

EXTENDED ESSAY

Theatre

Exploring Society and Culture Through Staging with the Body Central – A Study of DV8 Physical Theatre's

Approach to Expression via Theatre

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INTRODUCTION

Amongst the various genres and forms of theatre, physical theatre stands out in that within it, it is the body itself which is most central to the staging of the performance to the extent that "the primary means of creation occurs through the body" (Callery 4). With significant origins in the theories of Brecht and Artaud, as well as influence from other theatrical theorists & practitioners, including Grotowski and Lecoq, expression is created in physical theatre through the movement, proxemics, and relationship of bodies in ensemble, combined with various visual and auditory elements. Theatre company *DV8 Physical Theatre* ('DV8') are pioneers of the genre, utilizing such elements in harmony to create vivid commentary of social and cultural issues. Thus, their approach to expression through theatre, particularly recently as can be seen in two of their latest works, *To Be Straight With You* and *Can We Talk About This?*, can be understood in the context of these elements and the origins of physical theatre itself.

ABOUT DV8 PHYSICAL THEATRE

DV8 Physical Theatre, founded in 1986 by Lloyd Newson, is a contemporary British theatre company working in the genre of physical theatre (Callery 6). DV8 is considered one of the pioneering forces of the growth of contemporary physical theatre (7); the company was founded as the result of Newson's dissatisfaction with the conformism of the dance and theatrical establishment of the time (Roy), thus aiming, in their words, to "[take] risks, aesthetically and physically... [and] be radical and accessible", "[attempting] to push beyond the values [reflected in traditional dance] to enable discussion of wider and more complex issues" ("Artistic Policy").

ARTAUD’S CENTRALITY OF THE BODY IN DV8’S WORK

At its most basic level, ‘physical theatre’, as defined by Sanchez-Colberg, “focuses on the unfolding of a narrative through physicalized events and which relegates verbal narrative...to a subordinate position” (40). Indeed, the physicality of the body is the primary means through which the ideal/intent of a work is conveyed (Callery 4). The origins of this characteristic in physical theatre can be found in Artaud’s vision of the theatre – to quote Sanchez-Colberg, the “move towards a non-verbal idiom [as found in physical theatre]...found particular momentum...in the rediscovery of the work of Artaud.” (43) In his theories of theatre, Artaud viewed the body as central within the *mise en scene*, theorizing a theatrical work with the body central as such creating “for the audience a sympathetic and ecstatic experience” (Sanchez-Colberg 43), inspiring “generations of theatre-makers” to come in the process (42) – arguably, including DV8, whether directly or indirectly.

This vision is embodied in physical theatre’s exploration of intellectual matters through the use of the physical body (Callery 4) and, furthermore, within DV8’s work in the genre. For instance, take the following still capture of the staging of DV8’s *Can We Talk About This?*, shown in fig. 2 below:



Fig. 1. The staging of DV8’s *Can We Talk About This?* as filmed in performance at Sha Tin Town Hall, Hong Kong in 2011.; “Can We Talk About This?”; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2011, <https://dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/full-performance>.

As can be seen from fig. 1, there are a minimum of elements onstage, with the focus of the audience being drawn to the performers and their bodies. While there are other elements used, such as lighting in the case of fig. 1, to convey tone and atmosphere at given points in the performance to the audience, the bodies onstage dressed in plain black, who are meant not to be characters but rather non-specific and non-human symbols, are central to the performance. Granted, that is not to say that elements other than the body are not used onstage at all – take the example of the following scene from DV8’s *To Be Straight With You*, a work exploring homosexuality in relation to contemporary culture and religion (see figs. 2 & 3):



Fig. 2. Still capture of a scene from *To Be Straight With You* as filmed in performance at the Harbourfront Centre, Toronto in 2009.; “To Be Straight With You”; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2009, <https://dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/performance-recording>.



Fig. 3. A further capture of the same scene from *To Be Straight With You* as filmed in performance at the Harbourfront Centre, Toronto in 2009.; “To Be Straight With You”; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2009, <https://dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/performance-recording>.

