

Alice Theobald



They Keep Putting Words in My Mouth! An Operetta of Sorts 2013 performance

bottom
I'll finally lose the plot... 2014 video

‘ seem to have lost the reality of the ... reality,’ utters Gena Rowlands as Myrtle Gordon in John Cassavetes’ 1977 film *Opening Night*, highlighting the actress’s struggle with her part in the play, poignantly called *The Second Woman*, and the subsequent mounting anxiety about the misalignment of her on- and off-screen personas. She tries to negotiate her own position in relation to the character in the script while gradually losing her grasp on her own lived reality. *Opening Night* portrays an actress who continuously threatens to throw in the towel, to abandon the script if not the play itself. She forsakes her lines, storms out of rehearsals and quarrels with the director. Paradoxically, her disobedience and ultimate refusal to play the part, as demanded in the script, lead to a more truthful and alive portrayal of a character in all its facets.

In the performances of Alice Theobald no one departs from the script, and yet they are so much about the slippages between scripted and natural speech and behaviour. Theobald’s work shares with Cassavetes, and especially with *Opening Night*, the interest in the make-up and construction of performance, the challenges of acting and the blurring of character creation on and off stage. In the past couple of years Theobald has produced an impressive output of material that traces the development of a strong and autonomous voice, whose work thrives in her play with signifiers of authenticity and the reconsolidation of words, phrases, movements and gestures embraced as tools to explore the potential for genuine expression.

As with Theobald’s work, *Opening Night* is about theatricality, performance and acting and actively questions the division between stage and life, calling attention to the construction of personas in everyday life and to acting strategies such as the Method as taught by Lee Strasburg and others. Method acting was created as a strategy to invoke a hybrid state between a scripted situation and an experienced one. Actors were trained in intense workshop sessions to draw on personal emotional experiences and memories to recall an emotional state needed for the role. This ‘over’ identification was criticised by Cassavetes as a form of self-indulgence and narcissism that was, in the long run, counterproductive, more akin to psychotherapy than acting. As Ray Carney wrote in his 2001 book *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*: ‘The slouch, shuffle, furrow and stammer had been turned into recipes for profundity.’

Theobald’s 2013 performance *They Keep Putting Words in My Mouth! An Operetta of Sorts*, which she rehearsed and performed in fragments as part of a residency at Gasworks, and then later premiered as a finished piece in the form of a multi-channel video installation and performance at Pilar Corrias Gallery in London, takes place around a group therapy session-cum-acting rehearsal and social experiment. The work is accompanied by a voice-over reading the transcript of a conversation between Theobald and a therapist recalling said group session. The therapeutic methods and role-play function here as both

subject and strategy – analysing the piece while developing its narrative. The multiple threads of the plot are overlaid and joined by a musical soundtrack that doubles as the chorus of the piece with lyrics like: ‘They keep putting words in my mouth’, ‘I don’t think they are right for me’, ‘They keep putting thoughts in your head’, ‘Are they really what they ought to be?’, ‘They keep showing us things we can’t be sure about’, ‘Could it be a death of memory?’

Animated text banners on screen transcribe the lyrics in an almost karaoke-like style that holds the gaze of the

I've said yes now, that's it 2014
performance

audience captive and emancipates their role as potential performers. Participatory elements like these are enhanced by the installation of the piece, which mirrors the chair-circle setting displayed in the video, adding yet another latent performative layer to the piece.

Words often sit awkwardly in the mouth of Theobald's protagonist, which she often performs herself. In works like her most recent video installation *I'll finally lose the plot...*, 2014, which was produced for her degree show at the Royal Academy, language takes on the form of a hand-me-down – it never quite fits. But how could it, when borrowed from film, workshop or therapy sessions, literature, pop songs and advertisement? Found phrases are tried on and reassessed, and through close scrutiny and endless repetition, in a plethora of emotional tones and tints, they are slowly worn through. Like playing dress-up with words, the repetition of these language costumes in different affects and intonations makes the word malleable and soft. Detached from their original context, they appear to have lost any shape, form or meaning – ringing in the ears of the audience as echoes of their former selves – almost more music than text. Composition and music, however, play a vital role in Theobald's work. When she is not producing performances and video works, she is a member of the band Ravioli Me Away, together with Sian Dorrer and Rosie Ridgway, a self-proclaimed 'dangerously ambitious and delusional all-girl jazzy, post-pop-punk, hip-funk outfit'. The gigs of the band are characterised by a performative approach in their own right and often feature elaborate costumes and role-play. Theobald's artistic and musical practices develop alongside each other and only overlap occasionally, as for example in *Mike Check*, 2013 which features the song *Mic Check* by Ravioli Me Away as its hypnotic refrain.

In the production *I've said yes now, that's it*, which premiered at Chisenhale Gallery in February, Theobald continues to examine the cracks in the proscenium, in this instance by addressing the discrepancy between expression, appearance and feeling. Theobald blends a prompting instructional voice with an all-knowing narration that slips seamlessly between the position of instructor, narrator and actor. With phrases like – 'Now, I want you to think of something that you do that's very normal. That's very everyday, as they say. One of the necessary things that one does to get ready and get on with life. The sort of thing that one should do. Nothing new. Think about it in detail. Why don't you show us how you might act out that something that's a bit everyday?' – she instructs a cast of untrained actors through a succession of everyday motions, slogans, lyrics and other actions to which the actors respond in unison. It is an interesting take on the concept of the chorus, which appears here no longer as the omniscient collective commentary from the off, but instead as a spellbound group of marionettes that are bound to enact Theobald's own inner quandaries in custom-made costumes that look like clothing patterns for a uniform that sits somewhere between white and blue collar overall, between business and leisure – a high-performance outfit fit for the demands of modern day living. Less acting workshop this time and more live television show, the highly staged environment is complimented by video footage shot in Oman during a residency, which features scenes in a sterile hotel chain and on a local fairground. The highly emotive live soundtrack blends synthesiser tunes, saxophone and bass while borrowing heavily from movie-score clichés of the early 1990s. Paired with repetitive, amateur-sounding rhythmic fragments that complement the actions of the performers, the score is reminiscent



of the references to game shows or video games featured in the films of pioneering video artist Erika Beckman.

Both the performances and films are drenched in a heightened, almost caricatured sense of awkwardness not dissimilar to certain mannerisms common in method acting and retrieved by Theobald as a way to access a type of unaffectedness generally uncommon in performance art. The result is a break with the modern concept of the individual as a self-contained entity, calling into question where our experience of ourselves begins and ends.

Towards the end of *Opening Night*, Myrtle turns up at Maurice's apartment suggesting: 'Let's dump it [the play] upside down and see if we can't find something human in it.' Theobald's work doubts the possibility for such a break with the script, suggesting that language comes from a place outside of oneself, admitting an only limited potential for the authentic in expression whether on or off stage. A take not dissimilar to Jack Spicer's, who believed that it was the poet's task to get out of the way in order to make space for outside forces, to arrange the verses, and whose delirious last words were: 'My vocabulary did this to me.' ■

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