

Theory on stage – exploring the potential of theatrical dialogue for teaching social and cultural thought

End of award report - Appendices

Isabelle Darmon. April 2017.



Two ghosts or more

A play

By

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30 March 2017

Weber.....Michael Hajiantonis
Simmel.....Jennifer Jones
Alienated Worker.....Erick Lema Casa



Contents

Appendix 1 - Contribution to The University's Teaching and Learning strategy	3
Appendix 2- Report on workshop 1 - 18 November 2016	5
Appendix 3 - Report on workshop 2 - 25 November 2016	8
Appendix 4 – The play	10
Appendix 5 – Slide for Sociology 2B students.....	18

Appendix 1 - Contribution to The University's Teaching and Learning strategy

The project has contributed to the following aims of the University's Teaching and Learning strategy:

1. Offer an educational experience that is inspiring, challenging, and transformational:

The project gathered a postgraduate student in theatre, three 2nd year students in sociology, and two 2nd year students in Literature involved in the Bedlam theatre, to produce a play that will make the thought of 2 social theorists more accessible to a non-academic audience. In doing so the 2nd year Sociology students have changed their own views on social theory, improved their understanding of the 2 theorists, whilst the Theatre studies PhD student and the two student actors have realised the potential of social theory as material for theatre. There was a lot of mutual mentoring involved in the project, as well as creative learning on all parts. This has been a truly enthusing experience, both for the students involved and for staff.

Associated objective: *"Supporting a culture of active and engaged students by providing varied opportunities for independent and student-led learning within and beyond students' main programmes of study"*

After the first workshop, it was the students' decision to move directly to dialogue writing, instead of assessing dialogues written and performed by others. The team coordinating the project decided that this was entirely fair and viewed this as a stimulating development. We knew that this would require more resources, as we needed more coaching from the Theatre studies PhD student involved in the project, and therefore the PI required and obtained additional funding from the Sociology department.

The students have developed their own dialogue, which is in fact a short play, and is of such good quality that Bedlam actors were happy to perform it and suggested it should be included in the Bedlam Candlewasters competition to show it to a lay audience. It had always been the intention of the student participants from the beginning of the project to write the play with a lay, non-academic audience in mind, and indeed this desire to make a contribution for the wider community was a key aim for them. This also touches on another aim of the TL strategy, namely: "Equip students with the knowledge, skills and experiences to flourish and continue to learn in a complex world and become successful graduates who contribute to society".

2. Ensure all students from all backgrounds achieve their potential by providing a supportive environment and rich learning culture and associated objective: *"Using the curriculum to promote inclusion, equality and diversity"*

The students taking part confirmed that they had previously been intimidated by theory and that this seemed to make it more accessible. In the first workshop (18 November 2016), we asked them what brought them there and these are some answers:

- "This seems like an effective way of thinking through what these authors have said: by 'going inside' another person, you push your understanding of them";

- “The ‘classics’ sound like dead people, but this brings them alive as personalities, more embodied, also with their contradictions”;

- “We all have different learning styles, some more kinaesthetic, others more visual or auditive, and theatre will allow us to address these more than just the intellectual way”.

One of the students involved is a mature student, who has found it difficult to combine University studies with her life as parent of 2. The project made an extra demand on her time, yet she wrote: ‘I have very much enjoyed being a part of the project and have personally gained a lot from my involvement’. In her case the theatrical dimension aroused her interest in the 2 thinkers, she read further than required in the course, and was an active contributor to the final dialogue.

Another student involved is an international student whose first language is not English. He wrote a substantial part of the dialogue, with the help of the PI for this project, in an extremely creative and thoughtful way.

Be recognised nationally and internationally for providing research-led learning and teaching of the highest quality

This experiment has led to staff reflection further on their own teaching and the use of theatre for social theory teaching. Rather than teaching being research-led, in the case of the PI, it is this intervention, for a teaching purpose, which has led her to develop her research in new directions. She is now preparing a communication for a European sociological conference on ‘elective affinities between theatre and social theory’ and a journal article on the same topic (the premises for this are included in the introduction to a special issue for the *Journal of Classical Sociology*, about to be published – May 2017. The introduction was written whilst this PTAS project was being implemented and was strongly influenced by this experiment). Additionally, the project has led to a strengthened co-operation between Theatre studies and Sociology staff, which we hope to harness for a new project involving Taught MSc students in Theatre studies and Playwriting and Sociology 2nd year and Honours students.

