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# "Intimate" Spectatorship in *Hey, Fighter*

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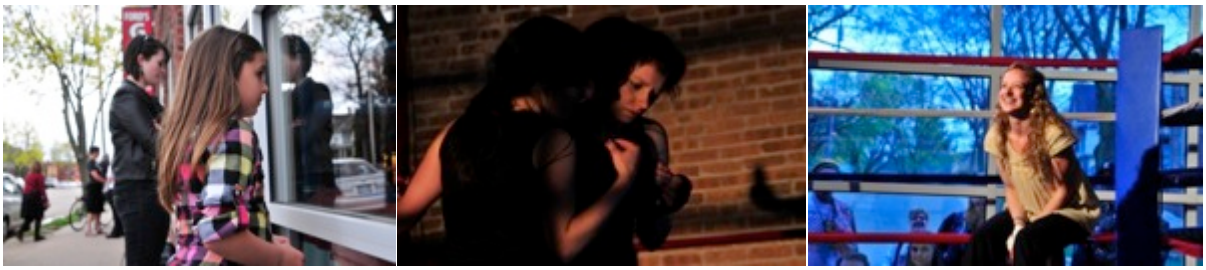

In our performance *Hey, Fighter*, Marina Kelly and I invited twenty-four spectators to join us, two at a time, inside the boxing ring at Ford's Gym in Madison, Wisconsin. We led each set of "ring spectators" through a series of encounters as our text was amplified outside to other spectators watching from the street. Marina and I performed as ourselves rather than as characters and we did not presume to be in a space or time apart from our spectators. The show's content took form through quasi-improvised moments of social interaction. Content and form both reflected our thematic interest in "intimacy."

By embedding "the real" into its theatrical design, *Hey, Fighter* experimented with the postdramatic theatrical paradigm as theorized by Hans-Thies Lehmann. Lehmann defines the postdramatic as an aestheticized presentation of the real. He sets it in opposition to fictive

representation, which presumes the represented world to be a self-contained totality. In Lehmann's conceptualization,

> dramatic theatre was the formation of illusion. It wanted to construct a fictive cosmos and let all the stage represent - be - a world… such an illusion…[depends on] the principle that what we perceive in the theatre can be referred to a "world," i.e.- to a totality. Wholeness, illusion, and world representation are inherent in the model "drama."[1]

This quote suggests that postdramatic theatre does not symbolize or stand in for worldly events. Instead, it presents "real" events, thereby diminishing the space between reality and representation. This diminishment of aesthetic distance makes theatrical representation's connection to reality continuous, meaning it highlights the way art and life mutually influence one another. Whereas I remain skeptical that referencing the world through fictive representations necessarily presumes the world to be a self-contained totality, I find it suggestive to consider postdramatic theatre's emphasis on the real as a critique of representation itself. Confusing the boundary between reality and representation brings the spectator into "closer" relation with theatrical material, and so also into "closer" relation with performers. As the distances between reality and representation and between performer and spectator are diminished, the spectator's subjectivity becomes a matter of concern.

As we brought spectators close to us, close to each other, and close to the material in *Hey, Fighter*, ambiguities inherent in so-called intimate spectatorship became apparent. These ambiguities, as well as Dror Harari's observation that "the likelihood of arriving at true reciprocal, chiasmic relations between performer and spectator…is valid but slight," point to the

[1] Hans- Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jurs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 22.

need for further theorization of what intimacy is in postdramatic theatrical structures.[2] Influenced by Lehmann's ideas about the real in postdramatic theatricality, I take "intimate" spectatorship to be a process through which the spectator and the aesthetic material can affect each other. Focusing on "intimate" spectatorship in *Hey, Fighter* can enrich understanding of how spectatorship changes when audiences occupy the space between reality and representation.[3]

## Performing Encounters

Performed one time on Madison's Spring 2011 Gallery Night, *Hey, Fighter* was a theatrical performance devised by two interdisciplinary collaborators with backgrounds in theatre, dance, and visual art. Throughout the show's three-hour duration, a fifteen-minute set repeated twelve times, beginning again each time two ring spectators left the ring and two others entered. In each of its repetitions, the fifteen-minute set presented four discrete moments of social interaction: between performer and spectator, between spectators, between performers, and among all four of us.

