

The Events

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David Pattie*

The Events: Immanence and the Audience

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Abstract: David Greig’s *The Events* (2013) stages the aftermath of a traumatic event; a cleric tries to come to terms with the massacre of her multicultural choir. The play uses two actors (one playing the cleric, and the other playing all the other main roles, including that of the killer). The cast, however, also includes a choir, drawn from the town where the show is being performed: the choir sings, and takes on small speaking roles (reading their lines from the script). They also serve as an audience for the action, occupying tiered seating at the back of the stage. The choir serves as a powerful reminder of what Laura Cull, in *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance* (2012) identifies as Deleuzian immanence: a performance which stages “the participation, multiplication and extension of the human body – understood as that which is produced by relations of force and encounters with the affects of other bodies” (10). In this article, I argue that the strong affect generated by the play in performance stems mainly from the positioning of the choir, the performers and the audience as, simultaneously, participants and witnesses to trauma; and from the immanent relation of actors, choir and audience within the structure of the performance event.

Keywords: audience, trauma, ethics, spectatorship, David Greig, *The Events*

At the end of the Actor’s Touring Company’s production of David Greig’s *The Events*, we are asked to join a choir. Not necessarily to sing – as the play’s central character, Claire, points out, “Nobody feels like singing all the time” (68) – but to be there, first of all, and then to join in with the singing if we want to. As she invites us to participate, the choir on stage start to sing; a simple, comforting tune, based on the repeated words ‘We’re all here’. After what we know has happened in the play to Claire, and to the choir she leads, the music and the words feel like a blessing; a reassertion of community, of empathy, of peace, to stand against the violence she and the choir have endured. This moment of comfort, however, is compromised by the song itself; it is in a minor key and, rather than singing the title of the song, a proportion of the choir – no more than a quarter, according to the play’s information pack – sing ‘I’m not here’. It is a

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simple, musical trick; but when I saw the play, at Lincoln Arts Centre in 2014, the strength of my reaction caught me entirely by surprise. I am, like most professional performance academics (and probably like most academics), innately suspicious of moments in performance that are designed to elicit an emotional response. We tend to assume that such moments are in some way meretricious; they appeal to our irrational selves, because the issues raised in performance are too troubling to be resolved in any other way. At the play's end, academic distance – that learned, objective reaction – seemed not only inappropriate, but unethical; far better to acknowledge the fragility of the resolution, far better simply to feel.

I am aware that this makes my response sound like a decision; but, in the moment, it was like all emotional responses unconscious and immediate. It was the kind of directly empathetic response which is, according to Stephen di Benedetto, part of our ingrained awareness of the external world:

We simulate the expressions and the emotions of the people around us. Therefore, we are primed to make the emotional journey presented within theatrical expression and its effects are greater than we can possibly imagine. We are inherently social beings and our own psychological states are tied to those we perceive around us. The more we are in contact with each other, the more we are tied into the social. As live theatre is a shared experience, simply our proximity to others during the event affects our response: therefore, the unconscious affect of sensorial stimulation is intrinsic to the theatrical event. (di Benedetto 15)

In other words, what I experienced was a form of social mirroring. I was a spectator, observing a performance based on a traumatic event – an event whose precise details had been rehearsed and picked over in news report after news report. I was primed, by my knowledge of the underlying narrative, by the staging of the play, and by the response of those around me; my emotional reaction was, it might seem, an entirely involuntary response to the emotional ambience that surrounded me.

At first glance, this might appear the banal restatement of a banal truth; we are social beings, and we respond socially – this much we know already. However, as di Benedetto goes on to point out, any such emotional response is never that simple. It is both active and passive; simultaneously a response to, and a comment on, the events presented. It is, in Josephine Machon's useful term, *synaesthetic*. Machon first applies this term to the work of immersive and participatory theatre companies (most notably, she was the first academic to analyse the work of companies such as *Punchdrunk*). *Synaesthetics*, as Machon defines it, encompasses theatre which aims to establish the kind of visceral response di Benedetto describes, and also what Machon calls "a fused and sensate approach to artistic process and analysis": "(syn)aesthetics [sic] provides a discourse that

