

CHAPTER 6

PIECING TOGETHER A GIRLHOOD: USING 'GIRLFRIEND PLAY' AS METHOD TO PERFORM MEMORY

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BACKGROUND: REVISITING MEMORY

Katuntu (...and you too) (from now on referred to as *Katuntu*) was devised and performed by myself and Injairu Kulundu as part of my thesis production in fulfilment of my MA in theatre-making from the University of Cape Town in 2009. The work was concerned with memory. In particular, I engaged with the concept of 'playing memory' through narratives of loss of language, place and family, brought on by a disrupted or uprooted childhood. Playing memory suggests in the first instance, an actual active playing of personal recollection that attempts to stage that which has passed. Playing memory in the second instance, is an exploration of how one might go about re-membering in order to recall oneself into being, that is, recapturing a lost time, place and childhood in order to put oneself back together.

In an effort to revisit memories using my girlfriend 'other' and nostalgia as catalysts, *Katuntu* told a story of loss and journeying. The performing figure banished herself to an open landscape searching for what she lost in hopes of repairing her broken memory.

Katuntu as a process also served as a sense of renewal, acceptance and forgiveness seen through the eyes of the girlfriend 'other' that is also so much the self. Accordingly, 'piecing together a girlhood' involved engaging with what Kevin Quashie (2004) calls the 'girlfriend aesthetic'. Quashie's 'girlfriend aesthetic' offers a methodology for remembering by providing a reflective surface: you see in the experience of the girlfriend 'other' something that incites your own memory and aids you in working towards healing of self. Whether or not this healing is possible lies at the heart of the development process. Accordingly, this chapter examines how one can go about 'playing memory' and how one might use "imaginative power to locate, realize and play an unconscious connection to the past" (Parker, 2001:2), in four steps.

STEP 1: FINDING YOUR THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The first question I asked myself was: why are you looking back to the past? My reason was to fill the gaps of my own fragmented memory and to bring to remembrance that which had been lost or forgotten, culturally, personally, historically, linguistically and familiarly, and it was also the need to search for a theatrical methodology that might assist me in coming to terms with this irrecoverable loss. I wanted to look to the past in order to function in

the present. Memory is not fixed or definite, so we look back or play memory, not as a way of reifying it or with a certainty that the gaps can ever be filled at all, but rather, with the knowledge that the gaps come to represent spaces of possibility and discovery. As a starting point then, Salman Rushdie's 'broken mirror' metaphor and Kevin Quashie's concept of the 'girlfriend aesthetic' were beneficial in grounding my methodological approach.

Salman Rushdie notes that humanity is haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim and to look back. His answer to being unable to reclaim what has been lost is to create imaginary worlds. Rushdie uses a "broken mirror" metaphor to explore fragments of the past or memory having been irretrievably lost (Rushdie, 1991:12). He points out that:

The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as one which is supposedly unflawed ...sometimes it is precisely the partial nature of memory, its fragmentation, which makes it evocative. The shards of memory acquire greater status, greater resonance because they are remains; fragmentation makes trivial things seem like symbols and the mundane acquire mysterious and divine qualities. (Rushdie, 1991:12)

This broken mirror metaphor was a useful tool with which to work with the idea of playing memory in the present. Accordingly, mirroring this oscillation between self and other, the merging and splitting of incomplete identities working in dichotomous push and pull, became a significant feature in *Katuntu*.



Figure 6.1: Alude Mahali (left) and Injairu Kulundu (right) performing the opening scene of *Katuntu* outside the Egyptian Building, Hiddingh Campus. The mirror is seen here as both object and propeller of action. Not only does the mirror provide your own reflection and that of your girlfriend 'other', but it also provides a surface through which the past is revealed by the 'other' figure in *Katuntu*. It is a portal through which to view in order to see something else. Photograph by Karabo Maine.

In practice, Augusto Boal's mirroring sequence exercises were useful for Injairu and me to start creating. There are several detailed exercises in the mirroring sequence which are designed to help participants "develop the capacity for observation by means of 'visual dialogues' between participants; the simultaneous use of spoken language is excluded" (Boal, 1992:129). Boal describes these exercises as a loving search for one's self in another: we seek ourselves in others, who seek themselves in us (Boal, 1992:134-135). For Injairu and me, this was not difficult as we were already good friends who also shared an uprooted childhood and immigrant past. I came from South Africa to the United States of America and back again, and she came from Kenya to South Africa via Lesotho – which was the impetus for our play making. For us, these mirroring exercises were a way to foster intuitive, synergistic and symbiotic physicality in the work. In *Katuntu*, the mirror is not only used as an object but also as an action that embodies what the 'girlfriend aesthetic' proposes. Quashie's 'girlfriend aesthetic' offers a methodology for re-membling by providing a reflective surface; you see in the experience of the girlfriend 'other' something that triggers or incites your own memory and aids you in working towards a sense of revelation and recovery. Whether or not this recovery is possible lies at the heart of the research.

