Meditations on the Pain of Others: Becoming Theater Squad

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> When I am asleep
> I dream of grass and water and soft skin
> When I am awake
> I dream that I live in a house of rubble
> I dream that my mother is buried there . . .
> I dream that an iron wall
> Splits the ground where I was born
> I'm screaming but no one can hear.
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> —Theater Squad, *Sleepwalking Apocalypse* 17

> "Empathy . . . is an action you take in the world."
>
> —Anne Bogart 66

In our era of increasing virtual access to the particulars of public and private spheres of social and political life, cultural thinkers, as well as artists, wonder whether is it possible to move audiences at all? Has "total access" and its 24/7-mediated simulacrum sequestered the human heart? Susan Sontag's 2003 treatise *Regarding the Pain of Others* examines a similar question in the case of war photography: Why would images that seared the imagination and moved the public in the wake of World War I fail to register on that mental emulsion sheet in our current decade? Sontag's analysis becomes useful in the theatre as both artists and activists struggle with the challenges of an over-saturated marketplace of concern.

This essay traces the formation of a loosely knit group of activists who, together with Seattle playwright Edward Mast, charted a course through the virtual din. As a case study, Theater Squad demonstrates how theatrical embodiment participates in civic discourse, helping to exercise the empathy vital to democratic society. Theater Squad performs a civic meditation on the human cost of current global conflicts. Described by Misha Berson in the *Seattle Times* as an example of "a growing movement of visual and performing artists using their work to protest the U.S. war in Iraq and other government policies," the group's image-based street performance aims to focus attention on the lived experiences of peoples around the world coping with the dehumanization of their status as refugees. While many activists and applied theatre practitioners might measure efficacy by information disseminated, policies changed, or increased public outrage, Jill Dolan reminds us that "success," even in overtly political performances, lies in *feeling*: "The politics lie in the desire to feel the potential of elsewhere . . . in our willingness to attend or create performance at all, to come together in real places . . . to explore in imaginary [ways] . . . the potential of the 'not yet' and the 'not here'" (20).

Theater Squad's efficacy, as a case in point, shows how the embodied presence of performer and spectator, with a shared willingness to witness each other, composes a moment of democracy. The troupe's primary performance tools—image, silence, mask, and embodied presence in public

locations—are not new, but in light of the over-mediated, multi-messaged, post-9/11 sociopolitical climate, its methods might newly demonstrate useful strategies for protest performance. Its work depends on the space—the interval— between curiosity and engagement; it returns agency to the spectator and precipitates a reflective pause that ruptures business (and thinking) as usual. Through a close examination of the formative experiments and discoveries that led to Theater Squad's *Shadows of Exile* (2004) and subsequent works, I show how its civic meditations become geographic and imaginative locations for empathetic knowledge to emerge.

Theater Squad is not a company and has no formal organization. Mast acts as its ad hoc organizer, director, and scribe, working in close collaboration with a central core of artist-activists. Rehearsals take place in living rooms and backyards, and notices of performances travel by personal messaging. Theater Squad grew out of a group of activists concerned with raising awareness about Palestinian issues. All were members of the Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC) of Seattle; some had been members of the Red Noses, one of many "affinity groups" from the November 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protest in Seattle. While a few have some theatre experience, all members are experienced in the usual modes of civic protest: organizing rallies, speeches, signage, teach-ins, picket lines, and marches. Mapping a spontaneous eruption of theatre in an otherwise traditional group of political activists not only provides insights into how these activists came to make aesthetic choices and discovered the effects of affective action, but it also illuminates the particular characteristics—call them performance demands—of the street.

Part of my interest in Theater Squad's work, admittedly, arises out of my own aesthetic politics, which concur with James Thompson's that political, applied, and/or community-based theatre should "fundamentally challenge who speaks . . . in a way that redistributes the sensible in favour of those whose faces are excluded or made invisible " (176). My project here, however, is not meant to advocate for the politics of Theater Squad, but rather to illuminate how they moved from protest as usual to theatre, in which (paraphrasing Dolan) the intersubjectivity afforded by performance demonstrates a fleeting glimpse of the Other as self, as community (88).

Theater Squad's politics engage a current, controversial, and contested debate, particularly among those who reside in the United States. The questions of Palestinian rights, statehood, and, more recently, Palestine's bid for recognition as a member state of the United Nations and its inclusion in UNESCO touch deeply held moral ground on all sides. Before any discussion of the current crisis can begin, the politics of this debate require a nuanced discussion of its complicated postcolonial and post–World War I historical contexts. For reasons of length and scope, that discussion cannot be included here. I am, however, mindful of the many specters of atrocities past in the sentiments of both Israeli and Palestinian identities. The work of Theater Squad is notable precisely because of the affective intensity and moral complexity of the topic. These activists turned to performance to circumvent the hostile rhetorical climate, to transform fear through the alchemy of performance into curiosity and compassion. Such transformation occurred for these pro-Palestinian activists themselves. As they stepped into the imaginary shoes of their chosen Other, their own cause became more inclusive. The images they embody are not unique to the Gaza Strip, but include Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Darfur, Guatemala, New Orleans, and, more recently, Haiti, Kamaishi, Japan, Somalia, and Joplin, Missouri. If the outmoded notion of "universal" means anything in our contemporary understanding of theatre, this capacity of the present to embody multiple times and places is its most useful currency.