Appendix 2- Report on workshop 1 - 18 November 2016

Facilitators: Sofia Polychronidou (Theatre studies), Isabelle Darmon (Sociology)

What brings us here?

- An effective way of thinking through what these authors have said: by 'going inside' another person, you push your understanding of them
- The 'classics' sound like dead people, but this brings them alive as personalities, more embodied, also with their contradictions
- Conversely, theatre has perhaps become form obsessed and is in need of rethinking its contents (Sofia)!
- Something needs to happen in the here and now, on stage and with the audience – in the academic environment, it can be more a question of preparing and then 'serving' learning, even though there is always an element of performance in teaching (and to some extent, what can be achieved through theatre echoes Weber's distinction between the scholar and the teacher in 'Science as a vocation')
- We all have different learning styles, some more kinaesthetic, others more visual or auditive, and theatre will allow us to address these more than just the intellectual way

In what sense are Weber and Simmel theatrical characters?

- Weber is a theatrical character, very much so – for example in the way he addresses the students in his Vocation lecture, 'you have invited me to talk about ... but that's not what I am going to give you!'... : position of engagement with the students and yet confrontation, challenge and contradiction, as well as gloom and pessimism ('this is what there is... you have to confront yourselves to this!'). He is almost gruff. There is a solidity, a density, perhaps a rigidity about him, certainly a systematic thinker, and a 'straight shooter'
- Simmel, very different, yet also theatrical: a Romantic, tending to act with flourish, his taste for metaphors and repetitions makes him seem more alive for us, also the fact that he was not necessarily addressing academic audiences, but also people. Perhaps tending to be in his own world though.
- Maybe it is this contrast between them which is theatrical: Weber – tension expressed in confrontation, Simmel – tension feeling like separation, aspiration to reconciliation (for Weber no reconciliation possible! – either internal or with the world)

Viewing the filmed dialogues

Dialogue on philosophical and political stances

It does not feel like a dialogue. They listen to each other deliver the whole speech, rather than having a conversation. Using a lot of cumbersome words – who is the audience, professional academics who are just going to be assessing whether they got this right or that wrong? It would feel very different if they 'chipped it off', if they bounced off from each other, if they were moving and thinking at the same time. When you talk with someone it is a different voice than when you write, you are bound to think on your feet as a result of the interaction with the other... This is absent here. It would need to be more dynamic.

In this dialogue Weber and Simmel are supposed to be planning their first Sociology conference, so their thoughts could be also around that – what should be in, and what should not, worries about what might happen... this could have provided for a concrete situation to be worked with: there has to be some action, some dynamic, a texture.

The part on the letters is much more successful, though it is not a dialogue. It was moving and conveying something more personal because they really address each other when they craft their letters. The inclusion of the real letter was interesting as it was exactly the same tone as the others. So this part brought them paradoxically more alive though that, too, could have been made more theatrical. A game of one actor reading the letter he is sending and facing the public whilst the other one turns his back, for example. The last letter – there is no one to send it to, so perhaps Simmel is not on stage anymore, and the lights close on the letter which will be left on an empty desk, or left to fall...

In the first part it did not feel like they were 2 different characters. These words could have been pronounced by other people talking about them.

Dialogue on reification (Lukacs' dream)

This was a dialogue between friends, having a friendly argument – it felt more dynamic and 'real', there was more of a sense of camaraderie yet opposition. There was more choppiness in the dialogue; also more humour and jokes – they are friends!

Nevertheless it sometimes felt too academic, as if they were citing their sources – this could be needed in a dialogue meant to educate a little bit the audience about what these 2 thinkers have said and where, but there could be more indirect ways to do this.

Again it could have been any 2 people talking about Weber and Simmel. The sense of their relationship is more present, but not their personalities. It feels like an exchange about ideas.

What could be done to improve these dialogues?

Having more to them than just the dialogue, introducing objects (Lukacs' book!), different paces in how they talk, move; a more distinct voice for each – more direct for Weber, more flourished for Simmel. In theatre, things need to be made 'bigger' than what they are in reality. It does not have to be authentically Weber and Simmel, more the essence of who they were and what they thought. Dialogue is about what takes place 'across', what circulates...

What kind of dialogue/play could speak to a non specialist audience?

Above all connecting the dialogue to a topic that the audience can relate to, as a point of entry – it could be a contemporary topic/situation. Finding ways to slip in some simple definitions to make the dialogue more approachable. Even though biographical detail should not be interpreted as a straightforward key into their thoughts, it can help.

