

Helena Grehan

Love and Information:

Ethical Spectatorship, Freedom, and the Limits of Time



Fig 1. Zahra Newman, Alison Whyte, Anthony Taufu and Ursula Yovich in *Love and Information*, 2015, co-production by Sydney Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre. Photo Pia Johnson ©

Depression is an essential part of the play.

—Caryl Churchill, *Love and Information* (2013: 74)

It's funny, it's heart wrenching, it's confusing and sometimes it verges on dull. Sound a little like living in the digital age?

—Ben Neutze (2015)

The fact that we humans have literally got others under our skin does not yet make us unique amongst other beings, but the historical practice of reflecting on such forms of relationality with others, via philosophy, story-telling, and art, does. *What is unique on the social level is therefore not the nature of these relations as such—indeed, they are part*

of the wider evolution of life—but rather the human possibility of taking (at least partial) responsibility for some of those relations, and giving (an equally partial) account of them. Our human responsibility can therefore be described as a form of experiential, corporeal and affective “worlding” in which we produce (knowledge about) the world, seen as a set of relations and tasks.

—Joanna Zylińska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (2014: 97, emphasis added)

Caryl Churchill’s play *Love and Information* deals with the changed and changing nature of relationships in the current highly technologised world.¹ ‘It is entirely open as a text, comprising anywhere between 51 and 76 scenes, and with over a hundred characters but no specified number of actors’ (Upton 2015: 4). In each individual scene characters grapple with topics such as: fear, insecurity, fragmentation, isolation, love, loyalty, loss, betrayal, and pain. Each of the scenes introduces one issue or situation—it is as if we are presented with (up to) 76 moments from daily life in miniature.² But this is also a play in which we encounter the complexities of the current age both in terms of the work’s content and its form, or mode of delivery. Each scene is precise, sharp, short, and open-ended. The lines are not allocated to any character and no specific directions are given on how each discrete scene might be framed. The work as a whole builds a rich collage of moments that replicate the sense of intensification and pressure we experience, as individuals in the neoliberal West. *Love and Information* mirrors our lives and our constant rushing from screen to conversation or encounter and back to screen. We see a range of characters who grapple with, and yet are never quite given the space or time to resolve, issues or feelings raised during their brief encounters. As spectators at the performance we are cast into an uneasy relationship with these scenes and these characters because the pace of the work deliberately thwarts any attempt at connectedness.

As Jesse Green reads it, Churchill asks:

How little knowledge is necessary, in the theater or in a relationship, to achieve coherence? Her answer seems to be paradoxical: Not very much, and more than is ever available. Apparently interchangeable elements can make a singular play (or, for someone else, a boring one) – just as deep human connection is possible even though, from genetic codons to chat-board logons, we are all trivia. (Green 2014)

And for Michael Billington, writing in the *Guardian*, Churchill’s concern seems to be ‘a deep sense of political and personal unease about a society in which speed of communication replaces human connections’. He goes on to say ‘For me, Churchill suggests, with compassionate urgency, that our insatiable appetite for knowledge needs to be informed by our capacity for love’ (Billington 2015). While I agree with both Billington and Green’s readings of the play and I think it is important that we see works that call the status quo into question, I wonder what happens or might happen to the

potential for an ethical encounter with the work given the speedy, fragmentary and potentially frustrating (or 'dull') form of *Love and Information*?



Fig 2. Ursula Yovich and Harry Greenwood in *Love and Information*, 2015, co-production by Sydney Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre. Photo Pia Johnson ©

I have argued previously for the space opened up by and in response to theatre and performance as something of a gift. As a space that has the potential to resist the overwhelming intensification of life outside, a space in which we might contemplate and reflect and have the opportunity or even luxury—whether through ambivalence or unsettlement with the bigger political questions raised—to see and feel things differently, to engage or re-engage, to reflect and ultimately to take responsibility for people, events, and things. Drawing on Hans-Thies Lehmann's theorisation of the rise of postdramatic theatre within the media saturated landscape, I proposed that what theatre offers us is a place in which to be engaged 'viscerally', 'emotionally', and 'intellectually', where spectators might find some respite from the information-laden outside world and have an opportunity to gain some purchase on what it all might mean, on the value and limits of human engagement, and on how to respond to and on how to take responsibility for the other (Grehan 2009: 2). I also argued, drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum, that the idea of the 'tragic spectator' (Grehan 2009: 2), one who 'understand[s] with subtlety and responsiveness the predicaments to which human life is prone' (Nussbaum 2003: 24) was an important one. I went on to explain that this spectator still exists and that the fact that this kind of spectatorship can be realised is something we need to believe, cling to, or even fight for in the current age of saturation.