From Protest to Performance

Theater Squad's work has been "molded by the polarized times" and is a response to a "culture of fear and aggressive response to fear" epitomized by the so-called war on terror (Mast 2009a). Since 9/11, the group had become increasingly concerned both with the public perception of Arab peoples and the increased polarization of the American public. Group-member Carla Curio felt "utterly frustrated" by what she and other members saw as the US government's systematically biased rhetoric:

> The war on terror has dehumanized people, stripped them of all nuance, of their individuality. . . . We don't protest [through theatre] out of fear of being more direct—we do it because the image of the Arab has been inculcated in the American mind, through very carefully chosen images, as being violent. They've been so successful at creating the image of Arab equals terrorist that you can't speak to it. Words no longer affect the template of the American mind. (2009)

This gave Curio and the others ample cause to work through theatrical means. Mast likewise observes that "people in this country rapidly became more interested in, but also more resistant to, what we have to say about Palestine and the Middle East" (2009a).[1] Mast and others claim that "the Bush administration's response [to 9/11] intensified the Israelification of the U.S., and turned public concerns with policy in the Middle East into concern for the survival of the U.S. itself." This climate fueled a sense of urgency, as these activists tried to "to find new ways to speak beyond the rants" (ibid.).

The Theater Squad members I interviewed claimed that the collective trauma of 9/11 created a national need, no matter where a person stood on the issues, for post-trauma healing—what Mast called "re-grounding through ceremony" (ibid.).[2] While this idea was perhaps new to many in the group, community ritual is one of the oldest functions of theatre. Jan Cohen-Cruz positions ritual as one of the elemental dimensions of community-based theatre (84–88).[3] What is unique in the case of Theater Squad is that these activists came to this conclusion *on their own*. Although applied and community-based theatre practice is sometimes misconstrued in this way, theatre cannot be "applied" to a community as a kind of remedy, like an Ace bandage or antibiotic.[4] Similar to the body's own healing properties, theatre arises ideally from within a community (see Boal). In this case of a community of peace and justice activists, theatrical expression grew out of the frustrations of not being heard, of being shouted down by a larger hegemonic voice.

In March 2003, a young activist from Olympia, Washington, named Rachel Corrie was killed while protesting the bulldozing of a Palestinian home in Gaza.[5] Her death hit Seattle-area activists personally, not only because Corrie hailed from the region, but also because many activists who would later become part of Theater Squad had recently traveled to Palestine. Curio recalls that

> When Rachel was killed, I had just been to Gaza. She came in February; I left in January. I too had stayed in homes that were being shot at. . . . During an action [a planned protest] we had one hundred rounds [of bullets] fired at us—a group of internationals marching on a checkpoint with Palestinians trying to return to their village. Bullets were hitting so close to my feet that the sand would bounce up and sting my face. But I believed that I was safe because I was a privileged foreigner. When Rachel was killed, right next to my anguish for what she and her family had suffered was this other feeling of "it could have been me!" I wanted to find a way to process my own experiences and also to reach people. Words are not enough. I've done speaking engagements and house parties. But considering the weight of my experience in Gaza, my effect as a protester felt very minimal. (2009)

The death of Corrie caused a cognitive dissonance in Curio and the other activists she worked with, as it simultaneously reminded her that she had been "over there," where ordinary people (both Israeli and Palestinian) are frequently killed in the course of daily life, but also that she was not there now

and instead enjoyed the palpable privilege of safety in a world where so many (and some she knew personally) were not safe.

"Someone—I think it was Jenna—called a meeting after Rachel was killed," Mast recalls of the first gathering in which a core group emerged who would work together over time developing site-specific performances.[6] "We wanted to do something, to find a way to speak back to the events in Gaza, and to counter the seeming indifference of Americans to Palestinian issues. . . . We wanted to find a crack in that cognitive dissonance, to enter into it, and find a way to allow others to do so" (2009a). One of the few theatre professionals in the group at its formation, Mast was nervous when some members raised the idea of doing theatre-type protest. He was aware of the skills and sensibilities required to make theatre: "I've never been very interested in agitprop. It's never seemed a very effective use of theatre . . . if it's not good [theatre], not entertaining, then the message falls flat" (ibid.). But he was willing to go with group consensus and provide what expertise he could.