When spectators entered the ring each performer greeted one spectator and led him or her to a corner stool. Each pair in opposite corners, performers oriented spectators to observable sensory and social aspects of the site which included the red, white, and blue décor, massive concrete weights, and gym members watching as they lifted weights nearby. We sought rapport with the spectators in our corner as we conversed and assured them that they would be safe inside the ring. About halfway through these conversations, Marina and I began to wrap our

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[2]Dror Harari, "Laotang: Intimate Encounters," *TDR: The Drama Review*, 55.2 (2010): 145.

[3] As one of *Hey, Fighter's* two devisors, I can reflect on the risks and potentialities involved in our theatrical experimentation, but analyses of the show's actual effects or meanings are better suited for discussion among its spectators.

spectator's hands with cloth from our torn T-shirts. As we patterned the cloth to mimic protective boxing wraps, we asked ring spectators about associations they had with the words "damage" and "repair." We chose these words for resonances they carried with our thematic concern for intimacy and with the site's invocation of bodily harm and healing. Spectators responded through tones ranging from deflective to playful to earnestly sincere.

Marina and I wore visible wireless microphones to amplify these conversations to the other group of spectators watching from the street. My conversation played on an outside speaker that corresponded with my side of the ring and Marina's conversation played on an outside speaker that corresponded with her side of the ring approximately fifteen feet away. The sun was high when the show began at 6:00 PM, and we could easily see the spectators outside. As the sun set our ability to see them diminished, but the outside spectators could observe us

with greater ease. Free to come and go throughout the show's three-hour duration, outside spectators saw as many fifteen-minute repetitions as they chose to watch.

After wrapping hands, each performer led her ring spectator to the center of the ring to face off in a gaze with the other "ring spectator." Through language and gesture, we guided them into a boxing stance: "step your right foot back, turn your hips to the right, bend your knees, hands up, chin down." We then instructed them to make eye contact with each other. As they held each other's gaze over their wrapped hands, Marina and I spoke our different monologues into our spectator's ear.

**Erin:** The first time she hit me something happened inside and for about half a second I could pounce … the shrinking space between me and her keeps me on my toes.

**Marina:** The first time I hit her, I felt kind of embarrassed … but it made me feel powerful … I could feel the space between us shrink.

These self-referential monologues reflected on how our relationship evolved through months of collaboration, thus providing exposition to illuminate the upcoming performer-to-performer encounter. Starting roughly four months before our May show date, Marina and I separately took large-group boxing lessons; in our final two months of devising we trained together, instructed by amateur boxing champion Andrea Nelson. We noticed our relationship changing as we became aware of our partner's (our opponent's?) physical habits and learned to act on those habits, sometimes helping our partner, sometimes helping ourselves at our partner's expense. Observations about what it felt like to hit and to be hit and to make both of those things normal inspired our monologues.

My ring spectator never heard Marina's text and her ring spectator never heard mine. The outside spectators could hear both monologues. However, because they were audible simultaneously on separated speakers, outside spectators may not have been able to absorb both monologues unless they stayed for more than one of the fifteen-minute repetitions. After our monologues, Marina and I left the "ring spectators," instructing them not to let go of their partner's gaze. They never made physical contact with one another. As they held their poses, the sound of a speed bag being hit inside the gym was amplified to the street.

Ready for our one-minute round of boxing, Marina and I led our ring spectators back to their original corners. She and I met in the center of the ring and repeated the foot, hips, knees, hands, and chin gesture to reference the ring spectators' previous actions. We sparred until a bell rang and a seven-year old girl circled the ring with a card marking the start of round two. The ring spectators rejoined us in the center. In this last interaction of the fifteen-minute set, Marina and I sewed our spectators together through the T-shirt cloth on their hands while speaking overlapping text that referenced beginnings, endings, and instruments of cohesion. Milanne, the seven-year old girl, called for the ring spectators to follow her out of the ring as Adam, a Ford's Gym employee, led two new spectators into the ring. Upon their arrival, the series of encounters began again.

