

How an image makes people move: Symbolic reality, civil disobedience and skills training on and off the stage of an Oxford University Theatre Production

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Abstract

In this photo-essay based on eight months of fieldwork on and off the stage of an Oxonian theatre production, I examine the mechanisms that lead cast members to simultaneously endorse on- and offstage responsibilities. I focus on 'movement', not only in the sense of physical motion but also, on the one hand, as the audience's mobilization process which students understood was key to commercial and symbolic success; and on the other hand, in the sense of the journeys the students underwent from the time they got acquainted with the symbolic reality of Voltaire plays in 2011, to the positionalities and civil disobedience they demonstrated on social media six years later. This photo-essay engages with key anthropological debates about the commodification of theatre performances, the ethics of entrepreneurial training in a University setting, and the uniqueness of theatre as a topic of ethnographic enquiry.

Keywords

Theatre, University theatre training, Performance, Oxford, Movement

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is an anthropologist whose work focuses on the study of human-animal relations in East Asia. His research interests are influenced by his previous studies in Philosophy and Visual Anthropology and include bioethics, ethnicity and ethology. For his doctoral degree at the University of Oxford entitled *The Seoul of Cats and Dogs*, he conducted extended fieldwork amidst Korea's cat and dog meat trade and Seoul's emerging animal welfare community.

Michael Billington, theatre critic for *The Guardian's* since 1971, recently argued for a wider recognition of British theatre as being 'heavily dependent on university-trained talent' (2012). In particular, since its creation in 1885, the Oxford University Drama Society (OUDS) has produced thousands of plays, has managed to attract high quality production resources to support student productions, and has established itself as a rare model of entrepreneurial trust between an academic institution and its most junior members. While Oxford does not run a specific department dedicated solely to theatre studies as drama literature is taught to those reading for English degrees, Oxford student drama has paved the way to the creation of countless successful British theatre companies and University drama departments throughout the nation. The success of Oxford student theatre production is enhanced by students' access to extensive funds from either the University, the Colleges and third-party sponsors; to a yearly inflow of no-longer needed costumes given away by renowned theatre associations such as the Royal Shakespeare Company;

and to a number of unique settings for either their rehearsals and/or performances such as college chapels, local churches, large bookstores, libraries, or professional venues like the renown *Oxford Theatre Playhouse* that currently hosts one student production every term.

However, resources for Oxford student theatre productions are far from being awarded to any student expressing an interest in putting together a theatrical performance. Rather, students have to be able to demonstrate the quality of their vision through elaborating a realistic managerial plan in a fiercely competitive environment, which requires an understanding of socio-political, and commercial dynamics very similar to those at play in the production of non-university-related British cultural events. Thus, by having to build their own project from scratch, and pitch it to potential sponsors and venues, the Oxford student theatre system, as critic Billington underlines it, offers students 'an invaluable preparation for life' (*Ibid*). It trains them to work in teams, put funding applications together, network with potential sponsors over social events, test their abilities at admin, at fundraising, at managing conflicts of interests and personalities, choosing and designing costumes, constructing sets, directing, choreographing, and even confront their skills to more seasoned theatre personalities under the University's yearly *Humanitas* drama visitor professorship scheme.

Much anthropological literature has been written about the use of drama as a means to make sense of social rites and symbolically charged cultural events. Turner's classic study of Ndembu rituals in Northwestern Zambia, has shown the relevance of approaching ritual through its processual, rather than static, nature and look at it as part of a 'social drama' (1969). In particular, Turner perceived ritual as the enactment of a four-stage liminal performance that resolves, or puts an end to, emerging social conflicts. Ritual's social drama starts with an initial breach between individuals or within the group, which expands to the rest of the tribe before it is resolved by the group's highest members, and which eventually leads to either reintegration or irreparable schism (*Ibid*). A decade later, Kapferer's classic study of Sri Lankan rituals followed a similar line of reasoning and envisaged, for instance, drama in Sinhalese healing rites as an organizing force that helped incorporating secular reality through symbolic references (1977). Following Turner and Kapferer, social anthropologists have since then particularly looked at drama as the expression of a society's underlying mechanisms, a *metaphor* for a society's enactment of its specific cultural values (Edkvist 1997).

