'I'll die soon!'. The perverse pleasure of watching a member of the public attempt to perform outside their ability, only to repeatedly fail, serves to reinforce their authenticity and point toward our shared humanity. Bailes offers further commentary on this effect: 'the capacity to fail – the probability of not being able to do something as well as hoped – is often made use of or turned to advantage' (2011: 7). In this sense, then, the set-up of *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, which seeks to ensure the failure of the non-professional performers, is utilised to draw attention to the potential meanings of the show around the experience of death and celebration of life.

Like post's earlier performances, *Oedipus Schmoedipus* has enshrined a deliberate circularity and raucousness in the service of authenticity. That is, in drawing attention to the real within the fictional, they have created 'confusion and disruption' (Martin 2013: 10) between the two. In their work, 'the real inhabit[s] the theatrical, providing spectators with an uncanny spectacle of double vision' (Martin 2013: 8). The use of non-professional performers in *Oedipus Schmoedipus* results in the total collapse of the boundaries between the two. To return to the language used above, this complete abandonment of the illusionistic mode that dominates the Australian professional stage in particular, allows post to craft a powerful criticism of the common humanity of the tragic experience—which, as they continually remind us, is a 'great white' experience. Drawing attention to the real people on stage allows post to suggest that it is their individual, messy experiences of the world that should be venerated above the presumed universality of the dramatic canon.

In this performance, post has harnessed the power of misperformance to their own ends. This places them in the company of European groups such as Gob Squad and Ontroerend Goed, both of whom have created recent work that embraces audience misperformance. In their work *Gob Squad's Kitchen (You Never Had It So Good)* (2007), the British/German company slowly replace themselves on stage with audience members, as they strive to remake Andy Warhol's *Kitchen*. Like much of their work, all of the performance is taking place both live and on screen, though after being taken on a tour of the set before the show, the audience are shown only the screens for the remainder of the show. Across the course of the piece, the performers gradually convince audience members to become involved in the action, wearing headphones to receive instructions

on what to say or do at any given moment. These instructions become enigmatic, and sometimes disappear entirely, leaving the audience-sourced performers to flounder—all the while exposed in merciless close-up on the screens. In so doing, Gob Squad are able to create a twenty-first-century variation on Warhol's scattered *cinéma vérité* style, and the inevitable misperformance of the recruited audience on stage/screen can be read as a sign of the authenticity of the performance (Shaw 2011). In this piece, too, the misperformance of the audience reinforces the meaning of the piece: what Charles Isherwood, writing for the *New York Times*, identifies as 'a startled appreciation of the beauty in the present moment' (2012).

Belgian ensemble Ontroerend Goed take this focus on the audience still further in their intimate performance pieces *Internal* and *A Game of You*. Both of these pieces place the burden of performance on individual audience members by stealth; after lulling us into an environment that seems to rely on authentic performance from the company members, the focus suddenly shifts to us. Wrong-footed by this sudden change, the audience members tend to flounder. As post demonstrate in *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, these non-professional performers lack the training and capacity to perform through their very real embarrassment, hurt, or desire. In *Internal*, for example, the piece commences as a one-on-one date, where each performer leads an audience member to his or her own private booth. Once there, the intimate setting prompts both performer and audience to reveal secrets and emotional burdens. In the final section of the show, though, all of the performers and audience reunite in a central space, and the performers proceed to reveal the secrets confessed earlier, before prompting audience members for responses. There are inevitably stutters, false starts and failures as the audience attempts to perform.⁷ Although this can be understood as a misperformance, again an authentic emotional reaction in the manner described by Ridout above is elicited (2006: 39). Furthermore, it is precisely this authentic live emotion that lands the central thesis of *Internal*—that in an age of increasingly mediated existence, there is a place for the live experience of emotions, whatever they may be. Despite their differences in execution, all three of these works are united by their use of non-professionals to provide an authentic presentation of human emotion.

Conclusion

Audiences for *Oedipus Schmoedipus* had purchased relatively expensive tickets to attend the show, drawn there either by its programming at Belvoir, Sydney's second major subsidised theatre company, or as part of the Sydney Festival, the city's annual international arts festival. Ordinarily, in this context, misperformance would be considered disastrous. The spectacle of an actor corpsing, experiencing stage fright, or failing to execute a physical action would usually signal an embarrassing breakdown—one the entire stage machinery is designed to avoid. However, when the failure is performed not by a trained actor but rather by a non-professional performer, this logic is inverted. In this case, as *Oedipus Schmoedipus* elegantly illustrates, the failure is constitutive, and the stuff of which the meaning of the piece is made. Instead of signalling disaster, the many misperformances that make up the show serve to reinforce its messages to an audience.

This reading lends two particular powers to non-professional performers, and suggests how they might be used to create innovative performance. Firstly, they are able to claim failure as their own, and to revalue misperformance into a positive category. As well, non-professional performers, in achieving this revaluation, are able to communicate almost by accident a kind of authenticity that often eludes the professional stage. It is no coincidence that all of the performances referenced herein attempt an authentic communication of emotion between the stage and the audience. In their eagerness to make the most of their moment in the spotlight, to please the professional artists with whom they have been invited to work, non-professional performers cannot but be

themselves. As I watch a young man on stage, clearly deeply uncomfortable in the elegant green ball gown he has been given to wear on stage, desperately try and shrug an errant strap back onto his shoulder, his desperation is nothing but real. So too is the reckless abandon of the middle-aged woman who disregards the choreography of the final dance number, throws her head back and her arms in the air with glee. Such is the power of the non-professional performer.

Notes

1. All of the references to the script of *Oedipus Schmoedipus* are direct quotations of the copy of the script I was provided with by post. This script is dated 19 January 2014. The designation of the performers by single initials is a convention I follow from the script.

2. This exchange is my own written transcript of the video copy of the performance of *Everything I Know About the Global Financial Crisis in One Hour* available online at <https://vimeo.com/63211315>. The particular performance is undated, but the season during which it was recorded was December 2010.

3. Or, as her company biography on post's website puts it, 'in 2011, Nat gave birth to a full human being. She is currently engaged in feeding and caring for that person, as well as making work for post'.

4. In a neat meta-theatrical twist surely not lost on post, Eden Falk had been a member of the Sydney Theatre Company Actors Company, a permanent ensemble of performers who appeared in at least two subscription shows per year between 2006 and 2009. The majority of audience members of *Who's the Best?* would therefore have had no trouble in recognising him, not only as not-Natalie but also as specifically himself.

5. Although I recognise that this phrase is commonly attributed to Karen Jürs-Munby's 2006 translation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Ridout's work (published in the same year) does not contain any reference to Lehmann's.

6. The shadow of Bertolt Brecht's work on the actor/character divide and the operations of authenticity hangs over all of this work. As the scope of this article does not allow me to engage fully with the considerable body of work on Brecht, I have chosen instead to contextualise my argument in the terms offered by Ridout, Martin and Bailes in the hope that this productive intersection of Brecht's work and non-professional performers might be extensively explored elsewhere.

7. Much of the response to *Internal* in both newspaper reviews and the blogosphere has focused on the extreme emotional reactions that it elicited from participants. For an indication, see Matt Trueman at <http://matttrueman.co.uk/2009/08/review-internal-mecure-point-hotel.html> or Euan Ferguson in *The Observer* at <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/aug/23/heroine-breakfast-faust-double-art>.

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