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1
Sublime Trauma: The Violence of Ethical Encounter

Leslie A. Wade

Performance events – from the brutalism of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* to the documentary style of Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* – have attempted to address the phenomenon of violence through various presentational strategies. Such recent works, while timely and innovative in effect, reiterate a persistent fascination of the Western theatrical tradition with the agonistic encounter, *sparagmos*, and the flow of blood. This chapter will not directly explore staging approaches per se but will primarily investigate the epistemic modalities of violence: how violence may effect a fundamental rupture of representation and a dissolution of identity relations under the law of the Same. I am chiefly interested in how violence functions as a critical touchstone in postmodern ethical theory and a guiding trope in an ethics of otherness, what Emmanuel Levinas identifies as a "first philosophy," and how this way of thinking may invite a re-imagining of the theatrical event as an experience that values interruption and generosity over domination and closure.

The fundamental focus of this chapter and its speculations concerns the rudiments of self-other relations. Much has been written about the violence that modernism and Western presumption have enacted, in totalizing attempts to eradicate alterity, to subsume and arrogate the Other. I rather wish to focus on a reverse dynamic – how recent ethical writing has asserted the violence that the Other brings to bear upon the self. Violence emerges as a key motif in the works of these writers (I here include Lyotard, Levinas, Derrida, and Nancy), as the phenomenon of violence, which defies representation and destabilizes assurances of the ego, parallels the sort of interior collapse experienced by the subject in an ethical encounter with the Other. In sum, violence operates as an ethical analogue; the encounter with otherness is on a basic level an experience of trauma (which ironically brings salutary effects).

The ethics of otherness provide a unique and illuminating conceptual lens for understanding violence and its theatrical evocation. Given the Western dramatic tradition's fascination with violence, and the continued obsession

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with violent events in contemporary performance, we can profitably question when and how theatre artists should approach the phenomenon of violence. On a basic level, we might consider how best to stage a violent moment and how to choreograph the victim and the aggressor. Outside of the practical matters of blocking and stage images, we can explore and evaluate how theatre productions materialize ethical relations and whether their stagings demonstrate impulses of ownership or domination. These concerns move the discussion from the staging of specific events or moments of violent action to the basic orientation of the theatrical form and approach. Attention to the theatrical figuring of ethical relations poses serious problems – both aesthetic and ethical – for the performative act and theatrical artists. Such concerns challenge conventional modes of representation and complicate the very possibilities of significative utterance.

In this light, if we view normative representation as a kind of appropriation, then traditional stage representation may enact a violence upon otherness, by "fitting" the Other to the theatrical frame. The staging process itself may thus enact a dynamic of violence. How, then, can the contemporary theatre proceed? How might it renounce such staging practices and explore modes that avoid the assertion of the self/same (at the expense of the Other)? How can the theatre draw from the insights of postmodern ethical writing and realize an approach that turns violence from the Other to the self, bringing an interrogation and challenge to the assumptions and complacency of the author/creators? Is it possible for a non-autonomous, non-Cartesian self to engage in an aesthetic enterprise whereby the event involves no "legislation," but rather works to open up a space for the Other?

I want to suggest in this chapter that the dissolution of the self – the violence that the Other brings upon the self – does not finally lead to solipsism or complete passivity; it rather calls the self to obligation. As Levinas asserts, the face of the Other demands responsibility. Explaining this motif in the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, E. Jeffrey Popke affirms that living ethically involves acknowledgment of a "shared Being" and participation in a "collective spatial politics in which a commitment to the Other is our abiding concern."[1] This way of understanding the self–other relation and the onstage materialization of this relation challenges the theatre practice that commonly promotes the sacrifice or ritualistic obliteration of the Other for the assurance of communal bonds and identity confidences. Rather, this model envisions a way of "being with" or "alongside" the Other in a manner that highlights a reciprocity and obligation incumbent upon the self.

The disapprobation that recent ethical theorists have exhibited toward the Western philosophic tradition and its understanding of knowledge cannot be overestimated. Indeed, the limitations, strictures and erasures of this tradition have in large measure fueled the desire for new models and articulations of ethical relations. In sum, it is the aim of postmodern ethical writing to challenge the rationalist egoism of Western thinking, which understands

the world (and others) only through modes of self-identification and a logic of the Same. According to both Levinas and Derrida, the history of Western philosophy has correlated thought with being and has struggled to systematize existence under the laws of knowledge, operations that territorialize alterity under the rubric of likeness. In short, the Other is brought into the knowledge of the subject under the terms of the subject. This kind of knowledge inaugurates a power relation that demands a subjugation of the Other, as something to be overcome, and the subject/other relation in the Western tradition has consequently taken a profoundly agonistic if not violent aspect. Hegel represents the epitome of this line of thinking; his history authorizes the dialectical overcoming of the slave/other in the advancement of Ideality.