defines simultaneously the impulse and processes of production and the subsequent appreciation strategies which incorporate reception and interpretation” (14). An emotional response, in this typology, is therefore both visceral and analytical; one might say that it is analytical because it is visceral – the power of a strong emotional response calls for an almost instantaneous ‘appreciation strategy’ to frame and to analyse it. If, following Machon, I would claim that my response to *The Events* was synaesthetic – that is, that it was both emotional and analytical – then what I would also have to acknowledge was that my response was, as I have suggested above, a fundamentally ethical one. It was a moment of witnessing, at least as defined by Simon Shepherd in *Theatre, Body and Pleasure* in 2006. Shepherd points out, in terms that echo di Benedetto, that theatre is “an art of bodies witnessed by bodies” (73). He argues that, in the theatre, the moment of witnessing can be thought of as a physical act:

The audience members as witnesses are physically engaged by that which is present to them, to the extent that they might be physically possessed by it. One of the outcomes of possession is that the audience members attempt, during a performance, to assert out loud, to announce publicly, the truths they believe exist – ‘Don’t believe him’, ‘Look out behind you’, ‘Oh yes it is!’. (73)

Or an involuntary, affective response such as tears, which takes the spectator entirely by surprise. As Shepherd notes, the act of witnessing is at base an ethical act; it is based on the truths we believe exist – and, one might add, rather than truths we rationally deduce from our experience of the world, truths which we have internalised so deeply that their expression is involuntary.

My reaction, then, was in itself a form of witnessing, as described by Shepherd; in the moment, it felt like the synaesthetic expression of a truth I believed – a truth about the relation between communities and between the individual self and those defined as Other. In describing my synaesthetic response to the play as the expression of a deeply felt truth about the relation between Self and Other, I am aware that I have strayed into ethical territory which has already been exhaustively mapped out. The idea of an ethics founded on the encounter between self and Other derives from the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas’s ethics is founded on the idea of a life lived, not for the self, but for the Other – even though the Other will remain fundamentally unknowable. He defines the impulse behind his ethical philosophy as:

Responsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along. A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being

devoted to myself. Or more exactly, as if I had to answer for the other's death even before *being*. (83; emphasis original)

Levinas's ethics is founded on the idea of a face-to-face encounter with the Other; as Nicholas Ridout has noted, when his thought is adapted to performance, much of what makes Levinas distinctive as an ethicist (the implicit theology of his thought, his austerity) is leached away. Ridout points out, in passing, that such a dilution runs the risk of converting Levinas's ethics into another version of the "mundane liberalism" that is British theatre's default ethical setting:

[In the] transfer across from Levinas' philosophy to theatre and performance, much of what was distinctive about Levinas [is lost]. It removes the unknowability and anonymity of the face; it dilutes the absolute quality of the demand to infinite responsibility; it obscures the idea that the self comes into being only through this encounter with, and infinite subjection to, the other. [...] Serious Levinasians would no doubt retort that the ethics left behind after this 'misappropriation' is [... an ethics] in which we are wearily enjoined to be nice to each other, and is thus of no use to anyone. (55)

Interestingly, it could be said that *The Events* begins at the point at which this 'mundane liberalism' collapses; but, arguably, the events, and what they reveal about the world that Claire inhabits, also illustrate a potential weakness in Levinas's ethical framework. Claire, the minister who runs the choir, could be termed an applied Levinasian ethicist: the choir she forms exists as much as a series of face-to-face encounters with the Other as it does as a musical ensemble. After the shooting, that ethical framework seems not ridiculous, but profoundly inadequate – so inadequate that it cannot even be expressed:

I ran a choir that brought together vulnerable people, old people, asylum- seekers, immigrant men, young mums and so on – it was a – the idea was – you can imagine.