However, Beeman regrets in this approach to drama the lack of focus on theatre as an evanescent ethnographic subject. He attributes this to the lack of precision in identifying theatricality's uniqueness over other forms of 'cultural performances' and isolated theatre performance as the unique combination of the systematic presence of an observer/audience, and a primordial focus on symbolic reality within the performance (1993: 378-80). British University student theatre productions, and in particular Oxford student productions, are well suited for testing Beeman's assertion as they unofficially institutionalize entrepreneurial skills training for students, force them to both produce and manage their own audience in the light of the play's themes, contents and contemporary significance. Moreover, in the light of their own public profiles on social media six years later, the students who engaged in the University theatre production I studied in 2011, often engage with the contemporaneity of the plays they performed and their resonance within their own daily lives. Symbolic reality and entrepreneurial skills are carried out into their lives as online positionalities about important issues related to, in this specific case, power and religious tolerance (see photo-essay).

The theatre production portrayed here consisted of two plays by Louis de Voltaire, *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète* and *Zaïre*, both performed four times, one after the other, at Mansfield College chapel between February and March 2011. The plays deal with religious fanaticism and have been at the center of numerous controversies in the past four centuries. In this photo-essay, I show that University drama is a processual product whose success depends on the ability of a team to simultaneously endorse on- and offstage responsibilities, such as ensuring commercial success through the 'production' of an audience when the play is running. The text of the plays studied here engages with political dominance, ethics of influence, vile treachery and religious extremism. This strong symbolism was a determining factor for subsequent decision-making in terms of directions, cast and venue choices, and marketing strategies. Written in 1732 by Louis de Voltaire, *Zaïre* is set in Jerusalem at the time of the crusades, and portrays Christian fanaticism in the person of King Lusignan who reunites with his long-lost daughter Zaïre, raised as a Muslim after Lusignan's imprisonment. Voltaire then published *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète* in 1736, a play that echoes *Zaïre's* theme of religious fanaticism in the person of a revengeful, manipulative and fundamentalist version of prophet Mahomet. In 1993, a famous Fellow in Middle Eastern Studies at St Antony's College publicly opposed to the performance of *Mahomet* in Geneva, anticipating that Voltaire's depiction of the prophet as a zealot might have negative repercussions on Swiss society and other European Muslim communities. Likewise, in 2005, in the context of the caricatures of Mahomet published by Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*, a performance of *Mahomet* in Saint-Genis Pouilly France, was nearly cancelled after receiving death threats on the night before opening night.

Both plays were re-translated into English from eighteenth-century French alexandrines by one of the main participants to this study, Medieval French Emeritus Fellow at Oriel College Oxford, Professor Michaels. Both plays were staged and directed by French actor and director Mr. Lejeune. The cast all shared an interest in the symbolic reality the plays depicted. While Fleur (*Zaïre* in *Zaïre*) was doing some research on violence and domination amidst her Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) degree; Sneha (Palmyre in *Mahomet* and Fatime in *Zaïre*), who comes from a religious Indian family, was to start reading religious studies at the University of Edinburgh the following year, and was interested in extremism and political abuse; and Sean (Omar in *Mahomet* and Orosman in *Zaïre*) who was reading Experimental Psychology at Oxford at the time of the play and who, since then, has explored religious fanaticism and relationships between faith and power.

In the photo-essay below, I have focused on 'movement'. First, in the straight-forward sense of physical motion. Second, in the sense of the audience's mobilization process which students understood was key to commercial and symbolic success, i.e. people had to go out of their way and physically attend the play for the production to be fulfilled. Third, in the sense of the journeys the students underwent from the time they got acquainted with the symbolic reality of Voltaire plays in 2011, to the mature positionalities and civil disobedience they demonstrated on social media six years later. While it is difficult to ascertain any strict correlation between the 2011 production and the 2017 online civil disobedience of the students with certainty; this photo-essay suggests a continuity between the exposure they received in 2011 to the symbolic reality of both plays, and the positionality and nuanced thoughts they show six years later when expressing their thoughts on social media about religion, extremism and civil responsibility in the context of the recent attacks against the UK population, the Brexit and the UK's 2017 general elections.