What perplexes me, then, in relation to *Love and Information* is that this play with its 76 truncated scenes or fragments, with its dramaturgical emphasis on speed and on the unsaid or incomplete exchange, could be seen to sit in opposition to my earlier arguments for the conditions within which an act of ethical spectatorship might (most productively) occur. Where is the space in response to this work for a moment of pause? How can we develop any sense of empathic engagement with the ‘characters’ or personae if we see them for 30 seconds or a couple of minutes? And what are the risks of making a work about the complexities of real connection and love in the information age that replicates this age in its construction and indeed dramaturgy? In sum: What can we make of *Love and Information* and what might this work do to the very idea (or possibility) of ethical spectatorship?

Churchill’s play, I argue, rather than opening up the contemplative space in which ethical questions might be negotiated during the work—via a deep engagement with themes, stories, provocations, figures, language, or characters—seems deliberately to shut this space down. There is no time for reflection or contemplation as the scenes whiz by and the fragments mount. There is, instead, the sense that there are myriad moments where the work is on the cusp of inviting the spectator in to a relationship with a character, personae, or an exchange, only to be shut out before any connection can be meaningfully formed, as the work moves to the next scene. For example:

I’m frightened.
 Just walk instead of driving and don’t take so many hot baths.
 I’m frightened for the children.
 There were those emails those scientists, I can’t remember the detail
 no it didn’t make any difference in the end
 no I think you’re right, most scientists all agree it’s a catastrophe.
 The question is how bad a catastrophe.
 It’s whether they drown or starve or get killed in the fights for water
 I’d choose drowning.
 Are you really not going to take it seriously?
 I don’t know how to.
 I don’t know how to. (Churchill 2013: 54)

This is, however, not a cop out. It is a deliberate strategy by the playwright in order to do what it is that she does so well: *to show us something*. Churchill reflects the world back at us, and in doing so she amplifies both its potential power in terms of the possibility of forging connections and relationships, and its potential meaninglessness in terms of the continual circulation of information and data. Here we have glimpses of the anxieties associated with life in a hyper-capitalist West being performed for us, where the characters are enacting the desire for some aspect of control over their lives in the face of rapid change. They are performing the state of being so powerfully described by Zygmunt Bauman, when he explains:

Unable to slow the mind-boggling pace of change, let alone to predict how to control its direction, we focus on things we can, or believe we can, or are assured that we can influence: we try to calculate and minimize the risk that we personally, or those nearest and dearest to us at that moment, might fall victim to. (Bauman 2007: 11)

Over and over again we see characters who desire a connection or connectedness, who long for control and for a sense of understanding and belonging, who exhibit a strong will to engage and who are constantly thwarted—by lack of attention, by an inability on the part of other characters, by the truncation of the scene, or the speed of the work. In this mixing of moments of pathos, humor, sadness, and anger, everything it seems is reduced (or reducible) to the banal (or as Green maintains ‘trivia’). Every emotion, every situation is of the same order or value as the previous or the next one. From a scene where a wife implores her sick husband to remember who she is, to one in which two fans discuss their love for a star, to filling out census forms—all of these moments are presented without differentiation or judgment.