The group's first performance was exactly the alienating agitprop that Mast feared. Members walked the Seattle downtown area carrying enlarged photographs of Corrie and an Israeli bulldozer, occasionally stopping to shout "Occupation kills!" followed by a minute of silence. They repeated this walk/stop/shout/freeze pattern as they moved through the streets. Each performance, or action, was followed by a collective debriefing. The group quickly noted that the skit had fallen flat; next time, it decided, a story would be added!

In the annual Solstice Parade of Seattle's Fremont District (a kind of Northwest Mardi Gras with nude unicyclists, painted bodies, extreme costumes, giant puppets, music, and organic food), Theater Squad members acted out the demolition of Palestinian homes by Israeli bulldozers: two actors carried a wooden doorframe; another actor wore a cardboard bulldozer puppet; others tried to prevent the bulldozer from knocking the doorframe (the "house") down, but the bulldozer succeeded over and over. Members wore white masks painted with red tears ("tears of blood") and *kufiyehs* (traditional Palestinian headscarves). The skit was equally unsuccessful; onlookers complained that it did not fit well with the celebratory theme of the parade (Mast 2009b). In the debriefing, Theatre Squad members realized (as many performers driven by ideology have discovered) that while didactic agitprop may rally the choir, it seldom persuades those who are less sympathetic and does little to educate them. Moreover, the hackneyed elements of civic protest (shouting, for example) may be "read" by the public as a kind of violence—being shouted *at*, or bullied.

The dramaturgical naiveté of these activists, while humorous to readers with professional theatre experience or training, was precisely what allowed them to question their methods and quickly adapt after self-reflection. At the next debriefing, Curio posed the question that would govern Theater Squad's creative process from that point forward: "How can we draw people *to* us instead of pushing people away from us?" (2009). The street, they realized, has particular performative demands. Narrative performance does not work in the street, in part because its activities of commerce are typically accomplished with a sense of urgency that work against even the simplest plot. "The weakest part of the skit was its dependence on a beginning, middle, and end," Mast observed. "Telling a story, even in a few moments, requires a quality of attention that most people, who are catching a bus or grabbing a latte, are unable or unwilling to give" (2009a). Theater Squad's commitment to self-reflection indicates sensitivity to performance reception, which, in turn, prompts creative adaptation; in this way, they demonstrate what Cohen-Cruz identified as one of the four principles of community-based theatre (89–91).

Units of Memory

Taking on the role of a community-based artist within this group of activists, Mast began to facilitate the process in a more active way, asking: "What if we drop the story, the narrative of

cause and effect, victim and oppressor—what's left?" Faces, bodies, tears, masks, *kufiyehs*, household objects. Like Allan Kaprow and others in the 1960s (and the Dadaists before them) who broke with narrative and other normative theatrical forms to perform Happenings, Theater Squad dispensed with narrative and moved to image-based work similar to the "image theatre" of Boal. Members devised still tableaus that embodied the experiences of uprooting and exile: families clinging to the pieces of daily life that signify the lost homes—a window frame, a rug, a teapot, a photograph, an article of clothing, a cup.[7] Relieved to discover that they did not need to tell a coherent story, but instead could allow the viewer to piece together what narrative she or he would, Theater Squad's work moved further in the direction of active reciprocity, as it increasingly trusted viewers to bring their own, in Sontag's words, "units of memory."

In her treatise *Regarding the Pain of Others* on the cultural function and changing significance of war photographs, Sontag interrogates whether images of atrocities are effective anti-war messages, or whether the ubiquity of such imagery has stripped it of its power to provoke empathetic response. She notes that "[f]or a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war" and try to stop it. "[P]hotographs of the victims of war are themselves pieces of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate" (6). If Sontag is even partly correct, what is it about the still image (versus narration) that cuts more deeply into the moral sensibility of the imagination? She argues that memory "freeze-frames" in single images, or "units of memory," that sear our imaginations in much the same way that our experience is recorded in the brain. In an era of information overload, "the photograph . . . is like a quotation" (22). Nevertheless, she argues, contemporary society has become habituated to such imagery. "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience," Sontag writes, "[w]ars are now also living room sights and sounds" (18). When litanies of world trauma merely reinforce a sense of separation from the experiences of Others, when our collective imagination is saturated with images of the calamities of war, genocide, and social injustice, and when moral outrage is in short supply, how is theatre to intervene? If Sontag is right, it would seem that Theater Squad's image-based street performances would also fail.

What is worse, she observes, in recent decades, the "[n]on-stop imagery (television, streaming video, movies) [that] is our surround" in large part shapes our perceptions of our *actual* experience. Media-speak has become a way of apprehending, transmuting the world into a performative replica of a prior fiction. Giving testament to this Baudrillardian world, in which even the most visceral, adrenalized experiences are encoded with performative counterparts, she notes that 9/11 "was described as 'unreal,' 'surreal,' 'like a movie,' in many of the first accounts of those who escaped from the towers or watched from nearby" (22). If the mediated always precedes us, intercepting rather than expressing our lives, and if the performative is not only a quality of behavior but a mode of perception, how is protest in *any* form to function?