We sang. (14)

In the aftermath of the shooting, Claire finds herself lost in a different, starker moral universe; one in which an encounter between self and Other is impossible. Simply, he is the only person in the play with an identity that is fixed. The Boy is not only the killer; he is her lover, the boy's father, the leader of a far-right organisation, the person who talks Claire out of jumping to her death – all the different faces, all the others she meets bear the face of the killer. She cannot meet them, because she cannot see them; all she can see is the Boy, everywhere. Neither does she have a stable encounter with the choir; we know, as an audience, that different choirs will go through the performance with her from night to night. Even the Boy cannot give her the certainty of a fixed identity; he cannot

explain himself to her – the best he can offer is, “If I talk – I get – discombobulated” (65). Moreover, the Boy, in one of his guises (as the leader of a far-right group), puts the case against diversity in the language of reactionary common sense:

The values we live by are under threat, our heritage, our traditions.
That might mean nothing to you, but it means everything to me. [...] Schoolgirls killed for going to school, mobs dancing on embassy roofs, burning books, what do you think would happen to you if you lived in Arabialand, Claire? Or Afghanistan? What do you think they do to lesbians? What’s your general impression of the way little lesbian girls get treated in Islamic countries?
It’s people like you who try to erase difference.
It’s you people who won’t call black ‘black’ and white ‘white’. (35)

This is an ethical position (even if I have some difficulty in using the term in relation to this speech – a sure sign of the ‘mundane liberalism’ of my own ethical framework). It operates by reversing Levinasian ethics; the Other is encountered only to be rejected – on the very basis that the Other is unknowable; it argues that the self is only knowable through the infinite rejection of the Other. It is in itself a demand to infinite responsibility; and it is also a form of infinite subjection to the Other – to the extent that the figure of the Other is to be abjured utterly. I will not understand your world, because you are incapable of understanding mine. It is here that ‘mundane liberalism’ is at its most vulnerable – it can be defeated by a simple ‘no’.

This, though, is not the only time in the play that a Levinasian ethical framework falls apart. Later, the Boy (this time as the Boy) answers, or seems to answer, the question that Claire, the Choir, and we most want him to address – the simple question, “What *are* you?”:

I am a Europe-wide malaise
I am a point in the continuum of contemporary masculinity
[...]
I am unique
I am typical
I am the way things are going
I am the past.
I am the product of the welfare state
I am the endpoint of capitalism,
I am an orphan
A narcissist
A psychopath
I am a void into which you are drawn. (53)

This in its turn reverses the ethical position outlined above; the rejection of the Other is based on the idea of essential difference – and here, the Boy (in Claire’s imagination) tells us that he has no essence. He is an absence, and as such, he is not accessible to Levinasian ethics – he is unknowable, not because he is different, but because there is nothing to know. So Levinasian ethics are, in this case, revealed as doubly insufficient – they can be reversed, turned into a negative version of themselves; and they can be effaced, if the essential nature of the Other is denied or ignored. The stable identities assumed in Levinasian ethics no longer exist. The play, then, does not provide us with an ethical framework in which the anonymous Other is encountered and ethically accommodated. How, then to account for the strongly emotional and ethical charge of the final moments of the performance?

To answer that question, I would like to return to my initial reaction to the performance. That reaction was sparked (as much as I can reconstruct the moment) by a number of things – the restraint in the writing, and the similar restraint in Amanda Drew’s performance as Claire – but also, and most directly, by the nature of the choir themselves. Each time the play was performed, it used a different choir, drawn from the local area. The choir members prepared and rehearsed the songs; there was a multiple choir rehearsal (in which all the choirs working on the show came together), and a pre-show rehearsal, with a call two hours before the show went up. Choir members had lines and actions, but they performed with scripts in hand, reading, rather than acting. In a play where one of the characters, the Boy, shifted identity from line to line, they were always themselves; both a part of the performance and its audience – participants, rather than performers. At the play’s end, the choir face us; the response they implicitly demand is not a distanced appreciation of their skill, but an acknowledgement of the human loss their participation indicates.

