

Jess Thom's *Not I* & the Accessibility of Silence

It's a crisp, remarkably rainless evening for the beginning of September at The Globe Theatre in London, as the audience wiggles and shifts in anticipation of Matthew Dunster's reimaging of *Much Ado About Nothing*. An announcement is made; there are members of the audience with Tourette Syndrome in the house this evening, which means they may express involuntary vocal or physical tics throughout the performance. The announcement concludes with a quip: "This is the Globe, so it shouldn't be that different." The audience offers an appreciative laugh, but the similarities to rowdy Elizabethan theatregoers end there. The expectation is of wide eyes and closed mouths.

In attendance on this particular night is a woman dedicated to spreading awareness about disability politics in the performing arts. Jess Thom is a theatre artist and the co-founder of Touretteshero, a blog and online forum that champions creativity within the Tourettes community. Thom's first play, *Backstage in Biscuit Land*, a warm and comic exploration of her personal experience living with Tourette Syndrome, ran at Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2014 and went on to tour internationally. Her most recent piece, an adaptation of Samuel Beckett's *Not I*, debuted on 22 August 2017 at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Upon first glance, Thom's most recent project appears to drastically differ from her other work. In *Not I*, Thom operates within the confines of a preexisting script constructed with the unwavering specificity and attention to detail of Beckett's pen. From the opening stage directions—"Stage in darkness but for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow"—*Not I* is written as a physical and artistic challenge.

Billie Whitelaw, who performed *Not I* in 1973 at the Royal Court Theatre following extensive coaching from Beckett, describes the tone of the piece as one of contentious anxiety. She reminisces about audience members who attempted to escape a theatre cut off from all illumination (including exit signs and bathroom lights) except for a singular hovering mouth. The exact moments and intensity at which the character of Mouth is expected to scream, laugh or pause are noted within the script, and Beckett further specified the duration and pitch of each utterance throughout his rehearsal process with Whitelaw.

Beckett's expectation of resolute precision appears antithetical to the aptitudes of Thom as a performer. Mastery over the duration of a pause or the tone of a scream is unattainable in the context of a performance in which completion of the script in its entirety is not guaranteed. And yet, it is precisely Thom's inability to rest her words that establishes such a profound connection between the performer and the character she inhabits. As Thom's reimaging of *Not I* progresses, her audience is captured by a newfound understanding of Mouth's context and prompted to participate in a collective conversation about theatrical accessibility.

Thom's performance does not begin with Beckett's words. As the crowd enters the theatre at Pleasance Courtyard, they are directed past the proscenium seating that remains in place from the previous performance, through an opening in a black curtain, and into an intimate set-up of chairs and floor cushions. Thom and British Sign Language (BSL) performer and interpreter Charmaine Wombwell are dressed in all black, yet their faces light up with exuberant greeting as each new audience member enters. The sense of impending entrapment that set the tone of Whitelaw's *Not I* is replaced by an atmosphere of

casual warmth and welcome.

Once everyone settles into the space, Thom introduces herself with interjections of “BISCUIT,” “CATS,” and various other physical and verbal tics. Thom and Wombwell’s introductions include a verbal description of each of their physical features for the visually impaired and real-time BSL (including Thom’s tics) for the deaf community. Thom is transparent in her revelation of the stakes of the piece. She explains that she may repeat specific words, produce irreverent additions to the text, or suffer an episode that could prevent her from completing the performance. Wombwell and Thom welcome unrestricted sound and physical movement into the space, thus classifying the piece as a “relaxed performance”—a term Thom writes extensively about on the Touretteshero blog—before proceeding with the artistic work. Once the ground rules—or intentional lack thereof—are set, Beckett’s script gains a vehicle through which to speak.

There is a collective intake of breath as Thom slips from her role as hostess into the tangled urgency of Mouth’s world. She rolls her wheelchair backwards into the lift and is hoisted up into darkness. Only her mouth lit under the dark hood. Wombwell steps into her own hazy spotlight, filling the role of the silent, standing Auditor noted in Beckett’s script. The mouth begins to speak, the fingers begin to sign, and what follows is intentionally left un-prescribed. The performance oscillates between the speed and precision of intense studio training, and the spontaneity of unforeseen alterations. Wombwell communicates with a certain grounded and expressive quality that can only be achieved through unwavering attentive listening. Both women operate under the impending possibility of failure, and with the mutual responsibility of communication.



Beckett's *Not I*, feat. performers Jess Thom and Charmaine Wombwell. Photo: James Lindsay.

Thom and Wombwell's elastic relationship with change makes it difficult to decipher the script from the "mistakes." Beckett's intentionally broken phrases and circular thought patterns are not far removed from the unpredictability of Thom's tics. The compulsion to categorize dissipates steadily as it becomes clear that linear plot and logical progression are no longer indications of normalcy. Once the audience forgoes the expectation of a specified structure, the challenge becomes to relax into the cadence of tangential thought and repetitive unpredictability. Like Thom herself, Mouth struggles with an inability to organize and revise as she speaks: "imagine! . . . no idea what she was saying!" Beckett's words take on new meaning in the context of a performer labeled as "other" precisely because the choice to remain silent is inaccessible to her.

Roughly twenty minutes later the lights restore and Thom descends once more. She flashes a victorious smile, and vacates her position center stage. Mouth is soon replaced by projected video footage chronicling the rehearsal process of *Not I*. The short film invites the audience into Thom's experience living as a disabled artist and performer, and provides context for the genesis, growth, and execution of the piece.

At the conclusion of the film, Thom invites her audience to discuss the material. Both performers avoid the stodgy power dichotomy of lecturer versus student body by engaging one-on-one with audience members throughout the conversation. A question and answer session follows, in which Thom maintains a spirit of enthusiasm as she navigates a series of prodding audience inquiries.

"Do you prefer to be called a disabled person or a person with disabilities?"

"I am a disabled person."

Thom takes this moment to clarify a concept introduced at the outset of the piece: the social model of disability. She explains that individuals are disabled by the social structures that are set up to define "normality" as opposed to his/her/their particular physical or cognitive malady.



Beckett's *Not I*, feat. performer Jess Thom. Photo: James Lindsay.

Thom's responses are at once personal and educational, encouraging an examination of preconceived notions about the hierarchy of speech within social and artistic organizations. The four-part structure of the performance—introduction, performance, discussion, Q&A—presents a model for the comprehension and re-creation of an accessible theatrical space. The content of the educational sections caters to an assumed public ignorance about disability and its relationship to the performing arts. The structure of the performance prioritizes engaged discourse and education over theatrical spectacle.

The performance concludes with designated time for unrestricted sound and movement. Thom instructs

her audience to yell, shake, squirm, and laugh all at once. Auditory exhalations and physical gestures commence, yet a sizable portion of the audience appears self-conscious. Thom and Wombwell have curated a safe space, and yet the traces of Mouth's anxieties linger in the room: Am I too loud? Too noticeable? If I open my mouth too far, will I be able to close it again?

The Edinburgh Fringe Festival is an active participant in discourse surrounding audience interaction, yet it is a conversation that does not often foreground accessibility. *Not I* addresses the kind of interaction that is impossible to anticipate: something that artists and academics with normative physical and cognitive functioning tend to leave unexamined in their creation and critique of performance. Thom's embodiment of Beckett's piece demands the inclusion of theatrical discourse surrounding the inherent privilege of silence.

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