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‘Everything Has a Fucking Value’: Negative Dialectics in the Work of Back to Back Theatre

Dave Calvert

1. I am grateful to Rebecca McIntyre and Yuhui Ng-Rodriguez of Back to Back Theatre for their assistance in providing images and other research materials.

2. Jane Goodall, ‘Preface’, in ‘We’re People Who Do Shows’: Back to Back Theatre, Performance, Politics, Visibility, ed. by Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2013), pp. 5–7 (p. 5).

3. Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake, ‘Disabling Spectacle: Curiosity, Contempt and Collapse in Performance Theatre’, in ‘We’re People Who Do Shows’, ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 119–30 (p. 120). Emphasis in original.

4. Yoni Prior, ‘“Scott’s Aired a Couple of Things”: Back to Back Theatre Rehearse *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*’, in ‘We’re People Who Do Shows’, ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 209–17 (p. 217).

Back to Back’s *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* (2011) consolidated the company’s reputation as an ensemble of international standing, following acclaimed earlier tours of *small metal objects* (2005) and *Food Court* (2008).¹ As Jane Goodall observes, members of the company’s acting ensemble ‘share the outsider experience of being excluded from the norm through being perceived as people with a disability. They know what it is to live with the burden of a category identity’.² For Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake, this ‘emphasis on *perceived* disability destabilizes the binary between ability and disability and signals an interest in the visual and cultural construction of these categories’.³ Yoni Prior, drawing on an unpublished interview with Artistic Director Bruce Gladwin, comments that this also ‘addresses a contradiction in the way that the company is seen. The company works with artists with formal diagnoses of intellectual disability, but the work they make is “so intelligent”’.⁴ This engagement with contradiction is characteristic of the company’s work, and in this article I will offer a dialectical reading of its productions which uncovers contradictions within perceptions of learning disability, and the ensemble’s own critical perceptions of the world. Taking Theodor Adorno’s theory of negative dialectics as a framework, my analysis is indebted to but also contests the Hegelian dialectic. For Adorno, the contradictory moment of the antithesis in Hegel’s model must not be resolved through a seemingly progressive synthesis, as this necessarily overlooks the object’s ongoing resistance to being readily conceptualised.

This is illustrated in the discussion above through the ways that the learning disabled performer contradicts the ‘category identity’ of intellectual impairment. To subsume the performer easily under this concept would be an instance of what Adorno calls identity-thinking, in which the

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Notes

1. I am grateful to Rebecca McIntyre and Yuhui Ng-Rodriguez of Back to Back Theatre for their assistance in providing images and other research materials.
2. Jane Goodall, ‘Preface’, in ‘We’re People Who Do Shows’: Back to Back Theatre, Performance, Politics, Visibility, ed. by Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2013), pp. 5–7 (p. 5).

3. Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake, 'Disabling Spectacle: Curiosity, Contempt and Collapse in Performance Theatre', in 'We're People Who Do Shows', ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 119-30 (p. 120). Emphasis in original.

4. Yoni Prior, "'Scott's Aired a Couple of Things": Back to Back Theatre Rehearse Ganesh versus the Third Reich', in 'We're People Who Do Shows', ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 209-17 (p. 217).

5. David Barnett, 'Performing Dialectics in an Age of Uncertainty, or: Why Post-Brechtian ≠ Postdramatic', in Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance, ed. by Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll, and Steve Giles (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), pp. 47-66.

6. Brian O'Connor, Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), p. 46.

7. Richard Gough, 'An Interview with Bruce Gladwin', in 'We're People Who Do Shows', ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 231-57 (p. 250).

8. Throughout the analysis, I will use the actors' surnames for general reference and their first names when referring to the avatars of Ganesh versus the Third Reich.

9. 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich Script', in 'We're People Who Do Shows', ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 159-94 (p. 184).

10. Anna Teresa Scheer, 'The Impossible Fairytale, or Resistance to the Real', in 'We're People Who Do Shows', ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 218-26 (p. 222).

11. Prior, "'Scott's Aired a Couple of Things'", pp. 209-17 (p. 217).

12. Helena Grehan, 'Irony, Satire and Parody in Ganesh versus the Third Reich', in 'We're People Who Do Shows', ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 197-207 (pp. 204-05).

13. Hans-Thies Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 95.

14. Ibid. Emphasis in original.

15. Ibid., p. 39.

16. Ibid., p. 33. Emphasis in original.

17. See Barnett, 'Performing Dialectics'.

18. David Barnett, *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 86.

19. Alison Stone, 'Adorno, Hegel and Dialectic', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 22.6 (2014), 1118-41 (p. 1135).

20. Ibid., p. 1130.

21. Grehan, 'Irony', p. 205.

22. Ibid., p. 206.

23. Gough, 'Interview', p. 246.

24. Ibid., p. 251.

25. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 5.

26. Theron Schmidt, 'Acting, Disabled: Back to Back Theatre and the Politics of Appearance', in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, ed. by Jürs-Munby, Carroll, and Giles, pp. 189-207 (pp. 204-05).

27. Ibid., p. 205. Emphasis in original.

28. Ibid.

29. O'Connor, *Adorno's Dialectic*, p. 47.

30. Bruce Gladwin cited in Schmidt, 'Acting, Disabled', p. 197.

31. Trezise and Wake 'Disabling Spectacle', p. 119.

32. Ibid., p. 129.

33. See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 162-63.

34. Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 17.

35. Stone, 'Adorno, Hegel and Dialectic', p. 1136.

36. Lehmann, *Postdramatic*, pp. 99-104.

37. Ibid., p. 31. Emphasis in original.

38. 'small metal objects Script', p. 65.

39. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 5.

40. O'Connor, Adorno's Negative Dialectic, p. 59.

41. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 162.

42. 'small metal objects Script', p. 62.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., p. 65.

45. Ibid., p. 67.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., p. 72.

48. Barnett, 'Performing Dialectics', p. 52.

49. 'Ganesh Script', p. 188.

50. Ibid., p. 183.

51. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 153.

52. 'Ganesh Script', p. 187.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., p. 188.

56. Ibid., p. 182.

57. Ibid., p. 170.

58. Ibid.

59. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, pp. 52-53.

60. Brigid Delaney, 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich: "Do We Have the Right to Perform This?"', *Guardian*, 8 August 2014

<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/aug/08/ganesh-versus-third-reich-edinburgh-festival-2014>> [accessed 21 November 2014].

61. 'Ganesh Script', p. 194.

62. Grehan, 'Irony', p. 207.

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