**"Intimacy" as Process in Performance**

*Hey, Fighter's* thematic concern with "intimacy" was reflected and informed by the moments of social interaction that served as the show's content. Curious about the forms intimacy takes in the emerging genre of intimate performance, we wondered what the show's forty-eight moments of encounter could suggest about being close to others in reality and in representation. Although physical proximity was a consistent feature, the qualities of closeness varied across the encounters. The spectators' abilities to inflect the quality of their encounters indicates that their subjectivities were present in the performance experience, but it does not indicate the extent to which their unique subjectivities could influence the staged interactions.

A characteristic feature of intimate performance is cultivation of a close connection between performer and spectator.[4] This close connection could be literal in the sense of being in close proximity or it could be symbolic in the sense of sharing a significant experience. Adrian Howell's *Foot-Washing for the Sole,* for example, cultivates close connection through both physical proximity and shared experience. The performance involves a thirty-minute encounter in a locked room. Howells and his spectator have a private conversation while Howells washes and massages the spectator's feet. The private and relatively anonymous circumstance common in intimate performance theoretically enables performer and spectator to speak openly and honestly with one another.[5]

Like work operating through postdramatic theatrical structures, *Foot-Washing for the Sole* makes the situation's reality a central feature of its aesthetic design. In contrast, Theatre for One, created by Tony Award-winning designer Christine Jones, operates through a dramatic structure, thus maintaining aesthetic distance between reality and theatrical representation. Theatre for One situates performer and spectator alone together in a small space for the duration of one short dramatic play.[6] In doing so it paradoxically manipulates the conventional relationship between performer and spectator while simultaneously keeping them on separate planes of reality. The spectator remains himself while the actor conveys a fictive narrative as someone other than himself.

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[4] See, Harari, "Laotang," 137-149. See also, Rachel Zerihan, "Intimate Inter-actions: Returning to the body in One to One performance," *Body, Space, Technology Journal* 6.1 (2006), accessed November 1, 2012.

[5] For a discussion of this dynamic in Kira O'Reilly's 2003 piece *My Mother*, see Rachel Zerihan "Revisiting Catharsis in Contemporary Live Art Practice: Kira O'Reilly's Evocative Skin Works," *Theatre Research International* 35.1 (2010): 33-35.

[6] See, Neva Grant. "Up Close and Personal: Introducing Intimate Theatre," *npr.org* (2 January 2012), accessed 3 November 2012.

Despite differences in how they negotiate the space between reality and representation, *Foot-Washing for the Sole* and Theatre for One both exemplify the intimate performance genre's interest in constructing situations in which close connections might transpire. Yet, as Guardian critic Lyn Gardner hints in her review of several "intimate" pieces, the genre requires acknowledgement that intimacy does not necessarily exist even when two people are in close physical proximity.[7] The emotional component of intimacy entails taking responsibility for caring for another while trusting that the other will care for you, all the while remaining responsive to the relationship's demands. The extent to which these interpersonal dynamics are present in postdramatic theatricality rests on how much of the spectator's subjectivity is present in performance. In other words, responsibility and trust affect how "close" the spectator can truly be to the material or to the performers.

Whether or not it brings about emotional components of intimacy, close physical proximity between performer and spectator affects how the spectator receives the work.[8] One spectator may be drawn in by the same amount of proximity that repels another spectator, but in any case close physical proximity makes apparent the capabilities and vulnerabilities of performing (and spectating) bodies. An awareness by the spectator that the people performing are going through something that exceeds the conventional boundaries of representation can affect dynamics within the theatrical situation. Lehmann explains a possible effect of this awareness:

if one reduces the distance between performer and spectator to such an

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[7] Lyn Gardner, "How intimate theatre won our hearts," *The Guardian Online,* (11 August 2009), accessed 3 November 2012.