Theater Squad wanted to create images that would halt spectators to look, but not to shock or shut them out emotionally. "We wanted something you could not miss" that would intercept public indifference. Mast, like others in the group, had visited Gaza and the West Bank many times. "Sometimes when people fear that their home will be demolished by Israeli bulldozers, they removed the windows and/or doorframes that are harder to replace than knocked over stones" (2009a). Wearing the neutral half-masks with red tears that had already become the hallmark of Theater Squad performances, the group moved through the streets in silent processions. At traffic signals, they formed tableaus representing postures and gestures of refugees. Group member Ruby Phillips describes the performance as a kind of walking meditation: "We walk. In front someone carries a lantern; someone beats a kitchen pot; some of us also carry house parts—doors, windows, rug, a teapot. At intervals, we stop to create an image" (2009). This simple walk/tableau/walk/tableau processional provided a dramaturgical structure (replacing the beginning/middle/end of narrative action) upon which the group would eventually "hang" vignettes, choreography, audience participation, written and spoken poetry, and large-scale, site-specific installations.

Like the war photograph, these tableaus functioned as units of collective memory—particularly the memories of those in the group who had been to Gaza and the West Bank. Text reentered the performance by way of fragments of poetry written on the doorframes group members carried (Fig. 1). The tableaus were sometimes drawn from photographs found in print media and Internet sites, though this is where the comparison of Theater Squad's tableaus to war photographs breaks down: these are embodied images, and the affective interchange between performer and spectator is different than that between photograph and viewer. While performance does not replicate (even as photography might) the lived human experience of trauma, living actors embody an awareness of that experience. Phillips describes the performances as "walking presences." Curio was relieved to be free of the obligation to agitate. "This [form] is the opposite of protest we were used to doing. . . . We're not shouting. We don't have big signs. We don't have 'Palestine' written anywhere" (2009). Whether or not spectators agreed or disagreed with the performers' politics, Mast observed, "if they are drawn over to us because they are intrigued, they can't take that back; they've still spent that many moments engaged" (2009a). "People stop, turn, and want to know, 'What is this? What's going on?' People walk across the street to see what we were doing; parents bring their children up and read the words on the doorframe" (Phillips 2009).

In this way, performance completes the process that photography begins, provoking first awareness and then response. When the image steps from memory into presence, when breath and eye contact are exchanged, viewer and representation are "on the same map"—that is, they share material (as well as mimetic) common ground. Curiosity, then, may be the first step toward engagement; even as they stepped off the curb to cross the street to get a closer look at the tableau, citizens' mode of being has shifted. "That distance between the intrigue and the information," Mast noted, "is engagement" (2009a). This embodied action on the part of the viewer is that hoped for "crack in the cognitive dissonance" between daily life in Seattle and the life of a refugee a world away.

When a compelling constructed image does not announce itself as performance, unlike a theatre performance where purchasing a ticket assumes the willing suspension of disbelief, are spectators being tricked? Unlike the performers, spectator/participants do not have an opportunity to debrief. Theater Squad does not unmask and say, "let's talk about what just happened." While the long tradition of guerrilla theatre argues in its own defense, Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "carnival" also reminds us that the street or public square is a space/place where anything goes, where performance can turn the world upside down, with or without official authority.[8] The street is the place where members of a community contest their collective identity. Indeed, in politically polarized times, the street is one of the few places where citizens have access to one another. The ongoing discussion of the merits, rights, and obligations of street theatre, however, often ignores the question of beauty. In public art, such as Henry Moore's giant bronze *Vertebrae* at Fourth and Madison in downtown Seattle, beauty arrests attention. While cultural notions of beauty are never apolitical, beauty's effect, however culturally wrought, is an interruption. Even in overtly political art, where beauty (like empathy), arrives in excess of its message, beauty ruptures business as usual and gives us pause. Psychologist Rollo May and others have argued that beauty can augment and accelerate empathy and healing.[9] In his interrogation of applied theatre, Thompson makes a similar case, that beauty is an invitation, a "force for good" and "rather than being a distraction from radical politics, beauty can be positioned as central" (136).

Beauty and suffering are not mutually exclusive. *Seattle Times* reviewer Berson describes the arresting images in a later Theater Squad performance for a 9/11 commemoration: "dancers in ashen makeup . . . moving in slow motion," "stark masks of mourning," "human statues . . . swathed in crimson cloth," "life-size paper cutouts similar to the chalked silhouettes of dead bodies at crime scenes." In addition to the uncanny experience of seeing what one considers beautiful, the act of presenting something that one *regards* as beautiful to another is an act of goodwill that not only acknowledges the value and presence of the Other, but invites shared reflection on the object's meanings. While no words are exchanged between Theater Squad performers and viewers, an affective conversation takes place as a function of beauty.

