

Here, Gone

a response to So Below, (a Haranczak/Navarre performance project, by Karen Christopher and Gerard Bell, Chelsea Theatre, London October 2012)

Joe Kelleher

You maybe wouldn't want to use words like 'abstract' or 'conceptual' when speaking about these two performers as they come and go for an hour or so, on the stage of the Chelsea Theatre. They don't come across as particularly abstract or conceptual types. They deal with flowerpots, and properly brewed tea, and an old song off the radio from when the radio was all there was. Their actions follow the very specific qualities of the materials they are dealing with. The way a syllable floats and drags. The way a liquid flows, pours, drips, and melts. The way a pebble drops straight down when you loosen the fingers holding it. The way a something – or a somebody – 'gives' or resists when you push your foot in a pile of earth, or when you press the person standing beside you to respond, right now, now or shortly, to something that occurs to you to say. So then, not so abstract at all. More rooted, we might say, in things and how they are, the time it takes to deal with them, and how it feels to be doing that. Even so, there are also patterns to pick up on, symmetries, triangulations and such. Geometrical patterns, call them. As if something – it is hard to say immediately what that something might be – is being measured up, weighed out and proportioned, and re-presented here in the theatre on that basis. Geometry, then, the measuring of the earth, or a sort of measuring of the earth that starts in the places where habits are formed, in domestic spaces, in activities of balancing and preparing, of attending and taking care: smelling the milk for sourness, keeping an ear open for footsteps off. Precise and delicate actions, which, after a little while, remove themselves from familiar circumstance and start to seem... well... a little more abstract after all, or to be referring at least to some other order of things than the one we

find here: the way, for instance, both performers stand for a few moments, their hands performing a finger-walk across their bodies, registering perhaps another way of sensing, another sort of pointing out, feeling for what belongs – if not belonging right here, then in some other ‘here’ that is somehow intimate with this one.

‘As above, so below’ is a peculiar, two-ways-facing formula that implies at the same time a turning in to secrets and mysteries – a hermeticism in that sense – but also an involvement and opening out: from world to world, from one individual to another, from the individual to the universe, or from the place and time in which we find ourselves into spaces we have to access through memory, or sympathetic imagination, through what we are able to conjure poetically through gesture and speech, or faith. In Karen Christopher and Gerard Bell’s theatrical duet *So Below* other places seem to be constantly intruding into what is going on here; or at least the signs of such intrusion are there to be gathered up, tuned into, sniffed out. A tincture of old-fashionedness, for instance, mixed in with the contemporary brew, certain objects, bits of speech, text, melodies, ways of stepping across the stage together that inflect what happens here. Their conversation seems to be made up of fragments of recovered wisdom, saws and sayings, to do with what accumulates upon us, itches, scratches, affections, pains. And that action of finger-walking across the body, it doesn’t look like something being invented in this moment, but a re-tracing of another action that took place before. An effort is made to keep things tidy, but even then the business of tidying and household management – the sort of taking care of the local theatrical economy that makes up a large part of the show – seems to involve, as much as anything, attending to what has been removed, what constantly insists on removing itself from the present situation. Small mounds of earth, brushed together neatly, take on the appearance of graves, conjuring the un-named dead, those whose voices – as we are told in another part of the show – are characterised not so much by disappearance

or finitude, but by removedness from the locations – the bodies – out of which they would be supposed to speak. The duet itself also is a thing of removedness, of removed elements brought into an economy of representation. A way also perhaps for an individual to represent one's removal from oneself; and not just from one's own perspective, but as we are experienced by others: I say to you I am there, but it is *like* I am over here. Or the way each performer's movement appears to be learned from the other one, or that way they have of being beside each other, not quite face-to-face, but slightly displaced, ever leading or following one another. Or how they inhabit the stage – and what can be made of how they inhabit the stage – the way this keeps lending itself to would-be symmetries between a here and a there: you, me; the living, the dead; or the relation simply between here in the theatre and somewhere else offstage, where Karen keeps departing and returning from, with buckets of water and such, with just enough of a suggestion that the supposed nowhere beyond the world of the stage might indeed be a somewhere, might indeed be somewhere the stage depends upon, for water, for air, for life. Although the water, when it arrives on stage, has no function other than that, to arrive, and to be there; to become weight and substance, at once existing in time.

And, for all the care that is taken, things loosen, they weaken. A hand loosens and pebbles again drop to the floor, knocking on those below. Some actions go unattended: one or the other performs a gesture and the other doesn't ask, makes nothing of it, maybe because the gesture has been done before – loose stuff, rehearsal left-overs – or because you just trust your partner to do whatever they do. When Karen enters, from off-stage, she makes a peculiar progress, balancing on flowerpots, apt to fall off (although she doesn't fall off). When Gerard and Karen stand beside each other they are there for a long time, silent in a sort of standingness of their own, nothing really happening or changing apart from those pebbles

falling from Gerard's hand. But they stand amidst whatever else rots, melts, crumbles and goes cold. The tea goes cold, presumably. The old songs are so out of fashion they are no longer even falling. A block of ice at the back of the stage melts, if imperceptibly. Things – and stories and names and people – are fast becoming pastness; but also just as fastly being remembered, recalled, acknowledged. Or so we might take it, following the geometry, as it points, as they say, towards a cognition beyond sensory perception. In this – this fastness, this binding of themselves to each other and whatever else their fidelity embraces – they are tenacious. They are also grown-up, familiar with life, realistic after a fashion. Fallen bodies may leave an outline, but outlines fade if they are not preserved, and there are so many bodies fallen, falling. The tin pan alley song that they dance to, 'If I didn't care for you', is a song of someone in love, which is to say someone removed from themselves in particular ways, which is to say a song of the living for the still-living-in-us, which is to say also the long gone outside of us, so far, so below. Like much else in the show – like the dropping of things on the stage floor, as if knocking on those below if they are ever there – the song is a messaging device. Let me ask you, would things be as they are, would I feel and act as I do, if I didn't care for you? It's a theatrical sort of question also, of course. Who is to say what they are feeling, or how things really are? The stage is hermetic in that sense too. Which is to say – at last – that the message, the song, is as much received as it is given, for them as much as for us. Here is also a below of sorts. The old song comes down to us. We carry it with us, if we will, if we can.

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