AUGUSTO BOAL'S MIRROR SEQUENCE

In its simplest form, in this exercise two participants stand opposite each other. Slowly and carefully one participant begins to move and the other participant copies their movement. They swap over. In the third phase they move interchangeably between moving and following. There are several detailed exercises in the mirroring sequence and the exercises are designed to help participants "develop the capacity for observation by means of 'visual dialogues' between participants; the simultaneous use of spoken language is excluded" (Boal, 1992:129). Boal describes these exercises as a loving search for one's self in another.



Figure 6.2 Injairu Kulundu (left) and Alude Mahali (right), publicity pictures for *Katuntu* taken at the fourth and final site in the production. Photograph by Karabo Maine.

STEP 2: JOURNALING, WORKING WITH TEXT AND OTHER STIMULI

In the quest to deepen our practice, I had to ask: what am I looking for in my nostalgia? Is it a host of lost objects and experiences? How might I begin finding the material to help play memory? A starting point was accessing personal, cultural, familial and historical remnants of memory and pairing those with tactile objects and sensory stimuli (songs, smells, sensations, visual images, letters, journals etc.) which we could then translate into visual images. Myer Taub used this method of retrieving memory in his 2003 production of *Lekker Faith*, which he said began with memories of stories he heard as a child. As he began to write them down, he experienced a charge; a flurry of memories, of people, of smells. And as he began to formulate the structure of the text, he became more alert to his own memory, which was not only being used as a tool to recover fragments from his past, but could be used as an imaginative instrument in order to transfer the facts that he could not remember. Thus he was able to use childhood memory to play with and in history (Taub, 2004:39). We followed this approach as I recall instructing Injairu in our initial correspondence at the beginning of the process:

So hang on to the stuff you write, letters etc. More importantly, keep EVERYTHING you have from childhood (if you have anything in your flat – keep it)... If you don't have anything, write about the things you remember. Can you send me a timeline of the places you grew up in? Within Kenya and outside (so like, when you moved to Lesotho, who was left behind)... take your time on this one. (Mahali, personal communication, 2009, 30 March)

Another useful approach in the process of creating was artist Betye Saar's five-step process of imprint, search, collect and gather, recycle and release. In her attempt to gather and create works of autobiographical memory, Saar makes use of Jungian psychotherapist Ira Progoff's Intensive Journal Method that he developed in the 1960s and 1970s. As part of his research Progoff trained participants to keep closely controlled and private journals, with noted details of any wishes, thoughts, dreams and memories (Dallow, 2004:82). Progoff's rationale for the use of journals was that "when a person is shown how to reconnect with the contents and the continuity of his life, the inner thread of movement by which his life has been unfolding reveals itself to him by itself" (Dallow, 2004:83). Progoff's stream-of-consciousness technique compares to Saar's approach to creating assemblages of the original objects she finds attractive. These objects could consist of old photographs, collectable miniatures, dried flowers, gloves, etc. These personal objects are interwoven in her work and when combined become autobiographical symbols. Like diary entries, Saar collects and combines fragments of memories to form a narrative. Only when she gathers all these fragmented objects and materials in one space or box for her installations does she feel that they come together to form a story (Dallow, 2004:83). In this phase of creating *Katuntu*, we did not use very many personal objects, relying instead on sonic and visual memory and stream-of-consciousness writing sessions. The objects we later introduced (like the mirror) were endowed with personal meaning based on written and practical exercises that we did.

BETYE SAAR'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY ASSEMBLAGES

In this process Betye Saar proposes creating assemblages of original objects she finds attractive. These objects could consist of old photographs, collectable miniatures, dried flowers, gloves etc. These personal objects are interwoven in her work and when combined become autobiographical symbols. Like diary entries, she collects and combines together fragments of memories in the form of objects, composing a narrative. (Dallow, 2004:83)

At the time, Injairu and I were living in different provinces and so developments in this phase took place remotely through email exchanges and messages, and the sharing of journal entries and memories. In one such email, dated 22 June 2009, Injairu details how she had been working from the text I sent her. She wrote:

Hey mchana, my brain has been spurting in starts, the result is a series of disorientated responses in song, word and images. In response to the first two paragraphs that you created I have written a melodic tune that wants to capture the element of play, the infectious conversation that the figure and the girl have together. The song is called "And you too" but is affectionately referred to as "Katuntu" because of how it kinda sounds like that too. Wish I could send you the song, it's not very wordy, it's a repetition of "and you too and you too" and rhythmic scattling. It grows every day.