FIG. 1. Theater Squad, Seattle (summer 2003). (Photo: Edward Mast.)

Masked, Silent Others

The marker and central aesthetic element of Theater Squad's work is a neutral white mask with red tears (Fig. 2). Masks have long histories in theatre and protest. Bread- and puppet-style masks, for example, have become regular elements of street protests since the 1960s, and their large, kindly papier-mâché faces are often seen walking like guardians of the people in current protests.[10] Typically, however, masks disguise identity—witness the "anarchists," repeatedly shown in photographs and video footage of the 1999 Seattle WTO protests, who wore black bandanas to protect themselves from tear gas, as well as from recognition.[11] The anarchists were not attempting to produce an image, but to escape their own.[12] Theater Squad's masks, however, are intended to *provoke recognition*—not of the individual performer, but of those on whose behalf the protest is being made, those whose fate hangs in the balance of public opinion and political policy. The mask serves as a visual invitation.

Unlike commedia dell'arte masks, for example, which represent stock characters with certain recognizable traits and behaviors, neutral masks veil the actor, while they provide the spectator with a site for imaginative engagement. The tears, Mast recalls, were suggested by a Palestinian colleague to represent the "weeping of those who had lost their homes" (2009a). The masks became mutable characters, allowing activists to stand *for P*alestinians by standing *in* for them. Curio observes that "my individual identity is hidden, but I look people in the eyes as if to say 'tell me you're not affected,' and I see various reactions in their faces. For me, this is a very powerful way to reconnect and express my horror at what I witnessed in Palestine" (2009). The mask invites the gaze and gives spectators permission to make contact. Phillips recalls how the mask allowed for an intimate connection between performer and spectator: "They look at us because the mask is a curiosity. They make eye contact through the mask, because our personal identities are not visible. . . . To the extent that we can be present with them looking at us, to the extent we can sustain their gaze, human moments are possible."

FIG. 2. Masked *habeeb* in *Map Memory Illegal,* Westlake Park, Seattle (15 May 2006). (Photo: Jack Storms.)

Viewers make meaning out of the image—meaning informed by their own memories, knowledge, and emotions. Phillips continues: "Because of the [slow] pace and the visuals . . . people are invited in a very human way into their emotions. They are invited to their sorrow, their guilt. They are invited into the world of refugees in a way that is not threatening. It's like inviting them into warm water." A neutral mask works as a kind of projection surface for imaginative associations; like a pool of water, it reflects back those faces already in the fabric of the spectator's memory.[13] Forgotten historic events rise to the surface of the imagination and, like memories, find purchase on the face of the neutral mask.[14]

The masks allowed Theater Squad to recruit more players. People who might never have played a role in a play were willing to become part of an image behind a mask. "The sense of autonomy [conferred by the mask] gives me freedom to put my body, my posture, myself whole-heartedly into [the performance]. That's what it means to insist on the humanity of Others" (Curio 2009). Curio sees this embodied compassion as a strategy that fights ubiquitous dehumanizing rhetoric. "These images that insist on the humanity of all people. I don't want to imply we're giving people their humanity. We are merely insisting on it. The US government's dehumanizing imagery is meant to justify murder and mistreatment of people. Through this work, we insist that these people have flesh and blood, homes and families" (ibid.). They call these silent characters *habayib* (singular: *habeeb*) after the Arabic word that means "loved ones" (see Fig. 2). The *habayib* became residents of Jenin after Israeli bulldozers leveled their homes, producing images of the faces of families in refugee camps, of the child playing on the pile of debris riddled with shrapnel, of women weeping over bodies in the street, of the school bus stopped at a checkpoint. But the *habayib* represent global refugees as well.

"Our street theatre is not only about Palestinians. Our characters could be refugees from Bosnia, Iraq, El Salvador, or New Orleans" (ibid.).[15]

Save for a kitchen pot used as a drum and poetry occasionally read aloud, actors bear silent witness to the Others they represent. Even if a spectator speaks to her, "I do not speak," Curio says. "The truth is, I am speechless at what our nation has condoned" (ibid.). Being a "speechless character" redoubles her own sense of outrage and echoes the silent screams of those she represents. This state of speechlessness is familiar to Americans who remember how the cognitive and spiritual rupture of 9/11 arrested speech itself. Theater Squad's silences echo back to that moment when life-as-we-knew-it was seemingly destroyed. But instead of tapping memories of terror to fuel antagonism toward an undefined Other, the company's images aim to serve as a bridge to compassion. The silence provides "a sense of relief in which to experience this collective grief for our human condition, for these atrocities, and . . . to touch into the grace and sadness of that is healing" (Phillips). By generating a space of collective contemplation, rather than a space of discourse, the speechless *habayib* remind spectators that they are not alone. Theater Squad's masks and strategic silence function as signals of contemplation, rather than of contestation: "[Silence] invites the whole self to be present. We're inviting other people to be present. Be present with my sadness. Be present with the child's clothing, or the teacup that I am clutching because it is all I have left. The invitation to be present . . . is simple, direct, and invites all your senses, but in a nonthreatening way" (ibid.).