[8] For a discussion of how the degree of distance affects the spectator's sensory perception of the work, see Lehmann, *Postdramatic,* 150-152. For a discussion of how the degree of distance affects the spectator's personal relationship to the work, see Edward Bullough "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912): 87-117.

> extent that the physical and physiological proximity (breath, sweat, panting, movement of the musculature, cramp, gaze) masks [transmission of signs and signals]…theatre becomes a moment of shared energies instead of transmitted signs."[9]

Whereas a moment of transmitted signs implies a theatrical dynamic in which the spectator interprets content, a moment of shared energies implies that the spectator has considerable agency in affecting content. Lehmann's quote suggests that close proximity cultivates spectatorial subjectivity because the spectator has some ability to influence the theatrical content, and any meanings that could be interpreted from it.

The actual sharing of energies, and the spectatorial subjectivity it enables, depends upon a variety of factors. It requires an intersubjective relation between spectators and performers, and therefore a relatively adaptable performance structure. As phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines them, intersubjective exchanges are dialogues in which the unique subjectivities of self and other are fully co-present with one another. As intersubjectivity relates to performance, spectators must be generous in the sense of being willing to give and take in the exchange, and performers must be generous in the sense of responding to what the spectators offer. The performance structure, therefore, must be adaptable enough to incorporate what happens in the exchange.

A spectator's contributions could take shape in any number of verbal or nonverbal ways. To provide a verbal example, playful responses from spectators in the ring corner encounter inflected the tone of some fifteen-minute sets. Playful responses suggest more willingness to give and take than deflective responses, but the latter must also be seen as a valid way to respond. Deflection suggests that the performer or performance structure was not conducive to

[9] Lehmann, *Postdramatic*, 150.

incorporating that spectator's unique subjectivity into the show. Nonverbally, many ring spectators committed to the relatively long periods of silent eye contact with the other ring spectator, while others contributed differently by looking away. Cultivating moments of shared energy requires the performer to both invite and subtly respond to the spectator's (verbal or nonverbal) feedback. It also requires the performance structure to incorporate what happens between them into the theatrical situation. The open-endedness implicit in this style of spectating and performing implies that the content and, therefore, the meanings of the production can never be fully determined before the performance occurs.

The staged moments of social interaction in *Hey, Fighter* provide a means of investigating how intersubjectivity might transpire in theatrical performance. The nonverbal spectator-to-spectator encounter highlighted the possibility for intersubjectivity to occur between spectators. In this gazing moment, spectators were instructed to make eye contact with the other spectator in the ring as Marina and I delivered our monologues and then left to prepare for our bout. The ring spectators held the gaze in close physical proximity to each other for several minutes. All the while, their bodies held an interpretation of the boxing posture Marina and I demonstrated when we first brought them to the center of the ring. As it relates to gazing, Beata Stawarska explains that intersubjectivity transpires when the person seeing opens himself up to also be seen by the other.[10] Here, intersubjectivity involves the awareness of being seen even as we are seeing. The reciprocity between self and other in this type of exchange is in play as long as the subjectivity of one does not dominate the subjectivity of another. The relationship between the spectators is in process as long as they are both willing and able to be present while

[10] Beata Stawarska, ""From the Body Proper to Flesh: Merleau-Ponty on Intersubjectivity," in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, eds Dorothea Olkowdki and Gail Weiss. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2006): 93.

responding to the other, who is doing the same. Although intangible, this quality of relation might be felt by the two involved in the gaze.

Mutual trust and responsibility raise the stakes of intersubjectivity, thus leading to a different quality of intimacy. The bodily posture we guided the ring spectators into as they faced off with each other inflected their gazing encounter with the embodied risks of boxing. Putting their bodies into boxing postures was not about defining them as boxers, but rather about placing their body in the other's care. I propose that in boxing intersubjectivity exists until the subjectivity of one contender dominates the other. *Hey, Fighter's* "boxing" encounters sought to maintain this balance, emphasizing potential over decisiveness. This emphasis on the maintenance of connection differentiates their encounter from a typical boxing encounter. Joyce Carol Oates observes that boxing displays hierarchical masculinity: "two men cannot occupy the same space at the same time;"[11] but the ring spectators were together responsible for holding the space between them. As long as they did so, their relationship was in process and grounded in potential.

