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Verbatim Theater Assignment

Interviewing people for my verbatim theatre script on the Israel-Palestine conflict taught me something unexpected: outside of social media, people are less polarized and more reflective. Online, people perform outrage, crafting their arguments for likes and retweets—playing their “hailed” role in a theatrical type of way. But in my interviews, stripped of that digital audience, they stopped acting and started a more honest dialogue (I also asked two people that we very well educated on this issue and who I knew wouldn’t “Tik-Tok takes”). As Harvey Young describes in *Theatre and Race*, race carries such weight because these concepts are embodied performances—we act out our identities in relation to others. I think we can extend the idea of race to belief ideologies because once you take a stance you typically generalize yourself and your argument around that stance. Along with this other people will perceive you differently if you reveal your stance, an almost hailing effect. Online, this is magnified, whether it is the performance or the hailing. But in a one-on-one interview, the act fades, replaced by genuine uncertainty or even discomfort.

This discomfort became even more apparent when the script was performed. Compared to other scripts in class—about class imbalance, gender inequality—this piece made people hesitate. Even when reading someone else’s words, classmates slowed down, stumbled, or seemed uneasy. Young captures why this might happen, “Race and racial thinking stem from a basic human desire for orientation, and a need for a sense of order within society-at-large. We learn where we are, who we are, and how we are expected to behave by observing the people who inhabit the same spaces as us.” (Young, 4) We worry we’ll reveal too much, that our own biases or ignorance will show. People knew they were reading someone else’s words, yet they still were almost too scared to read. People seemed afraid not just of the words but of how those words reflected their own prejudices or assumptions.

That hesitation I noticed when people performed this script—that wasn’t just about stumbling over the words. It felt like their bodies were resisting the act of saying something uncomfortable out loud. Colette Conroy talks about how theatre isn’t just copying actions or speech—it’s about how bodies carry meaning with them. That was exactly what was happening here. Performing something as charged as the Israel-Palestine conflict didn’t just sit in the head—it ran through the body. People could feel the weight of what they were saying, even if it wasn’t their own opinion. That tension didn’t just stay with the performers either. It spread into the room, because “theatre is founded on the dynamic interplay between actor and audience,” (Conroy, 23). Everyone felt it. No one could sit completely easy while those lines were spoken.

What I learned specifically from the interviews about the Israel-Palestine conflict was how nuanced the issue was. I learned in-depth how brutal the initial kidnapping and brutalization was and still is. I also learned how widespread Israeli push back has been—the attacks have focused schools and hospitals, leaving no area safe for civilian. The escalation and lack of break is Israel's goal, to tire Hamas into defeat. What I also learned was the stress that Jewish people are making to separate the government of Israel and the Jewish populations.

If I were to direct this piece, I would start with idea of hailing one character; throughout the play I would break that hail and forcing the audience to realize they made the mistake of presuming based on the hail. Then I'd lean into the discomfort and use it as a tool for staging. I would cast either two young actors to represent the next generation grappling with inherited conflict or pair a young actor with an older one, using age as a visual metaphor for how these debates stretch across time. This wouldn't be about assigning specific sides based on age, but about showing that disagreement lives in both generations. This connects to what Laurie Wolf describes in *Introduction to Theatre*—that crossing cultural borders in performance often raises questions of authenticity and representation, and when done poorly, can result in “superficial use of objects” (Wolf, 97). That's why I'd avoid any props or set pieces that lean into stereotypes. The focus would stay on the dialogue, the tension between bodies and voices, not on exoticizing one side or the other. Along with this for staging, I'd borrow techniques from Brecht and keep things stripped back so the audience is always aware they're watching a performance. The performance would rely on shared space, where discomfort lingers in the room and forces people to sit with perspectives they might scroll past online. Theatre's power lies in this shared moment, making people wrestle with the human condition—even when it's messy. It truly is the one place where the director controls time and focus, there is no escape for the audience.

Drawing on *The Laramie Project*, I'd also allow the performers to comment on their roles. Just as Tectonic Theatre's actors reflect on their own biases and experiences while playing Laramie's townsfolk, my actors could share their own moments of hesitation or discomfort. This meta-theatricality acknowledges that even the act of performing someone else's viewpoint is fraught, reinforcing the theme that real dialogue is harder than performance.

Finally, embodying this script requires sensitivity. Unlike other social issues we've performed, the Israel-Palestine conflict carries deep historical, cultural, and religious ties. It's essential to approach it with the ethics of representation in mind. As we discussed in our Diversity and Inclusion module, it's not enough to represent marginalized voices—we must also respect the process of doing so. This means consulting with people from the communities represented and creating space for reflection within the performance process itself.

In the end, this piece taught me that the hardest conversations, the ones we flinch from, are the most important to bring to the stage. Verbatim theatre makes us sit with the discomfort, makes us speak the words we'd rather avoid, and in doing so, it cracks open space for understanding. Although, I might have choose the most uncomfortable subject, I really think it brought the most understanding to myself and staging issues like these.

Works Cited

Conroy, Colette. *Theatre and the Body*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Wolf, Laurie J. *Introduction to Theatre*. Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2020.

Young, Harvey. *Theatre and Race*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.