Civic Meditations

Beginning in 2003, the silent, masked tableaus of Theater Squad began to populate Seattle's public places, including popular Pioneer Square, which is filled with trendy restaurants, art galleries, and jazz clubs. On the first Thursday of each month, district business owners host an Art Walk, when galleries and shops stay open late and restaurants have long wait lines. A civic event in which the community performs itself for itself, these First Thursdays are quintessentially Seattle: celebratory though not wild, elite though accessible, inclusive yet noticeably homogeneous, and family-centered and tolerant in a "don't ask, don't tell" kind of way.[16] In direct counterpoint to the resistance that protests and protest theatre traditionally deploys, Theater Squad joined the flow of civic life and became a regular First Thursday participant, and in doing so, it exercised theatre's functional empathetic place in community.

Shadows of Exile, the group's first titled work, was performed during the Art of Resistance Conference in Seattle on 15 May 2004, and again at the same conference in 2005. *Shadows* was composed of a series of installations along a long procession route, with the audience walking into and through the performance site. Sontag urges reflection on "how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering" (103). The embodiment that is at the heart of theatrical work implies shared location, living presence. In ways both imagined and embodied, Theater Squad performances site the spectator "on the same map" as those who are suffering. Performer and spectator stand on shared ground, their spheres of privilege intersect with the suffering of those they represent. In *Shadows of Exile*, masked *habayib* stood at a chain-link fence at the beginning and tried to pass notes to the audience (Fig. 3). Construction rubble (part of the found space) invoked images of lost homes and destroyed landscapes reminiscent perhaps of the site-specific performances of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.[17] "We used the junk we found onsite, along with our graffitied doors, windows, clothing, and house wares. . . . One actor bound her hands, another held a cup, while another held a teapot as if pouring tea into the cup. . . . It was also conscientious objectors day, and one actor wearing a helmet and jacket stood next to another who read the letter of the Israeli refusenick" (Mast 2009a).

In *Shadows*, as in subsequent works, the boundary between performance and participant was blurred, as Theater Squad players gave masks, props, and directions to some audience members.[18]

FIG. 3. *Shadows of Exile* by Edward Mast, Arts Brewery, Seattle (15 May 2004). (Photo: Ken Dean.)

Audience found themselves walking in the footsteps of refugees or detainees or representing grieving mothers and lost children. Players gave each audience member a cup, spoon, or child's toy as tangible invitations to step into the lives of refugees. Audience members orchestrated the rhythm and flow of their own individual reception, taking time to walk through the entire installation or halting just long enough to view only a fragment.

Theater Squad's later works, such as *Sleepwalking Apocalypse* (2005), reintroduced spoken text not as dialogue nor agitprop rhetoric, but rather as poetry taken from dreams. Mast recalls that "I had a friend tell me she 'had a dream in which she was fleeing on a bicycle wearing a bathrobe.'" This was incorporated into *Sleepwalking Apocalypse* as: "In my dream / I run outside / my face is covered with some kind of cloth / people are throwing Molotov cocktails at airplanes / it's a stupid idea / I start to pray / but I'm speaking a language I don't know / I'm trapped with some people against a wall / and I'm debating in my head which religion I / should use / to pray" (16). Such text functions both as aural aspects of the performed images and as prayer.

As civic mediations, Theater Squad's work repertoire has grown to include elaborate installations—site-specific performances inviting both imaginative and kinesthetic involvement. Berson described a performance in Greenlake Park of the later *Sleepwalking Apocalypse 9/11* (2005) as an "outdoor observance." Park pedestrians who were biking, skating, and jogging were "startled to hear mournful songs of grief performed in English, Spanish, and Yiddish, and to be invited by Theater Squad members to write their greatest fears on scraps of paper." The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*'s Athima Chansanchai noted that the performance "drew more than 100 . . . performers and passers-by into a solemn procession." Audience members carried "icons" given to them by the performers in a procession that "moved in a giant oval on the meadow side [of the lake]. Their ears filled with the wailing of grief-stricken women standing near white cardboard body outlines splayed on the grass."

The continuing work of Theater Squad takes place in abandoned buildings, malls, alleyways, homes, parks, and streets of Seattle, turning these sites of commerce into sites of contemplation.

When real lives and material dwellings of human beings a half-world away continue to be destroyed in the Middle East and elsewhere, the experiential knowledge fostered by the citizen-artists of Theater Squad throws down a gauntlet for theatre itself: namely, that if we take "presence" seriously, just what is it that we are willing to be present to? As Mast (2009a) says, "[s]ometimes the function of art is to take bad news and enable to people to spend time with it. Unfortunately, our current cultural imperative is to do it in thirty seconds. But art's job is to enable people to slow down and be with—to be in the presence of—Others and different but human experience. That is the message [of our work]. That's engagement."