We have the option then, of participating in this work as an act of consumption. Where we absorb the stories of the characters as we might a tweet or a meme, a brief moment of intensification and engagement and then potentially nothing, or let them wash over us as we might if we flick through TV channels, or move between clips on a screen. We can find the work funny and light, and relish/acknowledge/deny/laugh at the absurdity of contemporary life, or we can take the time to address the themes as well as the mode of telling, and to consider what it means for us as contemporary spectators and consumers operating within the hyper-technologised space. Churchill is not didactic; she is not pitting technology and love in opposition. She is not using the work as a space of protest or provocation in the directly political sense, as she did in previous works such as *Jewish Children* (Churchill 2009).³ Instead, this play offers a challenge to the ethical spectator not only in terms of responding to the other and in thinking about what it means or what it takes to love in this environment, but also in terms of how we might mobilise our ethical responsibility given the play’s relentless demands on spectators. Unlike other works where the space for reflection is often embedded within or engendered via the content, with *Love and Information* it is only after we have left the theatre and have a chance to escape the rapid flow and demands of the material that we might find the space in which to engage critically with its themes as well as its form. To think deeply about where we might find meaning in the midst of all of this consumption, information, speed, and anxiety.

One telling exchange occurs when we witness two people talking about seeing footage of an earthquake and tsunami, and how they each responded to it. One of them tries to engage the other to imagine what it might be like to be trapped in such a situation but the second person does not seem willing or able to be moved:

I can’t say I feel it, no. You really feel it?
I cried. Of course I feel it. I cried.

Ok.

And imagine the wave coming, imagine hearing it coming and running away and you can't get away, it came so fast did you see how fast it came?

Yes, I saw it.

You're not upset though.

That black wave with the cars in it was awesome. (Churchill 2013: 60)

This final moment of the scene is emblematic of a world in which the line between reality and fiction, between the lived, experienced world—a world of direct bodily implications for events—and the digitised representation of (often distant) events from which we might feel separate, disconnected or disinterested, is powerful. Where one character seems focused on the 'spectacle' of the event, the other on its terrifying emotional impact. But this line does not linger. It is the end of the scene and within seconds we have moved on—there is no time within the performance to absorb this and consider an ethical response to the exchange between these two characters because the scene changes and we move directly on the next fragment. Our old frameworks of response will not work here—indeed there is very little, if any, space or time for empathy, reflection, or deep feeling. Therefore, a different order of response is necessary if we are to have an ethical engagement with the themes and questions posed here, because the work's fragmented nature covers over or obfuscates our ability to take the time to engage in any profound way with the characters, scenarios, and tensions as the play unfolds. We may feel momentary stabs of pity or connectedness, but we are prevented from sustaining or deepening these responses because the work demands our attention on each scene. We must go with the flow of the work to avoid the risk of missing the point of a particular scene:

You have to say you're sorry

I'm not sorry.

But you know you hurt him. You have to say you're sorry.

I don't feel sorry

You have to say it. (Churchill 2013: 54)

This exchange reflects a tension between different perspectives on a theme, event, action, or idea that surfaces over and over again in the play. Where one character is seeking a response of compassion or love and care from another character who may appear unwilling or unable to provide this. And then they are gone. So although we might sincerely want to linger on a moment or provocation from this or previous scenes—to see where the banter or exchange positions us, to formulate a response or a judgment—we cannot do so or we will lose the thread, and miss out. This is intriguing and disturbing. It is also risk-taking theatre because in its reduction of everything to an undifferentiated sameness that allows any level of engagement from the spectator, including none at all, it runs the risk of closing down rather than opening up a space for response.



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Fig 3. Glenn Hazeldine and Ursula Yovich in *Love and Information*, 2015, co-production by Sydney Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre. Photo Pia Johnson ©

This work is offering us the freedom to choose how, if or why we might respond, but what kind of freedom is this? I keep returning to the 'black wave' and thinking about what this—and other similarly poignant moments in the work do, if responded to—in terms of the question of love. While the kinds of love addressed here are multiple—romantic love lost and found, familial love, friendship, collegiality etc.—what the 'black wave' exchange does, if we engage with it, is provoke us to reflect on the limits of our connectedness with others. Not only that, but on the time and space we accord to thinking about those others and about their lives, stories, and experiences. As Erich Fromm explains,

Satisfaction in individual love cannot be attained ... without true humility, courage, faith and discipline ... [in] a culture in which these qualities are rare, the attainment of the capacity to love must remain a rare achievement. (Fromm in Bauman 2003: 7)