Discussions of the Holocaust appear prominently in recent ethical writing, as its events have fundamentally challenged notions of morality, memory, community, and representation. Much of postmodern ethical theory has been read as a postscript to the Holocaust, and indeed for Levinas, a Lithuanian-born Jew who was himself incarcerated in a German prison camp, this atrocity informed and consolidated his conception of otherness. For these thinkers, the Holocaust exposed the presumption and the limits of the Western tradition. The rationalist enterprise of the modernist project – which understands difference under the law of the Same – revealed itself as ineffectual and mute. Giorgio Agamben has explored the impossibility of rationally assessing the experience of the death camps in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.[2] Edith Wyschogrod has written that the violence of the Holocaust has acted as a kind of "nihil," a black-hole in Western history that defied all categories of reason and understanding.[3] Not only did the rationalist tradition reveal itself as inadequate to comprehend the event, but the Western will to knowledge has been cited by some as complicit in the atrocity, evidencing a desire to suppress otherness: the gas chamber as solution to absolute alterity. Levinas's writing thus may be viewed as a profound defense of difference, a rebuttal to modernist assurance, and an insistence on the sanctity of the Other.

In this recent tradition of ethical investigation, the Holocaust has served as a profound limit point. Lyotard asserts that the Holocaust exploded the very possibility of thinking and speaking as a "we," effecting what one critic has described as a "suspension of the monopoly of the cognitive regime of phrases," that is, the confounding of all authority of knowledge and categorizations of experience.[4] In this light, the extreme violence of the Holocaust and its attendant trauma defy the very possibility of knowing and expose the limits of signification, demanding a moral and cognitive agnosticism. This kind of agnostic effect was the aim of Claude Lanzmann in his famous documentary film *Shoah*, which utilized extensive interviews with Holocaust survivors. For Lanzmann, "not understanding" was "the only ethical way to approach a representation of the Shoah"; his film did not attempt to mediate

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the event in critical or expository fashion, but pointedly worked to obviate what the film-maker identified as the "obscenity of understanding."[5]

The terror of genocide precipitated a profound distrust of "knowledge" in the conceptions of such figures as Levinas and Lyotard. Indeed, for these thinkers, the opposition to rationalism provoked a refashioning of knowledge and ethical relations, leading to the valuation of "not knowing" or "being otherwise." Their work thus undertook a reassessment of the ego and its will to knowledge. The film-maker Lanzmann's attitude towards "understanding" points toward what Lyotard would describe as the postmodern sublime.[6] Not to be confused or associated with notions of beauty or the ideal, the sublime here equals an expression of the *differend*, or that which cannot be apprehended or translated. Rather than bringing an exaltation or transcendent affirmation, the sublime exposes a disconnect between idea and feeling that shatters belief. For Lyotard, the subject in this experience does not have an adequate capacity to access or assess the event. The effect is to limit and humble. The self here is revealed in its rational poverty; the self is chastened. While the experience of the sublime can be devastating, the negative aspect of the experience can bring positive results: it can trigger an awakening to cognitive and representational limits. This disclosure of limits, according to Lyotard, is something that one should accept gratefully.[7]

In this line of thinking, attempts to address violence and its trauma are not so much concerned with the bodily mutilation of victims per se as with the psychic repercussions upon the survivor/viewer. At the risk of inviting cynicism, this outlook finds the violent event, in its horror, to bear a positive aspect. Violence's impact productively illuminates the extent of possible knowledge. Nameless victims thus promote a revelatory re-evaluation of the self and its prerogatives of power. And it is perhaps the salutary shattering of the subject – and its dynamics of sovereignty – that inclines writers of postmodern ethical theory to utilize tropes and images of violence.

Though it is certainly possible to read violence onstage (and in actuality) as the instantiation of dominance and the assertion of ego, an ethics of otherness invites an alternate reading, one that locates the "value" of violence not as overcoming, but as self-renunciation. Levinas clearly seeks to overthrow the structural models of Western rationalism; his portrayal of human relations reverses the poles of power, whereby the self bows prostrate before the Other, acknowledging and honoring the face of the unknown, the irreducible. This encounter has disturbing and disorienting effects upon the self, consonant with Lyotard's expression of the postmodern sublime. In this model, violence is not directed toward the Other but is experienced by the self, as a byproduct of ethical encounter. Images and metaphors of violence consequently pervade writings in recent ethical theory. Lyotard writes of this experience as disruptive, blazing, and lightning-like.[8] The Other is oftentimes described as having the effect of shock upon the self, inflicting a laceration in the language of the Same. Derrida, in fact, speaks of this

otherness as a sort of circumcision, a wound that opens the self to the Other.[9] Levinas himself writes of the primacy of the wounded and hurting existent.[10]