The ending of the play suggests the participation of this choir is in some way a surrogate for the participation both of the fictional choir (whose members we never see) and the audience themselves. This is an idea that the performance plays on: when the choir is not required, the singers sit on a row of benches at the back of the performance space, facing us, watching the actors, as we do. They line up and, one by one, ask the Boy the questions that we might want to ask someone whose behaviour we cannot understand – “Your actions will be shocking to many people, many people will ask – why do you kill?” (20). When Claire desperately tries to exorcise the memory of the shooting, she asks the choir to take part in a shamanic purging ritual, and the choir mirror what would probably be the audience’s awkward, rather embarrassed response. At the same time, the choir fits more closely to the world of the performance than the audience ever could; they bring their craft, their musical skill, to bear at key parts of the narrative – an *a cappella*

version of “Bonkers”, a haunting solo voice, singing as Claire imagines smothering the killer at birth. Our relation with the choir is therefore never settled; we look to them to mirror our response to the performance, but they only mirror us sometimes – and at others they are performers, as distanced from us as the actors themselves.

The choir, then, are ambiguously placed in the world of the play; they are both part of the fictional universe the performance establishes, and also separate from it – part of the world occupied by the audience. As such, our relation to them is different than our relation to the two stable performers who, we know, carry the text with them from theatre to theatre. What we experience in relation to the choir, it could be argued, is something based on an ‘aesthetics of undecidability’ (to borrow a term from Hans-Thies Lehmann): “The irruption of the real becomes an object not just of reflection (as in Romanticism) but of the theatrical design itself. This operates on a number of levels, but in an especially revealing way through a strategy and an *aesthetics of undecidability* concerning the basic means of theatre” (100; emphasis original). Lehmann’s term, however, needs to be adapted for this particular text and performance. It is not simply that the irruption of real people into a fictional universe can be objectively understood as contributing to a new theatrical aesthetic; it is that the presence of the choir changes the relation between the spectators and the performed world. They are our representatives on stage, but they mirror us; we are their representatives in the theatre, mirroring their response to the text that they help to create. We have, in effect, something more complex than the idea of the choir as simple audience surrogates; as Helena Grehan points out, this suggests a particular ethics of performance, one which complicates a strictly Levinasian approach to the subject. For Levinas, as noted above, the idea of theatricality itself militates against an ethical encounter with the Other, because it strives to make the Other knowable; Grehan argues that the incorporation of elements drawn, as the audience would see it, from the world beyond the performance will change the relation between the spectator and the event. It introduces an ambivalence into the creation and the reception of the performance:

Ambivalence is a key aspect of contemporary life. Instead of seeing ambivalence as something that leads to stasis or inertia, it should be reimagined as an unsettling and productive space. Neither ambivalence nor undecidability necessarily imply that the subject will flounder or experience paralysis in terms of decision making [...]: rather, it may generate an environment in which subjects become aware of their obligation to respond, as well as of the unstable or contingent nature of any response they might make. Ambivalence is understood here as a radical unsettling. (34–35)

Grehan's 2009 monograph, *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age*, deals with such moments; moments where the performances she discusses create this sense of a radical unsettling, which demand an ethical response in the instant of perception. Where I think her argument does not quite go far enough is in acknowledging the spontaneous nature of this ambivalence. Useful as Grehan's idea of ambivalence as an ethical demand is, her argument still follows a successive logic. The moment happens, the moment is experienced, and an ethical response forms after the moment is absorbed. My response to the event of *The Events* was instantaneous. All the moments crowded in together; and as I have said, I could not separate the moment from my response to the moment. They were part of the same productive, unsettling, ambivalent experience.

In a 2012 monograph, Laura Cull attempts to come to terms with moments like these in performance: moments that demand a response that is both affective and ethical. They are, as she rightly points out, moments of immanence; in an analysis drawn from her reading of Deleuze, Cull argues that

immanence precisely concerns the participation, multiplication and extension of the human body – understood as that which is produced by relations of force and encounters with other bodies. Our sense of *where* and *when* the human body 'is' may be dispersed in this model, but it is less a matter of us losing sight of 'the human' as it disappears into 'a world of intensity flows' and more a question of gaining a sense of humanness as an *open* quality. (10)