Where is the line between consuming the stories and lives of others, and understanding them? What is happening to our 'capacity to love' in the current environment? These are important questions I think, and they are questions that *Love and Information* opens up, for the ethical spectator at least. It encourages consideration about how we handle and care for important stories. Do we give stories about life, death and love enough attention? When someone tells us of an experience of heartbreak or of a tragedy do we have the reserves of empathy, or do we make the time, to take this in and to care about we are being told? Do we *perform* care rather than actually experiencing it? Do we merely see

the 'black wave' as 'awesome'? Through the bombardment that is *Love and Information* we have the option to either go with the flow and just smile, laugh, and let the 'black wave' wash over us, or to persist through the tumult of scene after scene and remember the isolated fragments that speak to us, once the work ends. If we are to engage in a process of ethical spectatorship then this is what we have to do. We have to hold on to the fragments, store them away, and then take the time to reflect on them when we are released by the work.



Fig 4. Ursula Yovich and Harry Greenwood in *Love and Information*, 2015, co-production by Sydney Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre. Photo Pia Johnson ©

We have other options, however. We can, as Charles Spencer did, say that: 'The scene in which a woman confides to a young boy that she is not his sister, as he believes, but his mother, is almost insultingly glib in its refusal to explore the emotional consequences of such a revelation' (Spencer 2012). Or we can laugh or ignore it, or we can return to moments such as this one and think about whether or not, for us it is glib or actually profoundly moving. Such exchanges are not given time, space, or judgment in the work but instead we add those things if and when we reflect. Surely another way to read this exchange is to do so while thinking about the complex nature of responsibility and love, and the situations in which someone might feel compelled to relinquish a child or to mask a relationship?

While Mum's out
what?
I've something to tell you
ok

so you need to look at me
 I'm listening
 I need to feel you're really paying attention
 I can pay attention and do other things at the same time, I'm not brain-
 dead, I can see and hear and everything
 will you listen?
 I'm listening, fuck off. Is this going to take long?
 Don't pay attention then, I'm just telling you, you might like to know
 Mum's not your mother, I'm your mother, Mum's your nan, ok? Did you
 listen to that? (Churchill 2013: 18)

Could we not, if we accepted the challenge of ethical spectatorship that this work throws out to us, think about how hard such a conversation would be for all parties, and how much attention it might demand? Furthermore, could we also reflect on what such a revelation might do to the nature of the connection between these two individuals: sister turned mother and brother turned son? And what of the other mother? And about how it might make us think about the connections between love and information as they are played out in the scene? Where is the love in the midst of this information? This is indeed rich material, and material that if we choose can be opened up, unpicked, and deeply considered once we leave the space. But the choice is ours.

Surely a work that mirrors the potential meaningless of life is provoking us (or offering the opportunity) to reclaim our ability for emotional connection with the other—to draw on our reserves of empathy and to create a space for love, for responsibility, and for pause? But how can this happen when at the same time as the work seems to be demanding this it is also preventing it? Is there a call here, however obliquely, for a reinvigoration of empathy, of emotional connectedness via love? If this is the case, is empathy or emotional connection enough? Does an empathic response run the risk of making us feel that we are doing something when we may not be? Does it become an end in itself as something that might be aimless and depoliticised? Is the work pointing to the difficulty of reading an empathic encounter as one in which we have the potential to feel involved, implicated in a relationship with the other? Or is it highlighting that in the neo-liberal West our potential for freedom/empathy/ response/refusal exists in a vacuum, so removed from the reality of peoples' experiences in the broader world that this supposed freedom to respond as we choose is indeed a trap?