I started to move in my head and body when I read what you wrote and the song gave rhythm – move and dance and just be silly – I am tasking myself to some serious play in the grass and in my head. The image is of a girl child and an imaginary friend overlapping, tripping over each other, rolling around, looking and finding that the other is there all along.

In response to the last paragraph and that sense of loss, I've written this short piece, it's the images that what you wrote inspire:

Image of a woman hanging upside down a child rendered dumb by the cold wind that smarts her face, a calloused landscape that is dry no moisture, a clanging of bells, disorientation, she's grown weary of looking up into the emptiness around her devoid of a sense of connection with what she sees. An ashen emissary from another world sent flying through the cacophony of a language she does not understand. Foreign pale creatures look down at her their disinterested sleek eyes gloss over the disruption she creates. Heavy tongue stuck stumped. Disorientation a murky whirlwind heavy speckled each bruise the only connection with a sense of feeling.

I have crazy music of a dream scape of clanging bells by Susumo Yokota, it's

surreal and a world that is drained and relentless, I'll bring it for you to have a listen. My mind also played with the images of these foreign pale creatures large and looming, dwarfing the girl or the presence in an alley.

In your email you spoke about dark play. I remember when I was younger, a game that we used to play that still gives me the khrills. We would meet at the end of a tunnel as long as 50 meters long one person would be egged on to enter it and try make it to the other side, somebody would be at the other side and call to you so that you had a voice encouraging you.

Sometimes that voice would turn into something malevolent as the kids would try scare you when you were stuck crawling in the heart of the dark tunnel. Pretty fucked up. I started imagining a tunnel with a girl trying to go through, with a candle and the image that light creates, the call and response from a friend and then when she's at the heart of it, the friendly echo goes away and the game becomes filled with fear – she is unwillingly on another journey now.

more soon

will write more

juju (Kulundu, personal communication, 2009, 22 June)

STEP 3: BRINGING OUR BODIES AND VOICES TOGETHER USING 'VIEWPOINTS' AND 'DARK PLAY'

The creation of a play-world was essential in the development process of *Katuntu*. According to *The viewpoints book*, a play-world is a “set of laws belonging to your piece and no other” (Bogart & Landau, 2005:167); it asks that you carefully consider the way time operates, the colour palette of your world and gestural language. Above all, this is a way of discovering the landscape of the world you have created and asks that you assume nothing and question everything and invent your own rules in making a unique play-world. Bogart and Landau describe viewpoints as:

A philosophy translated into a technique for; 1) training performers; 2) building ensemble; and 3) creating movement for the stage. Viewpoints is a set of names given to certain principles of movement through time and space; these names constitute a language for talking about what happens onstage. Viewpoints is points of awareness that a performer or creator makes use of while working. (Bogart & Landau, 2005:7-11)

A month before the production was staged, Injairu and I were finally able to physically

come together in Cape Town to further develop and rehearse *Katuntu*. We found viewpoints to be a dynamic way of framing the piece and the way in which we worked in those early stages.



Figure 6.3: This opening section of *Katuntu* performed outside the Egyptian Building on Hiddingh Campus came out of a series of improvisatory viewpoints exercises. We worked with the physical viewpoints of time (tempo, duration, kinaesthetic response, repetition), space (shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, topography) and composition. Photograph by Karabo Maine.

Another approach in our development process was engaging with what Richard Schechner calls 'dark play'. Dark play demands that you take risks, as unpredictability is part of playing's thrill (2002:27). Dark play may be done consciously or unconsciously with the players unaware (at times) about what is play and what is not. This play is explosive, sometimes sudden, taking hold of the player, then, settling again. It is frenzied, sometimes dangerous, a jest, threat or hallucination. It is this very shift in and out of different states full of discontinuity and disruption, both in the process and performance of *Katuntu*, that make it apparent that dark play is at work. Dark play works against order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed, but it need not be explicitly angry or violent (Schechner, 2002:36). Dark play may continue actions from early childhood, playing out alternative selves, but it only occasionally demands make-believe.

In our rehearsals together, we were able to bring to life this kind of play, at times oscillating between play and reality. Whether we were mocking one another playfully through song, engaged in a dance, screaming in agony or hollering with laughter, or becoming the witnesses of each other's purging, the playing was continuous: playing with a sense of imbalance, and with a flash of all-pervading eruptive and disruptive energy (Schechner, 2022:43). Schechner asserts that this kind of play is creative and destabilizes action: it is a mood, an attitude, a force.