The performer-to-performer boxing encounter provides another example of how *Hey, Fighter* provides a means to investigate how intersubjectivity might transpire in theatrical performance. This encounter presents a type of intimacy that enables mutual trust and responsibility to be present amidst serious conflict. Our bouts involved real punches, as opposed to staged ones. Although we were by all means amateurs in the ring, Marina and I delivered handfuls of finely focused jab and cross punches to each other. Leaving the hook and uppercut aside, we focused our previous months' training on getting the cross and jab styles into our muscle memories. Bruises marked that the bouts had happened, but the show involved no blood.

[11] Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (Garden City: Dolphin/Doubleday, 1987), 75.

The embodied risks implicit in our actions made the intersubjective balance between Marina and me especially delicate. However, the jarring bodily contact did not eliminate either of our subjectivities. Oates stipulates that "the primary rule of the ring [is to] defend oneself at all times."[12] This emphasis on defense suggests boxing to be about taking care of one's self through keen attention to the other. Throughout our process, we each took responsibility for taking care of our own well-being and trusted our collaborator to do the same. We went into each bout with the intention to give our partner a challenge, but as we did so we also remained responsive to bodily limitations that surfaced. Though physical vulnerability came with our agreement, the sense of cooperation that developed between us was significantly greater than a sense of competition.

[12] Oates, *Boxing*, 48.

Instead of setting out to injure each other or to emerge victorious, we set out to maintain connection amidst conflict. Both self and other remained present as long as we were working together to maintain the process and potential present in the space between us.

*Hey, Fighter's* emphasis on potential makes the show an examination of intimacy more than a means for achieving it. Whether or not we attained the intimacy we sought in our investigation, *Hey, Fighter* provides a concrete example through which we can consider what "intimacy" can be. By representing the concept of "encounter" while simultaneously presenting specific encounters, we were able to suggest that assumptions about what intimacy is can be affected by how we perform it. Intimacy is closeness, but the show's encounters provided a way of seeing closeness as a layered and always changing phenomenon and an adaptable concept.

## Negotiating the Space Between

In addition to its interpersonal significance, *Hey, Fighter's* investigation into intimacy can also interrogate modes of spectatorship in postdramatic theatricality. Conducting investigations into "intimate" spectatorship through public performances can raise ethical issues for those making the work and for those watching it. If confusing the boundary between reality and representation incites uncertainty or conflict, how can trust and responsibility between performers and spectators keep uncertain spectators connected to the performance?

Postdramatic theatricality hinges on diminishing distances between reality and representation and performer and spectator; yet maintaining some space between each pair remains important. Maintaining this space means that each entity maintains aspects of itself even amidst entanglement with its other. Reality becomes embedded in representation, but neither reality nor representation disappears. Spectators may be on display, but their contributions

remain different from performers' contributions. Maintaining the space between entails putting reality and representation into cooperative relation, which is different from collapsing all space between them.

Such cooperative tension between reality and representation can be seen in *Hey, Fighter's* performer-to-performer encounter. The reality of *Hey, Fighter's* theatrical situation became especially apparent during the twelve boxing rounds. The fights took observable tolls on the performers' bodies. Ford (owner of Ford's Gym) checked in the next day to make sure we were okay, and several spectators expressed discomfort about watching us spar. One friend later commented that she "had a very strong pull to want to help or to want that portion of the performance to end."[13] A colleague noted he was "not prepared for the intensity, physical or emotional" and was especially "uncomfortable with female-to-female confrontation."[14] These discomforts suggest spectatorial awareness of the performers' real bodily capabilities and vulnerabilities. Yet, the carefully considered rules and intentions structuring our confrontation clearly situated it in the realm of representation. Our actions affected our bodies, but the representational structure implied that these risks were reasonable and relatively safe. By boxing (instead of symbolizing boxing) and using representational conventions to structure our risky actions, we highlighted that the relation between reality and representation is continuous, not referential. In other words, we highlighted the mutual influence that reality and representation have on each other. This mutual influence of course exists in representational structures that intend to imitate reality. However, postdramatic structures, as Lehmann suggests, actively call attention to this mutual influence rather than obscuring it or taking it for granted.