Perhaps this is one of the things Churchill is conveying. That ours is the society in which the cult of the individual trumps everything, where we have become so obsessed with control, fear, anxiety, and threat that, as Bauman frequently argues, we have lost perspective and while we can laugh and skip from moment to moment—as the scenes do, nothing has purchase, and yet we yearn for guidance about how best to respond to the other and to the world around us.⁴ In response to *Love and Information* we choose our own adventure and this is what makes the work seem for some like an experience of 'gorging on canapés' (Spencer 2012), for others a play that opens up the idea that 'knowledge must be irradiated by emotion to become wisdom' (McNulty 2015), or one

that is 'ripe with the recognizable Churchillian qualities of wit and paradox, astringency and forgiveness' (Green 2014) and that 'compel[s] us to think about the paradoxical variety and similarity in the ways we try to make sense of our universe and our place in it' (Brantley 2014).



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Fig 5. Zahra Newman and Anthony Taufa in *Love and Information*, 2015, co-production by Sydney Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre. Photo Pia Johnson ©

Ultimately *Love and Information* offers a challenge to the ethical spectator—and indeed to me and my previously held ideas about what it takes in a work of art to engender responsibility. This challenge is to hold on for the ride and to savour the banal with the poignant, and for each one of us to remember what are for us the key moments and to take these out and think about them when we can. It may also, however, present an even bigger challenge, and that is to invite us to reconceive both the notion and parameters of an ethical spectatorship for the 21st century. To move beyond the idea of space, contemplation, and reflection (even after the fact) that a work of art affords or demands, and to develop an idea of ethical spectatorship that can accommodate works, like this one, that harness our lives of speed as integral to their dramaturgy. That amplify the reality and the absurdity of our surroundings, that take our breath away. This is a challenge that demands some fast (and deep) thinking in order to come up with a response or a set of ideas that might match the context, but it is a challenge worth embarking upon.

Nonetheless, whether we move into a landscape of fast spectatorship in response to fast work or not, the core of *Love and Information* is, for this spectator at least, about responsibility and the freedom to take it or leave it. But really what kind of freedom is this

at all? Ultimately, I hope that Churchill's play opens up the space in which spectators might realise that we are, as Joanna Zylinka puts it, 'always already involved, obligated, entangled' (Zylinka 2014: 95), and that they might decide to act on or take responsibility for these obligations and entanglements, rather than remaining mere bystanders.

Notes

1. *Love and Information* was first performed at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre, London, on Thursday 6 September 2012. The script, which went to press during rehearsals for the Royal Court production is available as: Caryl Churchill, *Love and Information* (Nick Hern Books: London, 2012) or (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013). I cited the latter edition here. The play comprises 7 sections with 7 scenes in each, plus one 'final scene'. There are also ten 'Depression' scenes (at least one of which must be included in any production) plus sixteen scenes entitled 'Random'. These can occur at any stage and are not compulsory.

2. The Sydney Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre co-production played at Merlyn Theatre, Southbank, in Melbourne, from 12 June to 4 July 2015. It was then performed at the Wharf 1 Theatre, Sydney, from 13 July to August 15 2015. It was directed by Kip Williams with design by David Fleischer, lighting design by Paul Jackson and composition and sound design by The Sweats. The staging was minimalist with a blank white set. A number of large white rectangular blocks were moved by the performers, at speed, around the space to create (or gesture towards) a frame or context for each scene. The excellent lighting and sound design worked apparently seamlessly to amplify, augment and highlight elements and to complement the highly skilled (and necessarily fit) performers as they rapidly performed and moved between scenes.

3. For more information on *7 Jewish Children* see:

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/feb/26/caryl-churchill-seven-jewish-children-play-gaza>

4. See for example: Bauman, *Society Under Siege* (2002), *Globalization* (1998), *Liquid Love* (2003), *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), and 'Happiness in a Society of Individuals' (2008).

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HELENA GREHAN is Professor of Theatre, Performance and Creative Arts at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia. She is the author of *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age* (Palgrave, 2009) and co-author of *New Media Dramaturgy* (with Peter Eckersall and Edward Scheer, Palgrave, forthcoming) as well as *William Yang: Stories of Love and Death* (with Scheer, New South Press, 2016). She is also the co-editor of "We're People Who Do Shows": Back to Back Theatre: Performance, Politics, Visibility (with Eckersall, Performance Research Books, 2013). She is Editor of *Performance Paradigm* and a Member of the Australian Research Council's College of Experts.