STEP 4: MEMORIES COMING TO LIFE THROUGH PERFORMANCE

Developed at first during Injairu's and my correspondence, *Katuntu* used song performance as a catalyst for the creation of shared girlfriend memory through incantatory call and response, summoning the voice of memory, albeit fragmented, into being. In African and African-American culture, call and response is pervasive as a pattern of musical, social and political expression. An example of such expression can be seen in the weekly gatherings of African-Americans in the clearing in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1997) where the entire community responds to Baby Suggs' 'call' (Su, 2005:27). The gatherings blend elements of Christian revival, celebration and group therapy through the traditional African-American 'call and response' patterns. Call and response can also be place-bound (Su, 2005:27). The social structure established by the 'call and response' model proves to be easily broken and dependent on the 'caller' for continuation. But in *Beloved*, even when Baby Suggs' refuses to continue the call, the "longago singing they left behind" is still heard (Morrison, 1997:164). The clearing becomes a "primal place" (Su, 2005:30). Perhaps Su uses "primal place" in the very same way that Injairu and I used 'memory hotspots'. For us, these memory hotspots were places where we erupted and flowed into memory. We were unexpectedly stirred by the hotspots and on (or in) them we were moved, and we heard and remembered the feeling of what it must have been like to have been there – in that memory. We created a nostalgic play-world in an openly visual landscape. We played ourselves as well as each other, seemingly like each other and then very different, seeing each other's 'selves' around us, in us, through us.

The audience was required to change location to various 'memory hotspots' four times during *Katuntu*, creating a sense of disruption and motion that was necessary, not only for the movement of the piece, but also as a device for reinforcing the sense of discord, disjointedness and disorder experienced by the ever-shifting figures. In the third performance space, the audience is confronted with writing on a wall that speaks to this device:

Keep walking ... the journey does not stop for her, all the time she is unsettled, unrooted, moved to a new place. She is compelled to move ... sometimes run, I cannot catch up with myself, I cannot take all my things. I collect what my feet land on ... I collect the earth under my feet. You must move with me. (*Katuntu*, 2009)

This kind of play implicated the audience in *Katuntu*, at times casting them as witness or voyeur, then participant, sometimes alienating them completely – what was imperative is that they became a part of the dark play, that they were physically moving in and out of memory with us.

IN SUMMARY

Appropriating and combining these different approaches, we found a style of working that was critical, practical and revelatory in the making of *Katuntu*. The process of remembering: introspection, self-analysis, claims of affiliation coupled with play and reflection in the form of intensive discussions, practical exercises and written exercises were helpful tools (methods) in developing a workable methodology. In short, we followed a four-step process which involved:

Step 1: Finding your theoretical grounding: this phase is about finding theories, concepts and metaphors that embody your preoccupation and help propel the experimentation period. They initiate a methodological approach to the work.

Step 2: Journaling, working with text and other stimuli: this phase invites you to introspect, reflect on memory and put that recollection to work through intensive discussion, written exercises, object/ image work and engaging with other sensory stimuli.

Step 3: Bringing our bodies and voices together using viewpoints and dark play: in this phase, steps one and two are actioned through practical exercises, improvisation, movement and vocal play in situ.

Step 4: Memories coming to life through performance: in this final phase, all performance modalities (voice, text and movement) and site converge through a journey with the performing figures and spectators.

In collaboration, Injairu and I journeyed through the various paths of our memory. Through a collage of sound, visual and narrative passage, we put into practice a methodology that might better articulate how one can play memory through individual and shared experience. Using song performance, old photographs and letters, childhood images and iconography, language and a shared experience of black girlhood, we investigated disrupted girlhood, loss of home and re-imagined site as we organised our 'selves' into sisterhoods. A combination of all these instruments became talismans that linked us to the past.

No one ever experienced as 'the present' what we now view as 'the past', for hindsight cannot clarify today as it does yesterday; the past, as reconstructed, is always more coherent than when it happened. Injairu articulated this point in one of our exercises, writing:

As your [referring to me] custodian I have the benefit of hindsight, of predicting, even knowing what will happen when this inevitable disruption will occur. I am the one who will hold the memory when you cannot name the rupture. I am the marker who already knows the consequence and when you too realize it, when you jump out of your own skin, you will come back and lay a flower on the places where you died little deaths. (Kulundu, rehearsal writing exercise, September, 2009)

This journey felt almost cyclical as we continued to revisit these "places where we died little deaths". This was the nature of *Katuntu's* ending; there was no real ending, no sense of coming to some closure because memory is always active, just as nostalgia is always placed in opposition to something else: past/ present, reality/ fantasy, there/ here. The nostalgic can never recapture a desired whole, but can always work towards filling those gaps where memory should be in an attempt at some sort of healing. In *Katuntu*, the audience is left, not with a sense of knowing, but rather left wondering where the journey will go. The figures themselves do not know where they will be led next. In the spirit of dark play, they might also surprise themselves.



Figure 6.4: Alude Mahali, pictured performing in the second performance site. Photograph by Karabo Maine.

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