1

From left to right, Hadrien, Mr. Lejeune, Bastian. 'I don't completely recognize the people involved in the photograph. I think that's Bastian and that is Hadrien, I'm pretty sure. And this in center is what I take to be Mr. Lejeune. Obviously I don't know why it was taken nor when it was taken and what was the objective of the photographer. What appears to me is the presence of the director as a shadowy image that is being looked at by two of the actors. It represents, the way a director of a theatrical piece is very active during the organization of rehearsals. He encourages the actors to perform in whatever way is appropriate for him and them, and yet when the performance comes, he is invisible to the audience.' (Professor Michaels, 2011)



2

David, Fleur, Petra and Mr. Lejeune. 'I was taking notes of the blocking to record to my mind what I had seen. Occasionally I was to draw a diagram from the chapel and note in which scene who comes from where and where everyone moves to. [Silence] And I sometimes made judgmental remarks on what was going on. /.../ Sometimes it would be "this is fantastic" and sometimes it would be "if I were directing this, I would be suggesting something else." /.../ I was very sparing of Mr. Lejeune on the remarks I wanted to make. I was very sparing particularly the last two weeks when things were getting stressful. He was directing and I wasn't. I would always ask myself: "Is it worth mentioning this?" Sometimes it would be little tweak. As the performances came closer, there wasn't anything major, which I thought was worth bringing to his attention. He had plenty on his plate /.../ I would keep my thoughts for myself.' (Professor Michaels, 2011)



3

David and Fleur. 'We ran through a few of these scenes, and I'm thinking this is incredible material; you don't get the chance to do very often new blank verses. It dealt with a lot of issues that I had dealt with on a more human aspect of it. We worked through it. Prof. Michaels decided to translate *Zaire* as well and we decided to put this play on. /.../ I put together briefs and applications for spaces and funding everywhere. I was running around Oxford trying to do as many things as I could. /.../ I'd rather concentrate on the acting. It's obviously not that I don't have the necessary skills to be a producer but it's just *not fun*. But I *had* to do it.' (Fleur, 2011)



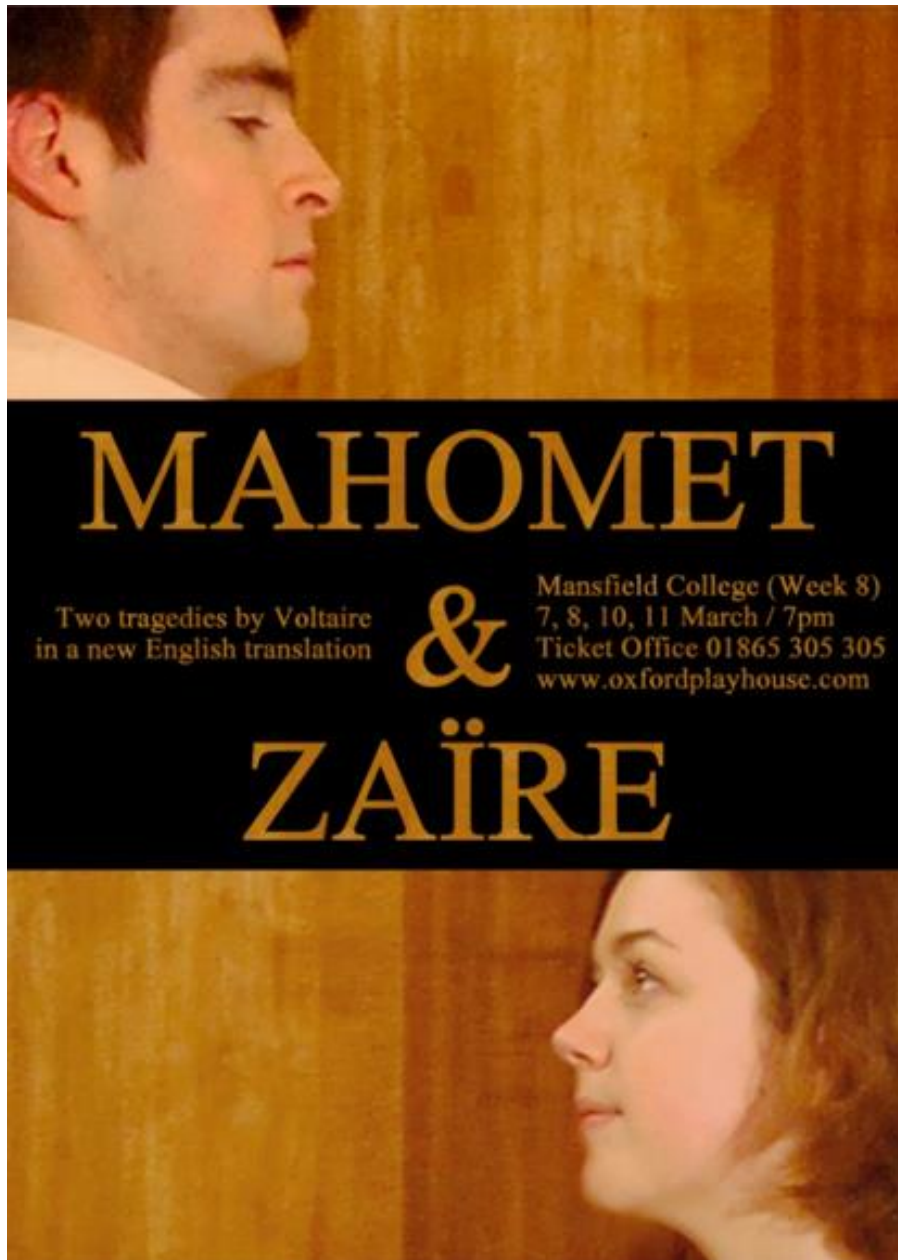
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Petra and Mr. Lejeune. 'It was a very organic process. Obviously during rehearsals, Mr. Lejeune was the one telling us to shut up, to stop giggling and get on with it. He was the authoritative figure. But when you have a group of people that are committed and bounded as we were, there wasn't any clear line for authority, we took our lead from the producers and the directors as actors and as part of the organization. /.../ No one was in charge I would say.' (Fleur, 2011)