This argument is relevant to the performance of *The Events* in two ways. Firstly, the experience that Claire lives through is itself a moment of profound, immediate, and shocking transformation, produced by a disruptive encounter with another body, in which relations of force are brought to bear on her and on those she has come to care about. Moreover, the new ethical universe in which she finds herself is one in which the kind of immanence Cull describes above is a guiding principle. Her sense of where and when the human body is, is dispersed; the multiplication of the human body – the Boy appearing everywhere – is for her not the means through which an ethical philosophy could be constructed, but a sign of the horror she has lived through. For her, for most of the play, humanness is an open quality, but it is only open to one other human – a human being linked to trauma, infinitely present, but (at least for Claire) ethically and affectively empty. Secondly, the staging of the performance ensures that our response to the work is, like Claire's, founded in the idea of immanence. Here, the nature of our and Claire's relation to the choir is key. In this new, painful and ethically uncertain world, the Choir become her, and our, fixed point of reference, not because they provide her and us with the reassurance of stable identity, but because what they do – the craft and skill they bring to the performance – is based on one of the defining characteristics of human identity, the individual voice.

Deena Weinstein, in a 2004 article entertainingly called “All Singers Are Dicks”, discusses the relation between singers and other musicians in rock bands. She points out that singers are often treated as marginal figures, because, unlike guitarists, bassists, keyboard players and drummers, their instruments are part of their physical selves:

The voice is part of the person, not a thing that can be carried, set up by others, or replaced for a better model. Like an athlete’s body, the voice is vulnerable. It doesn’t get played as much as it gets expressed, and its expression is influenced by the physical and mental condition of the person. Tired or energetic, with a head cold or in good health, depressed or happy, singers reflect their states of being in their vocal performances. (324)

The act of singing is a personal act; it connects us – immanently – with the physical reality of the singer. As Weinstein says, it is a reflection of the singer’s state of being. Added to this, as Weinstein also points out, is the fact that the singer occupies what might be called an immanent place in the performance of music; the vocalist shapes and crafts something which is recognisably part of a designed artwork – and yet, at the same time, the singer is also separate from the band, and the quality of attention paid to the singer by the audience is different from that paid to the other musicians. The singer is present to us; his or her response to us and to the music is a crucial component of the audience’s own perception of the event. Weinstein’s article deals with singers who are frontmen in rock; she is therefore looking at performers who are aware that, to be effective, they must adopt a performance style that is theatrically heightened. In *The Events*, it could be said, the various choirs achieve the same effect, but in reverse. The rock singer’s heightened theatricality contrasts with the other musicians, who tend to be assessed on their craft skills – their ability to play their instruments, and to recreate or build on recorded versions of the music.

In *The Events*, the choir are the ones who display those craft skills, in contrast to the theatrical registers employed by the actors playing Claire or the Boy. The effect, though, is the same; in both cases, our attention is drawn to those operating in a register which distinguishes them from the dominant style of the performance. The choirs bring their craft to *The Events*; but the nature of that craft, inevitably, establishes a connection between them and us that is closer, more intimate, than it is with the performers. They are the incarnation of the immanence of *The Events*: the site of the participation, multiplication, and extension of the human body. As noted above, they are our representatives in performance, and the play’s representatives in our world. But they are something more; the skill they bring to the performance is, of all musical skills, the one that seems closest to the world of the audience. They have voices; they bring that craft to the performance – and the voice, as Weinstein says, is part of the person. We all have a voice – and we all can sing.

It is not simply that the act of singing unites us with the choir; the experience of listening itself rests on our awareness of the physicality and the emotional condition of the person singing:

More than this, the experience of listening is itself inherently affective – Representation and interpretation, for example, are issues in which sound shares with pictures and text, yet sound reconfigures these very issues by inflecting representation with affect, and interpretation with embodiment. The act of listening is not an activity done remotely; it inevitably invokes corporeality, it envelops listeners, and [...] it resounds within the body. The types of ‘literacy’ involved with listening are strikingly complex; they not only exceed but challenge the conventions of visual and textual models. (Drobnick 10)

