

Theatre & War

Notes from Afar

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Series in Performing Arts



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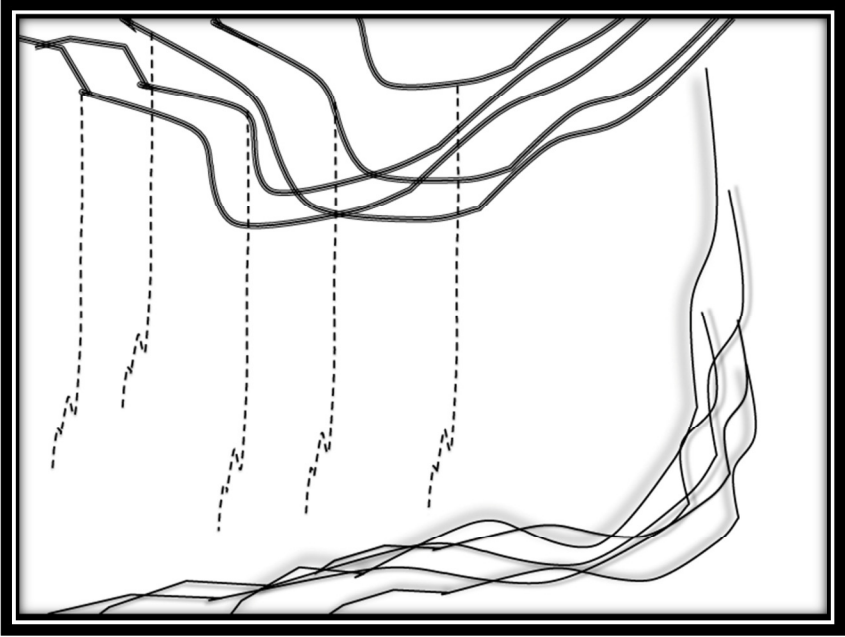
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A Roadmap



In *Theatre & War: Notes from the Field* (Dinesh, 2016), I write about making theatre in zones of conflict. I analyze practice; I describe various projects that I have undertaken 'on the ground'; I theorize strategies that might be useful to other practitioner-researchers that are involved in similar work. In this 'sequel', if I might call it that, I choose to return to the same themes: of theatre; of war. But this time, I intentionally craft my notes from afar. From somewhere outside the field. From somewhere outside the practice. And yet, a somewhere that is consumed by the field. And the practice.

Making theatre from/ about/ in conflict zones extends beyond the projects that I have written about to date; my research and practice extend beyond the beginning and ending of a particular project that I undertake in contexts of violence. Instead, I carry the practice with me – the practice carries me -- even when I am off the field. Even when I am in far off shores that do not know the kind of 'big' conflict that is being experienced in, say, Kashmir. Here, in the 'afar', even though I am away from the war, I find myself in spaces that have their own battles: of race; of immigration; of incarceration. More localized battles that are only augmented by my own intrapersonal clashes: of ego, of power, of privilege, of anxiety, of the ordinary, and the banal. What results then, even when I am away from the 'big' wars, is a constantly evolving tapestry of words and images that bring the field and the afar into unlikely conversations with each other. Words and images from spheres that are closer to 'home' – closer to the quotidian – and yet, however tenuously, always lead me to thinking about the Kashmirs of the world; to thinking about the place for theatre in the Kashmirs of the world.

I have consistently used the broad concept of autoethnography to frame my writing projects: to put forward subjective analyses that emerge from particular theatre projects that manifested at particular points in time. And while this book could also be called autoethnographic in its form, it is also something else; a something else that is hard to fit neatly into a particular methodology. Ultimately, given the hybridity of voices and styles that it contains, this book might best be termed as a work of creative non-fiction: in using strategies from autoethnography, performative writing, autoethnodrama, and documentary theatre to articulate how this theatre research-practitioner-educator's quotidian battles intersect with conflicts that permeate her local and global circles of influence.

Through writing that seeks to 'do', through writing that seeks to 'perform', I use different voices in this book. Voices that come from more traditional archival sources, which are then re-conceptualized as drama. Voices that come from sources that occupy the space between archived and lived experience, which are then shaped into creative vignettes. Voices that come from my repertoire – my own lived experiences – that are then crafted as flash fiction about past/

present/ future collaborators. By weaving together variously positioned experiences and voices, through creative (re)interpretations, this is a book that could be read; it is also a book that could be performed.

Drawing from Gregory Ulmer's (2004) approach to the *mystory* as a form of praxis that weaves together expert, popular, and personal narratives – a methodology that I've used in previous work (Dinesh, 2017) – the writing in this book weaves together three types of voices within sections that are framed around specifically chosen themes: voices that occupy global spaces of conflict; voices that emerge from my local spheres in New Mexico and Kashmir; voices that stem from my personal experiences vis-à-vis all of these dimensions. And in conjunction with these global, local, and personal voices, each section's theme has been carefully chosen to reflect a few of the ways in which my work in the field permeates my life in the afar: through guilt, passion and devastation, admiration, fear, and dissonance.