As can be seen, there are still a minimum of elements onstage – there are no set items present and the performers, while carrying/using props (animal heads and signs with letters spelling “love sinner hate sin”), are still dressed in generic black in a manner intended not to draw attention to themselves as individuals but rather themselves as symbols (‘themselves’ including not just their bodies, but also the physical elements they interact with). Furthermore, these props are not used to convey natural, “literal replications of life” but rather are meant to suggest and engage the audience’s minds & imagination in interpreting the action onstage (Callery 5). While, abiding by a strict definition of only the body being central, this might suggest the opposite of the points previously posited – that DV8 primarily engages the body as central in their work – arguably, the other elements present here arguably serve not to draw focus away from the physicality of the bodies but rather to emphasize them

(given Artaud's theory states that the *primary* focus is the body, not the *only* focus, thus implicitly allowing for other elements). In this scene, the actors move around the stage in unison almost as if marionettes, animals following the herd, symbolic of the 'herd-like' nature to which traditional/socially conservative homophobic societal norms are adhered to (see fig. 3); thus, the scene's use of animal figureheads as 'costume' items for the scene combined with the recognizably old/non-contemporary, 20th-century-style music playing in the background makes this movement and engagement of the body especially poignant. Thus, in this sense, the piece does explore intellectual matters through a centermost Artaud-inspired "physical engagement of the body" (Callery 4), the effect of which is emphasized by the use of various props and elements in a manner that highlights the use of the body and its effect rather than drawing focus away from them.

DV8 AND BRECHT'S ALIENATION EFFECT

Brecht, in proposing his *Verfremdungseffekt* ('alienation effect'), and his theories of 'epic theatre', pioneered the concept of the audience actively interpreting, as opposed to merely viewing, a work (Sanchez-Colberg 41). He imagined a theatre which "[projects] a picture of the world by artistic means and offer models of life that could help the spectators to understand their social environment and to master it both rationally and emotionally", envisioning pushing the audience to consider the theatrical work and its arguments critically as a representation of reality and hence draw their own conclusions from their experience as the audience of the work ("Epic Theatre"). Through the alienation effect, Brecht aimed to remind the audience of the artificiality of the work of theatre they watched, thus helping them understand the intellectual issues driving the work with a "critical frame of mind" ("Alienation Effect") Such Brechtian principles are readily apparent in physical theatre and within DV8's work; Sanchez-Colberg posits that "Epic theatre techniques are geared to re-emphasize...the process of language construction [in physical theatre]" (41). The specific

influences of the use of Brecht's 'Alienation Effect' in DV8's work in particular can be seen in various aspects of their work.

The Absence of Characters, Story, and Fiction

It is apparent in DV8's work that traditional ideas of introducing 'characters' of a 'story' are discarded in favor of the conveyance of broader messages. For instance, in both *Can We Talk About This?* and *To Be Straight With You*, none of the performers have defined characters/roles that they portray for the entirety of a show within a story, neither is there a fictional 'story' or 'plot' to speak of – instead, both works explore broader ideas through a collection of scenes inspired by real-life events in which performers, working in ensemble, portray a wide variety of roles, from politicians to protesters to the oppressed themselves. The cognitive dissonance incited by this simple act of alienation, in which the same individuals and the same bodies are used to portray different symbols and contextualized in different manners, such as a protester's speech or a politician's statement, thus forces the audience to consider the message of the work more critically not as a mere 'realistic' work being passively viewed but as one originating from reality itself, the same reality they themselves belong to, thus conveying responsibility for action onto them.

Take, for instance, the scene 'Ayaan Hirsi Ali' from *Can We Talk About This?*, in which a scantily-clad performer portraying Ayaan Hirsi Ali tells the story of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who with a colleague created the film 'Submission', in which the verse from the Quran saying that "disobedient wives can be beaten" was projected onto a woman's body; her colleague was later killed by Muslim extremists.



Fig. 4. A performer representing Ayaan Hirsi Ali drawing on her own skin with a marker in the scene ‘Ayaan Hirsi Ali’ from *Can We Talk About This?.*; “Can We Talk About This?”; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2011, <https://dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/full-performance>.