What can we learn from the Brecht/Joseph Losey extract (The life of Galileo, extract on the controversy between Galileo, the church and the pseudo philosopher, in front of the child-king).

There is almost no need to understand the words, it's the attitudes, the movements, the pronunciation...

What is there in this extract that was missing in the other extracts to make the stances of the characters more understandable? It is the split between the very contrasted, irreconcilable stances taken by Galileo and the church. Each one is utterly convinced of being in the truth and trying to convince the other.

In any case the Weber/Simmel situation (being friends with someone you disagree profoundly with) lends itself to theatrical representation.

Preparation for day 2

Read what you can among the papers below, in preparation for a conversation between the 2 friends on... alienation! (Situation to be imagined!)

- *By/on Weber:*

The last 3 pages of the Protestant Ethic (printed)

Science as a Vocation (in attached pdf – pages 25-52)

Karl Lowith (attached pdf, Chapter 2, especially pages 62-72)

Michael Lowy 'Marx and Weber, critics of capitalism' (printed)

- *By/on Simmel:*

Money in modern culture (printed)

David Frisby on the Philosophy of Money (printed)

- Dialogue on reification (printed)
- Dialogue on Weber's and Simmel's philosophical and political stances (I had only printed Act 1 so I am now attaching the whole dialogue which includes the 2 parts you saw, and in between a discussion on the war).

Appendix 3 - Report on workshop 2 - 25 November 2016

Facilitators: Sofia Polychronidou (Theatre studies), Isabelle Darmon (Sociology)

The workshop was aimed at starting to write a dialogue between Weber and Simmel. We asked the students to take roles and imagine a situation and to start talking to each other, whilst Isabelle was taking notes. Isabelle acted as a referent when there was uncertainty as to what the position/stance of each author might have been. The notes below chart what was achieved that afternoon. The session was taped and the recordings sent to all participants.

Setting: Weber and Simmel as ghosts, appearing to have frequent conversations about the humans. Their last observed specimen seems to tire them as he is engaged in monotonous activity - at present typing a report to a deadline... A typical alienated worker (AW).

The dialogue is constructed around action by AW - significant discoveries about his actions cause turning points in the dialogue. More insignificant actions (the pen falling, a sigh) may give rise to moments of comedy.

Intro: When the curtain rises, the conversation between W and S seems to be ongoing - about alienation precisely.

BITS OF DIALOGUE RECORDED HERE

Act 1:

Simmel gets closer to the worker, and his screen, and takes a look at the 'report'. This is the first turning point in the dialogue as Simmel realises the alienated worker is writing a novel! This requires new interpretations... Weber is impressed at this bout of insubordination for vocational purposes or so it seems, (though he would perhaps have favoured a mode of resistance that was less openly resisting). But Simmel is quickly disappointed as the novel is very bad...

BIT OF DIALOGUE RECORDED HERE ALLOWING FOR MORE SPECIFICATION OF WHAT IS ALIENATION FOR BOTH

Act 2:

A phone call comes in which makes them realise (2nd turning point) that the AW is actually ghost writing (so many ghosts in this story! This is very fitting!). What new reactions does this news trigger in our 2 friends?

It is Weber's turn to be disappointed as he sees this as the apex of domination, subjection to someone else without even a formal acknowledgement, playing in to the logic of the publishing market and precarious labour conditions.

Simmel thinks it is more subtle than this. The ghost writer, in alienating himself, actually penetrates the personality of another, and through that experience of instilling life into a fictitious personality (the official author, i.e. a name) through writing for him, he is actually bridging the objectivity/subjectivity divide (this needs to be worked out! But i think the argument can be made!)

Act 3:

The last turning point, a true 'coup de theatre', takes place when the 2 realise that AW has posted the whole manuscript on an open source website, thus preventing the official author to get the financial and prestige rewards of authorship. How should this be interpreted? Is it revenge? Is it a political act? Was this a sudden reaction of rebellion? A long planned deed? Weber hesitates - is AW breaking with the domination inherent in the publishing market, or is that act an escape, which does not lead anywhere politically? Simmel too wonders: is open source and free communication the replication of the money economy in another realm, and therefore a realm of pure movement and life, or is this endless flow of communication, even though it is free, contributing even more to our endless exposure to too much stimulation, making us even more blasé and alienated?

Weber and Simmel are a bit at a loss, and possibly haunted (!) more than ever by the spirit of Marx...

