

The Unspeakable Rooms

written by Alaric Sumner and performed by Rory McDermott,
Battersea Arts Centre, London, 3rd October 1998.

The text was written by Alaric Sumner for Rory McDermott to interpret and perform. The performance by McDermott, devised by McDermott, is an interpretation of the text by Sumner. Sumner was in the audience.

I saw it first, when it was work in progress, at the Tate Gallery St Ives, earlier this year. A final version of it, which I did not see, was performed in USA in May. Later this month, it goes to Dartington College, where Sumner teaches, and then Leeds; then it's back to St Ives in January. Other and further performances are intended. The text is being published in *Performing Arts Journal* in January.

A brief quote from the text -

PERMANENT DECEPTION

Dare to leap, have that faith
to make the threshold an invitation
not a barrier over which you require...

as language shifts its basis and redefines
the parameters of meaning so that the rooms
though unspeakable when integral become
speakable ruins, speakable ruins, wordruins
language ruins, roofless ruins, doorless arches
tumbled towers of language open to elements

The audience enters, when it is told to, to see McDermott, already sitting on the floor, waiting for the audience, curled over, still, sideways against a white wall, with a video image of himself facing the other way, as if mirror image, on the same wall. The lights go down. The video image is the only illumination.. The sound track, as the audience enters, is loud breathing. McDermott's breathing. The contrivance of the video projector is clear and undisguised. Someone else has pressed a switch. A process is under way. Our job is to sit and witness. The apparatus of the state of things.

Near the end of the performance, 50 minutes later, McDermott is back where he was, the sound track has reverted to loud breathing, the lights come up, the door of the room is opened, the audience leaves.

Slowly, in the sound track, the sound of the breathing, McDermott's breathing, becomes McDermott performing the title of the text. In due course, he does the whole thing, pages of it, including the title, and the words and subtitles. He tries to leave nothing out. He must say it all if he can. The text is

not a script; he performs the text. The performance is not a straight reading; the words of the text beginning formation, for instance, out of their phonemes, the bits of it performed in simultaneous layers.

The soundtrack is a nifty bit of work, especially at the beginning. One could take parts of the sound track, extensive parts, as sound works in their own right. Apart from the prerecorded performance of text, we also see the video image of McDermott uttering it, though we do not hear that sound, and at times hear and see McDermott himself uttering it.

The video image shows a disembodied McDermott, his figure in white space, inaudible, exploring, shouting, raging, suffering, while, in the performance space, McDermott audibly does the same, synchronous-asynchronously. Text is processed through McDermott - the figure of McDermott, the figure he represents, the figure he plays, him, I do not say person - and he / it is processed through it. What is it? It is a process of agony, a struggle apparently, and a struggle with the struggle. There is a time when his jacket opens, dragged open by himself as if he is trying to open his own visible apparently physical body of which clothing is a part, the outer layer, showing his bare torso, out of which comes the video image of the figure tearing at its jacket, showing the white flesh inside. It reminded me of the kind of transformation that flower buds and insects perform, layers within layers of themselves of something else within they must become, usually without us seeing, transferred to and discovered within the frame of a fellow human being or something seemingly recognisable as one. Whether this transformation is successful or unsuccessful and what is transformed into what is not clear to me, something remarkable and terrible glimpsed, something uncomfortably familiar. What's that, Mummy? Move along, please, ladies and gentlemen, there's nothing to see. Do you mind if we change the subject? Acquiescence under duress. Rooms and spaces within what had seemed solid. Mental spaces. Closed or inaccessible spaces from which no sound comes, though we know well what is being uttered there, think we know, which the depicted-actual figure strives to reach, at least, with words. What language? We are in the performance room and we look at it. Both of them. Him. Us. And all the time there is that empty white space beyond the performance room, a reflection and extension of the performance room where we cannot go, where he is and has left already and cannot leave. Flashback. Flesh background, an impenetrable film between. Physical foreground, disembodied.

There is a time near the beginning of the piece when the two figures seem to discover the existence of the other, what they might become, what they already are, and react variously without knowledge, by ignoring it, with fear.

A mirror in a room provides a reversed but otherwise continuous extension of the room; here we are given the room's negation as its extension, yet, in the

negative space, remains soundlessly, trying to communicate, the positive figure.

A friend spoke to me of waking in an unfamiliar room and, as he sat up and climbed from bed, seeing a ghost, a white something which moved sideways very fast in a direction he could not look in and then vanished. Then vanished. It remained visible a while in a direction in which he - This man does not believe in ghosts - could not look. In my mind's eye, he is refreshingly of the when-you-die-you-rot persuasion; but the experience was his and he spoke it; without belief and from experience, which was more interesting and I suspect more accurate than our subsequent attempt to analyse the possible physiological explanation.

The figure, what might have been or might be, gestures, small careful tentative gestures through to fairly uncontrolled - apparently - expressionistic movements, and shakes, twists and distorts, in ways that I suspect will only be known to members of the security and police forces among the decent people of the world. Between the actual image and the image-image, the shadow of the physical figure, a third image which one only glimpses because McDermott stays so near the wall.

But if he were to approach the audience, to break free of that system which apparently contains him, to deny that he is trapped or restrained in a transparent room of his own, as he came towards us, there would grow behind him a featureless, increasingly insubstantial shadow figure, stuck in the space he is seeking to leave.

Though the performance seems to end as it began, and the text returns to its beginning, to some extent, the effect is the opposite of resolution. I think of an sf story I have read where one could see the failing now silent films of a dead race, of whom one knew nothing beyond these images, as one approached their mausoleums. But here, there was a real figure, made intangible and unreachable by some state, inner or real, from which there was no escape, from which there had been no release of death, from which there could be no flight down some pathway on an astral plane, and through which there could be no communication from us to it. Caliban within the tree, unquiet.

There was no certainty that the figure in the performance was aware of the audience. There was an absolute certainty that its agony is still real and will be revived as soon as we enter that room again, or even if we found ourselves unable to return, may well be repeating experience, like a bubble rising over and over again from wounded tranquillity to break and then reform. Sisyphus.

The language, the sound of the voice and the voice, the words written, what we heard, not a list of many things but ways of describing one thing fragmentally, seemed both created by the presence of the figure and to make it what it was, a synthesis of continuous fragments. Words, which we had not got, commanded. We're here because we're here. Hear because procedures

require it. It is our duty. It is our right to know. It is our entertainment. When the prisoner has been prepared, the witnesses will be allowed to watch. Continuous performances.

Lawrence Upton

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