As can be seen in fig. 4, the performer’s actions and body movement in drawing on herself with a marker form the focus of the scene, provoking the attention of the audience; the spoken monologue, written from Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s perspective, contextualizes this emotional reaction in terms of what Ayaan Hirsi Ali herself went through. Given Ayaan Hirsi Ali being not only a real person with her experiences being equally real, this commentary is thus especially poignant as being utterly real, imposing itself onto the audience and thus bringing the ‘reality’ of the events onstage to the audience as being the same reality the audience experiences. As such, it is evident how, in portraying reality as opposed to fiction with utterly real situations conveyed by performer working in ensemble without defined characters acting as symbols, the audience is alienated from the supposed ‘fiction’ of the theatrical event and pushed towards considering DV8’s work critically.

An Explicit Basis in Reality Through Visual and Auditory Elements

DV8's works feature a heavy basis & grounding in reality as opposed to realism – they do not convey a similarity to reality but rather *reality itself*. Indeed, often the basis of individual scenes in DV8's work is not fiction inspired by reality but specifically and utterly honest real-life events, using even the original words of the victims of said events.

Take, for instance, *To Be Straight With You*, which features heavy use of interviews conducted by DV8 where participants offered thoughts on various issues concerning homosexuality and religion (Tomlin 175) – in some scenes, the transcripts of these interviews are spoken by the actors themselves, while in others, the original recordings of said interviews are played. In particular, take the titular scene¹ from *To Be Straight With You*. As can be seen in fig. 5, the performer moves in a straight-limbed manner, as if, as described by DV8, “[hiding] his homosexuality by pretending to be heterosexual (straight)”. Simultaneously, a compilation of various clips from such interviews of people saying the phrase ‘to be straight with you’ – here, the phrase here is used as a double entendre, referring to both honesty and the action of pretending to be straight rather than gay. Both movement and recordings build in intensity to the scene's ending comment “I'm gay, don't tell no one” (“Scene: To Be Straight With You”).

¹ For reasons unknown, while this scene is present in rehearsal recordings of *To Be Straight With You*, it is not present in the full official recording of it. All recordings used, partial rehearsal and full, have been cited in the bibliography.



Fig. 5. A still capture from the titular scene from *To Be Straight With You.*; “To Be Straight With You”; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2009, dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/performance-recording.

The scene not only demonstrates an Artaud-inspired centrality of the body, with the body’s movement taking center stage in conveying the intent and meaning of the scene, but also the alienation effect conveyed through movement and emphasized through auditory elements. The performer’s unnaturally straight-limbed movements (to the point of apparent discomfort), symbolizing a gay person wanting to appear straight as represented by their physical ‘straightness’ and the difficulty of such an act (“Scene: To Be Straight With You”), is visibly unrealistic; thus, the audience is pushed into considering the reasons behind said choice of movement and thus understand critically instead of merely emotionally the discomfort behind pretending to be gay, the subtext behind the scene. Additionally, the audio recordings serve to additionally contextualize the situation, highlighting its utterly real nature – rather than being a *realistic* representation of the discomfort of pretending to be straight, the recordings serve to make the situation *real* itself. This not only has the effect of impressing

said real nature of the situation – it belonging to the same reality as the audience – upon said audience, but also of offering the victims and the marginalized in the real situation a more direct voice, rather than merely “‘giving voice’ to [them] from a position of cultural power” (Tomlin 171-172). Thus, the intellectual commentary expressed by the scene is made particularly poignant and effective, inciting critical thought within the audience using the body’s movement contextualized and emphasized by auditory elements in the form of clips from real-life interview recordings regarding the subject matter in question.

A further example of this, a common element of both *To Be Straight With You* and *Can We Talk About This?* is the use of the upstage wall/face of the theatre as a site for visual contextualization of the performance. For instance, as seen in fig. 6 below, in ‘Can We Talk About This?’, the performers write names of events and people who have been victims of Islamic extremism (see fig. 3 for a specific instance of this) on the upstage face of the theatre. This writing remains for the entirety of the performance, being present in each scene reminding the audience throughout of the content matter being discussed and the message of the piece; by maintaining this in the minds of the audience, the audience is thus further influenced into considering the overarching message of the piece critically in each scene. Similarly, in *To Be Straight With You*, in a scene where the performer performs as a gay rights activist conveying his experiences, a projection of a video relating to such experiences is displayed behind him (see fig. 4).