Empathy as Engagement

Director Anne Bogart reminds us that empathy is not something that happens to us, but is something we do. It is "an action you take in the world." We "enter feelingly" into the life circumstances of another, and "from this action consciousness and feeling, thinking and imagination are brought to bear on present circumstances" (66–67). Performance interfaces with memory and experience through action that is both embodied and imaginative. When a person plays a role in the presence of others, she or he not only represents an image of a world apart, but also conjures a present world that becomes part of the memory, the flesh of those who witness. If I carry the cup, spoon, or rug or if I trace my body or my child's body on the pavement with chalk as an act of remembering a family a world away, then I have done more than cognitively acknowledge the suffering of Others: I have performed an act of empathy, described by Bogart as "a putting-together, a going-out, a joining. It involves compassion and creativity. It is an act of the soul reaching out and becoming part of the world" (67).

However, when people feel that "the sufferings and misfortunes [of Others] are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political interventions . . . compassion can only flounder" (Sontag 79). As embodied contemplation, Theater Squad's work addresses the anonymity of the war-photograph subject and its scale of mediated horror with a simple, theatrically commonplace intervention: "What if this were me?" Active empathy is as important an aspect of a functioning democracy as civic debate; empathy shapes and nourishes the values that serve as both the rationale and the impetus for civil society.[18]

If Theater Squad's nascent meeting included a greater proportion of members with professional theatre experience, its work might have merely imitated other contemporary protest theatre, replicating now canonical forms like the didactic methods of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the direct action of the Yes Men, the street preaching of Bill Talen, or the giant puppet sit-ins of Bread and Puppet. Instead, and perhaps because of its dramatugical naiveté, the company followed the path of its own discoveries, the street becoming a laboratory of creative civic exchange made possible by a dogged commitment to self-reflection.

In the years since its coalescence, Theater Squad's work has spoken not only to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, but also the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Hurricane Katrina, and the lived experience of refugees around the world coping with their dehumanization. What began as a rudimentary skit in the community's Solstice parade shortly after Corrie's death has grown into a form of environmental theatre that participates directly in civic life. Rather than arguing for one locus of blame or another or advocating a particular solution, *Shadows of Exile* and Theater Squad's subsequent performances and installations demonstrate how theatre might allow citizens to process tragic events like 9/11 (or the many lesser tragedies occurring daily around the world) through identification rather than retribution.

What is remarkable about Theater Squad's work is not the forms it employed, but its rapid departure from both traditional protest and traditional political-theatre forms. It has done away

with overt messages, shouting, chanting, and bold signs—all the protesters' stock and trade—and dispenses with the expected elements of theatre, including narrative, plot, dialogue, and character development, as well as omitting the "in-your-face" messaging present in more familiar agitprop theatre. Theater Squad's suggested response in these times of crisis, which seem to grow in frequency in our civic lives, is to stop, stand still, look, listen, and feel into the imagined experiences of those Others who, on this day, in this moment, struggle for freedom, life, health, food, and mobility.

Appendix: Chronology of Theater Squad's Titled Works

15 May 2004	*Shadows of Exile*, Arts Brewery, Seattle
14 May 2005	*Sleepwalking Apocalypse*, Capitol Hill, Seattle
11 September 2005	*Sleepwalking Apocalypse 9/11,* Greenlake Park, Seattle
15 May, 2006	*Map Memory Illegal*, Westlake Plaza, Seattle
11 September 2006	*Without End*, Westlake Plaza, Seattle
9–10 June 2007	*Occupation Game*, with *Antigone's Nation*, Cal Anderson Park, Seattle
15 May 2009	*Stolen Land, Stolen Lives*, Westlake Plaza, Seattle
15 May 2010	*Stolen Land, Stolen Lives,* Westlake Plaza, Seattle
11 September 2010	*Tent City Planet,* Westlake Plaza, Seattle
15 May 2011	*Stolen Land, Stolen Lives,* Westlake Plaza, Seattle
23 September 2011	*The Mother of Justice Visits Nordstrom,* downtown Seattle

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Notes

1. A citizen activist and playwright, Edward Mast, has traveled frequently to Gaza and the West Bank, joining other international-solidarity protesters in nonviolent actions, such as blocking the demolition of Palestinian homes. In 1993, Mast collaborated with Palestinian American director Hanna Eady on *Sahmatah*, a play about the dislocation of Palestinians from a village in 1948. *Sahmatah* premiered with New Image Theater in Seattle in 1996. In 1998, in a joint venture with al-Midan Theater in Israel, an Arabic translation of the play was performed on the site of the ruins of the village of Sahmatah, where neighbors of Eady had lived for generations prior to 1948. (See Mast, "*Sahmatah*: Awakening History" [2000].) *Sahmatah* has toured Israel, the West Bank and elsewhere in Europe and the Middle East (1991–2011). It was revived in Seattle at the New Image Theater in 2008. Other works by Mast include: *Jungalbook* (Seattle Project, 1982); *The Hobbit* (Coterie, 1994); *Million Bells of Ocean* (American Theater Company, Chicago, 1998); and *Peach Blossom Fan* (Cal Arts, Los Angeles, 1999).