Appendix 4 – The play

Two ghosts or more

A play

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Characters

Weber, German sociologist
Simmel, German sociologist
Alienated worker

(In an office.
The time and precise location are indeterminate.
ALIENATED WORKER sits DSC, typing;
SIMMEL sits DSR, tossing a stress ball;
WEBER paces DSL.
ALIENATED WORKER stands, suddenly;
SIMMEL and WEBER freeze and look at the ALIENATED WORKER, who stretches slightly and sits back down;
SIMMEL and WEBER resume their activity.
SIMMEL stops tossing the stress ball, irritated by WEBER's pacing, and hurls the ball in his direction.)

WEBER

(with a baleful glance at SIMMEL, stops at the ALIENATED WORKER's shoulder and stops a stopwatch)

This time yesterday he was at 2 hours, 34 minutes, and 33 seconds. Today it's 2 hours and 28 minutes! (Looks pointedly at Simmel)

SIMMEL

(mumbles/rolls eyes)

WEBER

(peering at the screen)

Simmel, have you read his latest chapter?

SIMMEL

(sighs, drags his chair beside the AW, plops down, shoots a look at WEBER, and reads from the screen)

His broken heart fell like a falling wave that falls against the gray and grim sandy shore. (SIMMEL groans; WEBER winces)
And you think this is his 'calling'?

WEBER

Hey! He's trying!

SIMMEL

Oh, is he now? Well I, for one, would hate to see what it would look like if he wasn't trying.

WEBER

It's only the first draft! Given time and effort... (sighs in exasperation) But of course he's not giving it time and effort, is he? (sighs) I think he's giving up.

SIMMEL

(riffing through AW's desk)

You think? Hate to break it to you, but he gave up ages ago. Look at him. (stands, gesturing towards the AW) Day in, day out, he sits, staring off somewhere into middle distance. The phone rings, he answers it. The mail comes, he reads it. Bills, birthday cards, wedding invitations - he treats them all exactly the same. He doesn't smile anymore. Nor does he cry. (to Weber) Do you know, yesterday I saw him type 'LOL' to a friend... and he wasn't.

WEBER

(apparently confused)

SIMMEL

(proud of his grasp of modern English)

'Laughing out loud'. He wasn't. (leans in close to AW's face, loudly) Why weren't you 'laughing out loud'?

ALIENATED WORKER

(unaffected, waves SIMMEL away as though shooing a buzzing insect)

SIMMEL

(points, 'see!?!')

WEBER

(a dismissive noise)

He was trying, before. He was determined to be more, to do more, to contribute something to the world that was his. To be able to say, "Here is what I have done! I have added my voice to the conversation of the ages! I made a difference! I have contributed!"

SIMMEL

(aside)

Yeah, contributed to the number of bad novels out there.

WEBER

(ignoring SIMMEL)

He took time out of his working day...

(Mobile phone rings)
(The three of them get startled by the unexpected ringing. WEBER hurriedly approaches to the AW to nose around, SIMMEL faces them in wonder. The AW looks at his phone, then he rolls his eyes and sighs.)

ALIENATED WORKER (AW)

Oh, God! Again?

(WEBER and SIMMEL look at each other somewhat disconcerted. SIMMEL motions his hands and face in an inquisitive manner to WEBER. WEBER just shrugs equally disconcerted. AW takes the phone and answers.)

AW

Hello! How is it go... the novel? Yes, yes, I am almost done... Of course I am aware that I have missed the new deadline... Yeah, I know this is important. No, no! I am taking it seriously. You will have it for tonight. Listen, I have been taking time from my second job to complete it... No, I am not saying that, it is just that, I just need to add some minor details to... What?... Yeah, I did include the changes you both suggested... Yeah, the love story, the aliens... it is all done. She will love it... What?... Yeah, yeah, it is unique! Trust me, nobody has seen this before. It is a wonder!

(His face expresses infinite boredom and exhaustion, he covers the phone with his hand to avoid being listened. Then, annoyed and somewhat ironic he says apart.)

Of course it's a wonder. It's a wonder how many people still commission this kind of stories...

(Answers the phone again)
Yeah, she will love it! The public will love it!... OK, no problem. Bye... Yes, tonight!

(Simmel and Weber stare at each other for a couple of seconds.)

SIMMEL

(Standing up from his chair, leaving the stress ball behind. He approaches the AW. Delighted.) That's genius!

(Weber sees all his hopes sink.)

WEBER

(Still confused. Annoyed. He addresses the AW.) What... What are you doing?