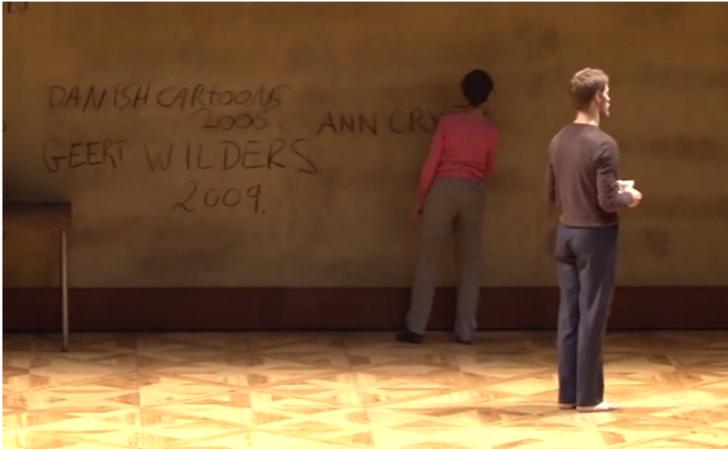


Fig. 6. The performer (upstage) playing Ann Cryer, a UK Labour Party politician ostracized for speaking out against forced-marriage practices in Muslim communities of her constituents, writes down Cryer’s name on the upstage face/wall of the theatre.; “Can We Talk About This?”; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2011, dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/full-performance.



Fig. 7. As the performer performs movement relating to the experience of a gay rights activist, a video relating to such experiences is projected behind him.; “To Be Straight With You”; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2009, dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/performance-recording.

These elements, clearly not realistic in that they would not be part of a naturalistically portrayed scene, each serve to further remind the audience of the nature and hence message of the performance they are watching and bring the various themes and issues of the piece to the forefront of the audience's minds throughout the performance. It is thus that the audience is alienated and further considers the piece and its message critically in this manner.

Tension in a Direct Audience-Performer Relationship

A key characteristic of physical theatre and, by extension, DV8's work, is a 'transgression of the proscenium' by the performer, with a direct relationship initiated between performer and audience where the audience is "not expected to remain a passive observer" (Sanchez-Colberg 47) but rather an active member within an audience-performer 'conversation', so to speak, influencing the audience into interpreting the work critically – as Wittje argues, "...in being exposed to the extreme vulnerability...of the performers, the audience is...called to account and compelled to respond from a profoundly pre-personal and pre-conscious level" (70).

For an example of this, take the scene 'Ayaan Hirsi Ali' from *Can We Talk About This?* discussed prior. In it, the performer directly addresses the audience, both verbally and physically. the performer addresses their spoken monologue directly to the audience, looking directly towards and facing the audience with their body, making the audience the very-real direct target of their monologue and its message as opposed to merely acting out an internal monologue to an imaginary target. While, of course, one could argue that none of this necessarily implies that a direct audience-performer relationship is indeed formed, its formation is made more likely by these actions; the audience being directly targeted by such commentary would arguably incite discomfort, moreso than implicit targeting/commentary, thus giving rise to the alienation effect. Thus, rather than immersing the audience in the scene, as the performer addresses the audience, the audience is provoked into truly thinking,

as if in an intellectual conversation rather than observing a performance, about the message conveyed by the performer.

Another such example can be seen in the scene titled ‘Stabbing In Hull’ from *To Be Straight With You*, which depicts, in DV8’s words, “a 15-year old Muslim boy whose father and brother stabbed him and left him to die because he told them he was gay.” (“Stabbing in Hull”)