2. As James Thompson notes, all traumas are not created equal. The idea of 9/11 as a "national trauma" has been a result, in part, of political rhetoric, media coverage, and re-inscription. The event's impact on citizens of New York City and/or NYC emergency personnel is significantly distinct from its impact on the once-removed bystanders in Seattle or elsewhere. The extent to which so-called national traumas become, as a result of mediatized consolidation of meaning, part of the identity-making processes at work in any nation-state is a topic that calls for increased investigation. (See, for example, Thompson, *Performance Affects* [2009], 52–56.)

3. For example, Susan Sontag and a company of actors in Sarajevo playing *Waiting for Godot*.

4. Applied- and community-based theatre practitioners for the most part, however, are particularly attentive to the importance of long-term investment in and relationship with the communities with whom they work. See, for example, Jan Cohen-Cruz (2005), Theresa May (2007), and James Thompson (2009).

5. **On 15 March 2003, 23-year-old Rachel Corrie from Olympia, Washington, died as a result of injuries sustained by being run over by a bulldozer while she was protesting the demolition of homes in Rafah in the West Bank. See Heather Foster, "Local Protester Dies in Gaza,"** *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, **16 March 2003; see also** Huwaida Arraf, "Rachel Corrie (1979–2003): An American Martyr for Palestine," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 22.4 (2003): 12**. A play titled** *My Name Is Rachel Corrie,* **t**aken from her writings and edited by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner, has its own tumultuous history. The United States premiere occurred at the Minetta Lane Theatre in New York City on 15 October 2006 amid controversy and public outcry. In March 2007, Seattle Repertory Theatre produced the play, directed by Braden Abraham, which played through 6 May 2007. See Ben Brantley, "Notes From a Young Idealist in a World Gone Awry," *New York Times*, 6 October 2006; and Joe Adcock, "Rep Production Puts the Spotlight on Rachel Corrie," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 15 March 2007.

6. The name "Theater Squad" was "snatched out of thin air when it came time to put a name on press releases, which probably wasn't until a year later [2004]" (Mast 2009b).

7. See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

8. Carnival is one of a spectrum of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "chronotopes," or space/times, each of which implying or sanctioning certain archetypal modes of behavior; see Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel" (1981).

9. See Rollo May, *My Quest for Beauty* (1985) and *The Courage to Create* (1994), both of which comment on the significance of art in psychological and social healing.

10. Walking near the giant puppet-mask during the Seattle WTO protests of 1999, I remember having the sense of both safety and solidarity (and indeed, perhaps I was less likely to be tear-gassed because the puppet was followed by the eyes of the television-news camera).

11. Mainstream media was quick to call those committing violent direct action as the "violent protesters," making a distinction between them, who overturned dumpsters and broke the windows of a downtown Starbucks, and the "vast majority [of] peaceful protesters." This distinction allowed for the arrest of many whose only "violence" was to claim the right to walk on Seattle streets after a curfew meant to quell the protests. For more on the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, see Michael Krantz, Steven Frank, and Margot Hornblower, "How Organized Anarchists Led Seattle into Chaos" (1999).

12. Bandanas over the nose and mouth were also a means to protect against tear gas. Ironically, the image of one of the masked anarchists became emblematic of the WTO protests as a whole.

13. Theater Squad developed variations of its trademark mask in 2005. The larger white mask mounted with outstretched arms vaguely resembles Kwan Yin, the Chinese goddess of compassion; her overarching gaze marks the location of a Theater Squad event and provides a metaphoric circle of protection as it establishes the grounds for performance. The large mask also attracts audiences and helps performers negotiate the challenges of performing in public spaces by creating a visual focal point in an otherwise multifocal public space.

14. See, for example, Bari Rolfe, *Behind the Mask* (1977).

15. *Sleepwalking Apocalypse* took shape in the fall of 2004, concurrent with hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Both Curio and Phillips indicated that their work was as much in solidarity with the victims of the hurricanes as it was with those in the Middle East.

16. The author lived in Seattle from 1983 to 2000.

17. For more about the unique challenges of site-specific and public performance, see Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater* (1994), chaps. 1–2; see also Theresa May, “Bakhtin on Site” (1999).

18. This notion of the “first democracy” is obviously problematic, since we know that citizenship was reserved for land-owning men, not women, slaves, nor other marginalized members of society.