SIMMEL

(Conciliatory.)

Listen, I know I said he was a bad writer... But that's completely irrelevant! (Pause. Weber winces in disbelief. Simmel becomes excited.) Just think about that! (Pause.) A ghostwriter! (Pause.) A ghost! (Pause.) A spirit that penetrates somebody else's being, that experiences her being, that lives through her own experience of the world, her style and her very way of objectifying herself in her writing! (Pause.) That's just genius!

WEBER

(Seemingly unimpressed about what Simmel just said. Pointing towards the AW. Emphatic)
He's a ghostwriter! (Pause.) A ghost! (Pause.) A shadow of himself! A poor, desolated soul bereft of any control over anything. (Pause. Conciliatory.) Come on, Georg! He's selling his own creativity! How more distanced from himself could he be, how more (Brief pause, as if pondering his own words.) alienated? The only thing that could have redeemed him is now gone!

SIMMEL

(Calmly.) This is a very mundane level of analysis, Max. Can you forget the everyday for a while, and focus on life experience in its totality? (Pointing at AW.) There you have someone who is capable of perceiving life and the world through the pores of another person. (Pause. Emphatic.) He is not estranged from himself, he is bridging that vast abyss that separates him from the rest of beings! He is becoming more connected, not less! If that takes writing a bad novel, then so be it! Who cares?

WEBER

(Pointing at AW.) But he is just playing into the logic of the publishing market, just like tons of others like him. All *homo oeconomicus*! All faceless!

SIMMEL

(Very excited.) I beg to disagree, my dear Max! The ghostwriter does not play into the publishing logic, he plays with it. Shall I dare to say, he subverts it! If he wants to stand out as ghostwriter, he cannot just imitate her style... He has to live through her, breathe through her, insufflate life into her thoughts, however trite they might be! He is forced to become a real actor, not a pale imitator! (To the audience. Pensive.) I should really write a 'sociology of the ghostwriter'!

WEBER

Come on, Georg! He's not even going to add his name to that... (Emphatically points to the screen) to that mediocre thing

he's writing. (Brief pause. Weber recovers. Then, more calmly while looking away.) He has given up.

SIMMEL

(Exulting.) What does it matter if he publishes under her name, or under any other name? In the realm of ghostwriting, he is the king! (Pause.) And as a human being, he is experiencing the world on two registers. He is doubling his experience of life. He is eating the world!

WEBER

(Shrugs.) Eating the world! I just see someone devoured by this system of impersonal and rational production! (Tries to remain calm) Tell me, Georg, what difference he has made in the world? Where is his imprint? Where is the connection between his own work and himself? You say it lies in his ability to be another.

SIMMEL

Max, he does not need to achieve fame or any recognition if he does not want it. The connection is within himself. He knows it, and that's enough.

WEBER

(Pointing to the screen) But look at this... thing. He's not even a good writer. How could you possibly justify this? (Reads out loud, with a monotonous voice.) 'His broken heart fell like a falling wave that falls against the grey and grim sandy shore and the eerie gibbous moon dazzlingly shone in the pitch-black night where the weird, distant, batrachian sounds that...' (Gets annoyed.) Oh, I can't even continue!

SIMMEL

(Very excited. Stares at Weber.) Isn't it astounding?

WEBER

(In an ironic way.) Yeah! Definitely!

SIMMEL

(Excited) I mean, look at this: 'grey and grim sandy shore', 'eerie gibbous moon', 'weird, distant, batrachian sounds'. He's deliberately over using adjectives. In an actual bad writer, this cannot be other than a pitiful confirmation of his mediocrity, an outrageous heresy against literature. But in him (Points emphatically at AW.) this is an astonishing assertion of his own dexterity.

WEBER

(Visibly confused.) What?

SIMMEL

Yes, if you look carefully. He didn't put all those adjectives for naught. Look, 'sandy shore', 'black-pitched night'. (Very excited.) Ah! Those obvious and overused phrases! He certainly knows what he is doing. (Looks at Weber as if looking for confirmation.)

WEBER

(Again, replies ironically, but less interested) Hum. It seems we've got a Pierre Menard here.

SIMMEL

(Continues his own train of thought without paying much attention. Pensive.) Yes, very ingenuous indeed! (Still pensive. Very excited.) And if we think about the plot: the alien, their love story...

WEBER

(Disappointed. Without energy.) Oh, Georg! He's just given up! (Pause.) And I am giving up with you...

Appendix 5 – Slide for Sociology 2B students



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