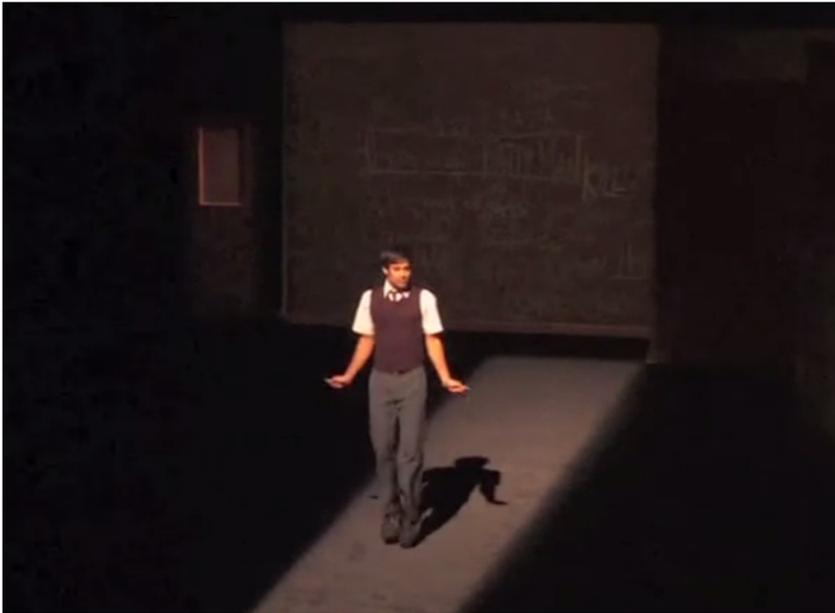


Fig. 8. The performer skipping in the scene ‘Stabbing in Hull’ from *To Be Straight With You*.; “To Be Straight With You”; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2009, dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/performance-recording.

As in the scene ‘Ayaan Hirsi Ali’, the performer directly addresses the audience both verbally and physically, directly facing and speaking to the audience as opposed to merely reciting an internal monologue; thus, their choice of movement in this scene, skipping, being symbolic of youth and/or childhood innocence, is made particularly poignant, provoking the audience into considering critically the implications of what the performer says, particularly given their physical motions conveying their clear innocence. Thus, once the direct audience-

performer relationship is established, great tension is conveyed through it when the performer collapses against the rear of the theatre, representing the stabbing of the boy in real life; this act of utter vulnerability compels the audience to react, not just emotionally but critically too as a result of the direct relationship established between the vulnerable performer and the audience.

As such, it can be seen how DV8, in creating a direct audience-performer relationship, emphasizes the various elements, physical and otherwise, of the performance by alienating the audience, thus conveying tension and highlighting the message conveyed by said elements.

OTHER INFLUENCES IN GROTOWSKI AND LECOQ

In addition to the significant influence of Artaud & Brecht on the genre of physical theatre and on DV8's work specifically, the influence of other theatrical practitioners must too be acknowledged as influential; in particular, Grotowski's theories of 'poor theatre' and Lecoq's ideas of 'play' in his work in *commedia dell'arte* should also be considered as arguably influential themselves in DV8's work in physical theatre.

Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre' in DV8's Work

DV8's Newson himself states that the term physical theatre "is a Grotowski-based term"; indeed, the influence of Grotowski's 'poor theatre' – the pursuit of the *via negativa*, in other words the "eradication of blocks" (Grotowski 17), in seeking of a theatre "stripped of all that is not essential to it" (21) can be seen in DV8's work, particularly as an extension of DV8's use of an Artaud-inspired centrality of the body. Indeed, it is evident from the staging of *To Be Straight With You* and *Can We Talk About This?* that both pieces utilize minimal stage elements, with few distinct features other than generic protrusions and recessions – as can be seen in figs. 7 and 8, the stage is quite simply an 'empty stage'.



Fig. 9. An example of the plain staging used in *Can We Talk About This?.*; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2011, <https://dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/full-performance>.