The first section on guilt draws from the archives of outsiders to conflict zones: outsiders who speak about their guilt through photography, through poetry, through different combinations of words and images. These outsider voices of guilt are then woven together with experiences from the current context that surrounds me, of an international school in a rural area of New Mexico – and from personal experiences in other international schools in India, Kenya, Rwanda, and Armenia – where guilt underpins the tenuous interactions that often exist between more privileged international schools and the relatively less privileged contexts that they are situated within. Through the use of a written structure that takes the form of an immersive and participatory experience, the narratives in this section are infused with different hues of guilt: the guilt of privilege; the guilt of exclusion; the guilt that stems from an inability to bridge the gap between the host and the guest. In addition to guilt, the second, fourth, and fifth sections on passion & devastation, fear, and dissonance have also been crafted so as to highlight some of the darker sides to engaging in theatre-in-war work. However, the global, local, and personal dimensions in these three sections have been given diverse, written forms: one of them uses techniques that are akin to crafting spectators' experiences in Immersive Theatre; one uses more 'conventional' scriptwriting techniques that might be found in a dramatic play script; one takes the form of flash (non) fiction stories that each contain a maximum of 1000 words. This diversity of form is also encoded within the third section on admiration; a section that is a commentary on resilience; about ways in which communities in contexts of war, globally, embody admirable strength. Bolstered by my own experiences of witnessing incredible grace-under-pressure from colleagues in war zones, and students in my classrooms, the writing in this chapter is an homage, of sorts, to the

people whose courage under (literal and metaphorical) fire enables me to realize how petty, sometimes, my own privileged dilemmas can be.

In each of the five sections, therefore, the written form that I have chosen to represent that thematic focus -- vis-à-vis the global, local, and personal voices that they weave together -- seeks to reflect elements of the content. In so doing, this book is *not* a 'traditional' academic investigation that includes extensive references to others' scholarship. It is *not* a book that provides practical strategies that can be implemented and replicated by like-minded practitioner-researchers. It is *not* a book that seeks to function as a critical analysis of my/ others' work. No. Instead, this *is* a writing project that seeks to give a creative voice to the conundrums that consume one theatre practitioner-researcher who works in conflict zones. It *is* an autoethnographic, autoethnodramatic synergy of global, local, and personal narratives that pervade the everyday life of an outsider who -- for better or worse -- is consumed by war. It *is* a performative work that hopes to embody the links between here and there; between war and not-war; between the field and the afar.

So, in one sense, this is an incredibly selfish book and my focus is on nothing more/ less than using the written word to give shape to dimensions of my work that I have thus far left unexplored in my writing. And yet, the utilitarian in me -- the utilitarian that cannot seem to write without thinking about how her writing might be 'used' -- has some ideas about how this book might be shared with a wider audience. The possibility that intrigues me most, for instance, is the potential integration of the sections of this book as performative components within *Information for/from Outsiders: Chronicles from Kashmir (Chronicles from Kashmir)*: a 24-hour durational piece that I have been developing with Kashmiri artists since 2013. While *Chronicles from Kashmir*, in its current state, does highlight the positioning of the outsider within theatrical renderings of different perspectives from the Kashmir Valley, I do not think that in its current version, the performance does enough justice to the outsider's 'crises' when creating work about a conflict zone that they do not have the lived experience of themselves. Therefore, I wonder if the works created as part of this book might eventually become part of the 24-hour, immersive experience of Kashmir... Might the inclusion of these sections allow spectators more insight into the creation of *Chronicles from Kashmir*, and better underscore the complexities of the endeavor? Can the writings in this book become the central crux of what I share with audiences, when I have cause to speak about *Chronicles from Kashmir* in the absence of my Kashmiri colleagues? As I said, the utilitarian in me cannot help but look for ways in which this writing project might be put to 'use'. And yet, I must be honest with the reader and say that when I began this book, I was not really

thinking about how the work would be used. I was simply thinking of this book as a creative challenge for a writer: nothing more, and nothing less.

Given the abovementioned reasons that underpin the *why* and *what* and *how* of this book, I invite the reader to engage with its spirit by setting aside any expectations of a 'conventional' academic text. I invite the reader to immerse themselves in creative ways of thinking about an outsider's engagements with a conflict zone, however far the outsider might be (geographically) from that conflict zone. The work of making, researching, and writing about theatre in contexts of conflict has consumed my life in various ways for more than a decade now. And this book... this book is one more humble attempt to give written shape to the multifaceted dimensions of that work. Dimensions that are not restricted to times when I am in the field: in Rwanda, or in Kashmir, or somewhere else. Dimensions that, instead, consume me even when I am teaching theatre in 'peaceful' New Mexico. Dimensions, from afar.

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