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“They’re incredibly relevant plays to a lot of my studies in a number of ways. /.../ *Mahomet* and *Zaire* both have these ethical tensions in what is right and acceptable for the protagonist to choose /.../ e.g. how acceptable is it to mislead people? Or how far is it acceptable to allow people freedom of choice?” (Fleur, 2011)



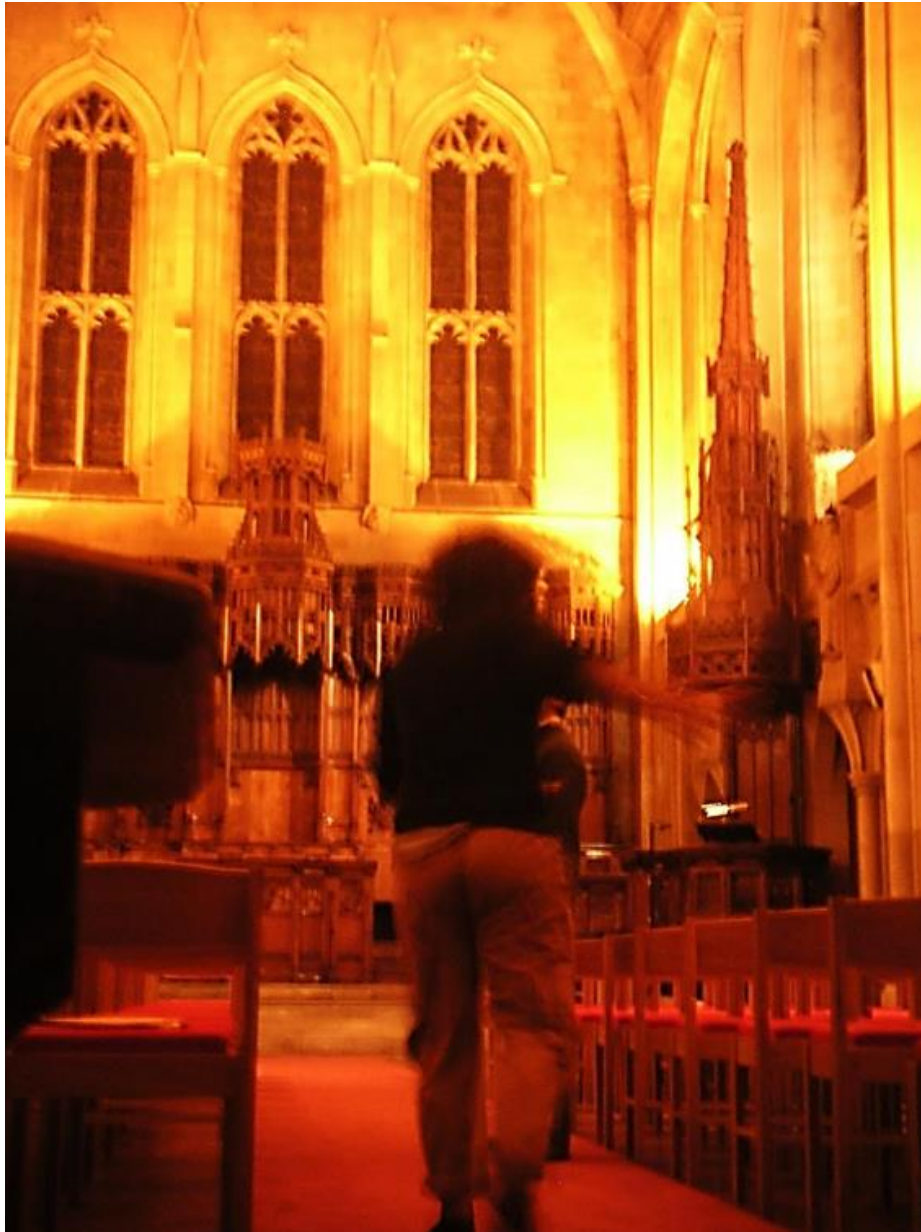
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David and Fleur. "The language [*of the play*] is not realistic; you have to carry the melodramatic slide to the acting. In a historical sense, it is so far removed from where I am. I wouldn't say it was a complete success, I would never be absolutely happy with my acting, I had some nights better than others but I tried very hard to keep an awareness of the seriousness for "Zaïre". The real impact is that it's a complete change of life for her. Had I been given more time to work on it (in Oxford you never get enough time to work on anything), I would have been able to do a better performance.' (Fleur, 2011)