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[13] Arrie Callahan, e-mail message to author, 29 February 2012.

[14] William Schuth, e-mail message to author, 7 May 2011.

Calling attention to the mutual influence of reality and representation can confuse habits of spectatorship. Foregrounding bodily risk in representation is an extreme way of focusing attention on the individual's role in spectatorship. Calling attention to the embodied realities always present in theatrical representation implicitly asks spectators to question what they are watching and how they are watching. Lehmann clarifies that the unsettling effect "occurs through the indecidability whether one is dealing with reality or fiction."[15] If faced with embodied risks (or other ethically questionable material) in reality then a person might feel a need to act, but if the embodied risks happen within an aesthetic frame, then taking action is more likely to seem unnecessary or perhaps even disallowed. Whether or not our staging of gazing and boxing was truly provocative is up for *Hey, Fighter's* spectators to decide. In any case, this logic of aesthetic distance is predicated on the assumption that what happens in representation stays in representation. Effects of our boxing encounter did not stay in representation. Foregrounding bodily capabilities and vulnerabilities take performer and spectator beyond the realm of fictive representation because the performance's effects exceed the boundaries of representation. In sum, embedding reality into representation while maintaining differences central to both concepts demonstrates an intimate connection between reality and representation. This type of relation between reality and representation is necessary for modes of spectatorship that want to keep the spectator "close" in both senses of the word.

A second feature of intimate spectatorship emerges through endowing the spectator with enough agency to do something about how she is watching the work. Situating spectators in the middle of cooperative relation between reality and representation asks a lot of them. Theoretically, the real draws spectators closer to performers and to performance material.

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[15] Lehmann, *Postdramatic*, 101.

However, if the performance content and spectators' sensibilities are too far out of alignment—if the real is too real perhaps because it involves blood or irreversible bodily damage and the spectators cannot find any point of entry—then the spectator is likely to pull away because there is not enough space for her to maintain her own subjectivity in relation to the work.

Through making *Hey, Fighter* we realized that fostering mutual trust between performers and spectators depends upon giving spectators some degree of choice in how they participate. The flow of *Hey, Fighter* relied upon the ring spectators' willingness to closely follow our instructions for the duration of their fifteen-minute set. Ways in which they could participate were, therefore, circumscribed by our tight schedule and expectations. Moreover, the watchful presence of outside audience members affected their contributions. One of my ring spectators was keen to let me (and all of the listening outside spectators) know, "they can hear everything you're saying out there."[16] In contrast to manifestations of the intimate performance genre that construct a private and relatively anonymous exchange between performer and spectator, all of *Hey, Fighter's* encounters were under public observation. The ring spectators' consciousness of being on display may have hindered open and honest exchange. Importantly for its theatricality, roles of performer and spectator remained distinct in *Hey, Fighter*; however, ambiguity in how intersubjectively co-present performers and spectators were able to be points to the idea that intimacy is just as difficult to maintain as it is to achieve.

Disorienting spectators with theatrical experimentation can be done generously when reality and representation and performer and spectator are able to each maintain aspects of themselves even amidst entanglement with their others. Maintaining these co-presences maintains theatricality. But it changes theatricality's function. Lessening aesthetic distance is important because it invites spectators to forge a personal relationship with provocative actions

[16] Michael Peterson, *Hey, Fighter*, 6 May 2012.

and ideas. The political function of this form of spectatorship is to encourage reflection on what we see and what we do about what we see. To work, intimate spectatorship must find ways to be sensitive to what spectators bring to the experience even if those very sensibilities are under investigation. Unsettling the spectator is at the heart of many postdramatic projects. As postdramatic forms of theatricality become more prominent, modes of spectator engagement require theoretical attention. Theorizations of the spectator's place in her own displacement can lay the groundwork for ensuring the spectator is cared for while being unsettled.