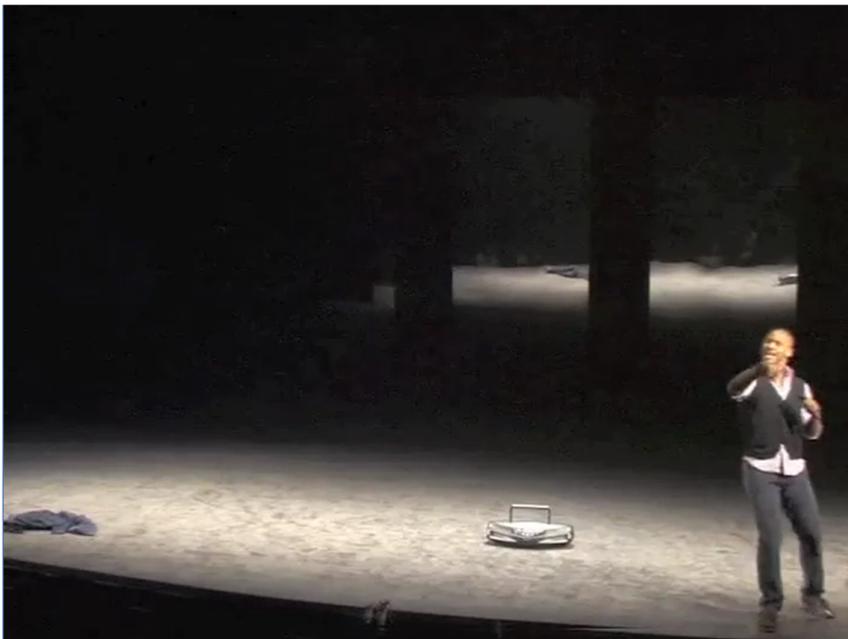


Fig. 10. An example of the plain staging used in *To Be Straight With You..*; “To Be Straight With You”; *DV8 Physical Theatre*; 2009, dv8.co.uk/media-portal/explore-our-videos/performance-recording.

DV8’s treatment of the stage is thus in line with Grotowski’s concept of a ‘poor theatre’ devoid of unnecessary theatrical elements as detailed prior (particularly given

Newson's inclination towards Grotowski's theories in physical theatre, as also mentioned prior), being a further extension of Artaud's vision of considering the *mise en scène* "a language in space and in movement" such that the body is most central to the staging of the piece (Sanchez-Colberg 43) with all unnecessary elements removed so that the message conveyed may be highlighted most effectively.

Lecoq's 'Play' in DV8's Work Process

While not perhaps a direct component of DV8's expression in theatre, the principles of Lecoq's work in *Commedia dell'arte* and miming – his "concept of '*le jeu*, or 'play'" and examination of the "*la comédie humaine*, i.e. 'the human comedy'" (Callery 63) – have also informed DV8's work process in producing their works. Indeed, as leader of DV8 Physical Theatre, Newson describes his role in the company as a "stimulator, facilitator, editor, and constructor" as opposed to a traditional choreographer ("Lloyd Newson In Conversation"), encouraging his performers to "create rather than simply interpret" (Callery 7); he stimulates their work and self-exploration rather than directing it. The overarching goal of DV8's work process could thus be described as creating "a form close to the people...[with] warmth and humanity", thus creating empathy and evoking emotion and critical thought within the audience by creating experiences distinctly personal to the performers, especially given, as Tomlin notes, how "a number of the professional artists involved [in DV8 Physical Theatre] were from the same 'community' [of oppressed individuals] as those they were interviewing and presenting" (170). While, of course, it is difficult to identify and pinpoint specific instances of this, given the impossibility of observing DV8's work process and knowing each individual nuance given to the performance by the performers in each scene in accordance with each performer's personal experiences, it is reasonable to assume that, given Newson's stated role in DV8 in their work process, the principles of Lecoq's 'play' thus influence DV8 work and thus expression as well.

Grotowski and Lecoq as Developments of Brecht and Artaud

Arguably, though, while these additional influences of Grotowski and Lecoq cannot be disregarded, they could also be characterized as falling under the umbrella of, or as further developments of, the initial, central ideas of Brecht and Artaud. Indeed, Grotowski himself acknowledges how theatre is “entering the age of Artaud” in which “an eminent creator...turns to Artaud...” as “one can see in the theatrical avant-garde of many countries”, even despite his disagreements with Artaud’s specific approach and application within contemporary theatre (Grotowski 117-118). While Lecoq’s ideas on the work process of DV8 could be viewed as unique, it is not unreasonable to treat Grotowski’s theories on poor theatre as merely a development of the Brechtian alienation effect and Artaud’s vision of the theatre in being yet another step towards the elimination of unnecessary items for the emphasis and most powerful conveyance of the piece’s message.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, DV8 creates expression primarily through movement in combination with various visual and verbal elements. DV8 devises movement which engages the audience on an intellectual and emotional level; the movement itself, contextualized with visual and verbal elements, evokes thought of social and cultural concepts and hence the issues related to them. Inspired by the various theories of Artaud and Brecht in the centrality of the body and the alienation effect through which the audience is reminded of the artificiality of performance, and also to a lesser extent by Grotowski’s concept of a ‘poor theatre’ and implicitly also Lecoq’s techniques of ‘play’, DV8 provokes the audience to consider the issues which they raise through the aforementioned movement objectively, thus allowing DV8 to explore, comment on, and convey their message in regards to such social and cultural norms.

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