7

Audience before venue opened. 'Part of the problem here is that these make the perpetrator of this attack invisible (the van did not drive itself into pedestrians). And some places were still reporting this without using the words terrorist or attack in the headline when I got up at 530 today, long after the PM's announcement. I appreciate media can't use the word terrorist until someone official does, but this felt a lot slower than London bridge (where everyone was saying terrorist within 30 minutes)' (One of Fleur's Facebook posts after the 19/06/17 Finsbury Park attack)



8

Sneha on the stage. 'From the alarming number of 'immigration compliance' censuses you are asking me to attend, United Kingdom Border Agency, I have drawn two possible conclusions: ONE | You are threatened by my dazzling employability and think that I am clinging on to the flesh body of your country with no intention of letting go, in which case let me draw your attention to my degree in Religious Studies and sickening lack of upper body strength. TWO | You are attracted to me and are using these meetings as a way of expressing your devotion, in which case what are you doing tomorrow and would you like to hear me say words like 'numinous' and 'phenomenology' while heaving my way through one and a half push-ups?' (Sneha, 12/10/15 Facebook post)



9

Audience during the intermission. 'So hey, about that election next week...

- Want to vote based on which local candidate would best represent you? That's cool!
- Want to vote based on which party's manifesto you want enacted? That's cool!
- Want to vote based on which party's ideology aligns with yours? That's cool!
- Want to vote tactically to try to prevent a certain party gaining power? That's cool!
- Want to vote based on the person you want to be Prime Minister of our country? That's cool!
- Can't bring yourself to vote for anybody at all? That's cool! (I would encourage you to spoil your ballot because those are counted differently to not turning up - but hey, you do you!)

Bottom Line: You have a right to vote. You have a right to not vote. You have a right to decide how you vote and nobody else can tell you what you can or cannot do.' (Sean 03/06/17 Facebook post about the 08/06/17 UK general elections)



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Audience after the performance. “The Prime Minister is reportedly preparing her new government to crack down on higher education institutions, claiming they have become an easy route into Britain for economic migrants...” Yep yep yep, after all, I DID pay a ludicrous amount for a student visa for the privilege of contributing a ludicrous tuition fee for the privilege of contributing to the economy (I buy a lot of chorizo) and the university marketplace (I tell my tutees all about chorizo) for seven years. All because I wanted to worm my way into the sweet, sweet apple that is the UK. Ludicrous, unsurprising.’ (Sneha, 26/07/16 Facebook post about Theresa May’s statements about economic migrants and Higher Education)



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End of show. Audience leaving. 'I have voted! You should too. Go do it' (Fleur, 08/06/17
Facebook post about the UK general elections held on the same day)

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