The point that Jim Drobnick makes is one that covers all uses of sound in performance; it can be applied to an audience’s experience both of designed sound environments (soundscapes, the use of music, and so on) and to the vagaries of vocal tone and delivery, as well as to those sounds produced as a by-product of the performative process. Our relation to the singing of the choir in *The Events*, however, is not quite as simple as Drobnick suggests; certainly, the music they create combines representation and affect, but it does more than inflect the first term with the second. Implicit in Drobnick’s argument is the idea that representation is the dominant term; that what we see and understand as a representation in performance is coloured by the aural environment in which we see it. This might capture the relation between sound, image and event in drama, live art, immersive theatre, and other forms of performance where audiences are enjoined to interpret representations; it does not, however, capture the relation between sound, image and event in live music performance. Here, more commonly, affect is inflected by representation; the structure of the event, and the images created in performance, are designed to reflect and enhance the corporeal impact of the music. *The Events* switches between these two performance styles; at some points, theatrical sound (the delivery of the text, the sounds produced by the stage furniture and by the movement of the performers’ bodies) predominates and inflects our understanding of the events represented. At other times, though, we hear music; and the theatrical elements are subordinate, and inflect, the affective embodiment which is an inescapable part of our response to any sound.

The choir in *The Events*, then, is not simply a way of extending the audience into the playing area. The particular nature of their craft, and the fact that these voices emanate from people who are dressed, who are positioned, and who hold themselves on stage in a fashion which demonstrates that they have not been drilled in the performance in the same way that the professional actors have, mark them out as indeterminate figures, half-way between the stage and us. The skill they bring to the performance is a skill that is, of all musical talents, the most

ordinary – a point that the play itself makes. Their very ordinariness, night after night, is arguably what makes them a fixed point of reference for us. The Boy's identity shifts; Claire's response to the events shifts too; but the choir, during the performance, remain stubbornly, humanly, themselves. And they are local; when the tour moves on, the choir remain, as we remain – no longer performers, but left, as we are left, with the memory of the performance. Moreover, when they are foregrounded in the performance, what they create is something which is first and foremost affective, but which does not allow the audience a simple moment of emotional catharsis. Affect is inflected by representation – in this case, the representation of absence and trauma. No matter how effective they are as a choir, the audience knows that they can never be more than ersatz; a temporary assuaging of a loss which the play treats as both total and irredeemable.

In *Theatres of Immanence*, Cull discusses the idea of participation in performance. She notes, following Carl Lavery, that the term itself is now so widely applied as to seem meaningless; after all, performance is innately participatory. She argues, however, that we should be very wary of limiting the use of the term simply because it might make the nature of participation in theatre easier to define and codify. Seen from the perspective of Deleuzian immanence, participation stops being a performance category, and reveals itself as a fundamental part of the mechanisms of performance:

[An] immanent perspective is inherently participatory in outlook – not only thinking in terms of a continuum of tendencies between the two poles of immanent participation and transcendent separation, but also construing participation (or immanence) as the more fundamental of the two tendencies. Or again, according to thinkers of immanence, it is not that we begin with separate things (such as 'an actor' and 'an audience member'), which then take part in each other in a manner that presents participation as derivative of the participants. Rather, immanence suggests that participants are produced by processes of participation. (146–47)

The Events, in performance, works by laying bare the mechanisms through which the processes of participation create participants; the audience watches, and participates in, a performance shaped partly by performers who are themselves visibly negotiating the processes of performance, rather than employing learned theatrical skills to efface those processes. The choir involve us in the production of immanent participation; they do so by incarnating the 'irruption of the real' into the world of the play, and in doing so they force us into a judgement which is both affective and ethical. They do not give us a Levinasian Other against which to gauge our ethical response to the narrative. As Cull puts it, they, above all else, give us a sense of humanness as an open quality – open both to the choir on stage and to the potential choir in the audience. Claire's offer, at the play's end, is

nominally to the members of a new choir; but it is also to the non-professional performers surrounding her on stage – and as in production it is addressed to the seated audience, it is also an inherently ethical offer to us: “Why don’t you sit with us and if you feel like singing – sing” (68).

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