Focusing only on violence and its radical effect upon the self, however, overlooks a central element in postmodern ethical relations. This decentering of the subject is certainly a recurring theme in the writings of Levinas, Derrida, and Nancy, one that serves as a counterbalance to Western rationalism and its presumptions. While this de-emphasis of the self may be viewed as a needed redress to modernist overweening, attention to this diminished aspect alone can invite charges of nihilism, foregrounding vertigo and foundational evacuation – the self in collapse and solipsistic withdrawal. These thinkers, importantly, point beyond any negative or injurious implications. Rather, they conceive a subjectivity that seeks to honor the distant stranger, the nameless victims, all absent others. Despite the inefficacy of signification and the self that is called into question, the sublime trauma of otherness engenders a "responsibility [...] in the face of something that exceeds symbolic guarantee."[11] In this context, trauma involves a beneficent pain, inaugurating a realigned relation between self and Other, an exploration of relational modes outside of reason and domination. The self is not left immobilized, shocked, and impaired, but called to responsibility for the Other. In this regard, the violence of encounter does not eradicate the Other nor does it immobilize the self; rather, it initiates an attitude of hospitality for the stranger, the refugee, the abject.

The insights of thinkers such as Levinas and Derrida encourage a questioning of normative moral imperatives and expand the ethical conceptualizations of philosophical discourse. Their writings can also activate speculation about the use and deployment of the stage – how to ethically engage the Other in a theatrical context and how to address otherness without resorting to moral maxims or notions of community. We are, in effect, challenged to imagine how we might be "in relation" with one another at the deepest and most profound level. What insight these thinkers might offer – in regard to both theatre art and social praxis – ultimately involves the matter of responsibility, or how to ethically honor one's obligation to the singular Other.

The definition and operation of responsibility can be illuminated by the ways in which recent theorists have reframed the contexts of ethical decision-making, highlighting a sensitive regard for singularity (as opposed to universal law) and an understanding of the self that is not independent or autonomous but always "in relation." Traditional moral conceptions have privileged the "rights" of the ego and principles of rationalist determination that act as a calculus in assessing ethical relations between self and other. Kant, for example, argues that actions can be determined to be responsible according to a principle of universality, that an action is just if it can be followed logically in all situations and cases of that kind. He argues that a just act, therefore, must accord with a maxim that operates independently of

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any given situation – attention should focus on the principle, not any individuals in question. Indeed, the tradition of Western philosophy has sought to intellectualize ethics. From Aristotle to Spinoza to Mill, the Western tradition has attempted to conceptualize ethical behavior in systems of justice based upon rational orders of operation and justification.

Described by one scholar as a sort of "radical altruism," the ethics of Levinas challenge the traditional moral appeal to law or principles of justice.[12] According to Levinas, the appeal to universal law can work to shroud alterity, in effect, to disconnect the self from responsibility with a mediating legalism – one in which otherness is elided. In this type of appeal, a moral code or set of maxims serves to separate the self from the Other. Levinas insists that no mediating element should intervene, that the self's obligation to the Other is not informed by law, duty, precept, or religious coercion. As Richard Cohen explains, "it is not the law in the other person that a moral agent respects, but the very otherness of the other person [. . .] in the very flesh of the Other, the Other's mortality, aging, degradation, suffering."[13]

The writings of Levinas – like those of Nietzsche and Heidegger – seek the demolition of the absolutism that is evident, for example, in Hegel's systematic philosophy. However, Levinas believes that Nietzsche and Heidegger point only to an ultimate egoism, the self alone in the world operating under the will to power (rather than the modernist will to truth). Levinas rejects the *uber mensch* of Nietzsche; in place of the sovereign ego, Levinas posits the call of the Other, which positions the self in a relation of responsibility toward the Other's alterity. The ultimate aim of Levinas's work is thus to reclaim the Other in inviolable relation to the self. In this view, the difference of the Other can never be subsumed (and therefore should not be elided via appeal to principles of justice or morality).

For Levinas, and for this chapter's rumination on both actual and theoretical violence, conceiving of human relations structurally is paramount. Levinas holds that the rudiment of human existence is not solitude but sociality. He rejects the independent ego of Western rationalism and offers an ethics of intersubjectivity, what one critic has described as a "pre-ontological relation to alterity."[14] In his two most prominent works, *Infinity and Time* and *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas argues that ethics precedes knowledge, that ethics exists as a "first philosophy." For Levinas, the Other is anterior to the self, prior to discourse (and knowledge), and the self comes into being only in relation to the Other. The ethical relation is thus coincident with becoming, alterity its precondition. In this manner Levinas undermines the traditional subject/other relation of philosophy in which the subject, as author of his world, precedes and maps the Other. Moreover, the ethical relation is defined as a given, a constituent of existence, rather than a consequence of a social contract, universal maxim, or human-constructed code of rights and obligations. Levinas reverses the axis, so that, rather than deciphering or appropriating the Other, the self must "justify"

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its existence before the face of the Other, which commands as though from on high. The relationship is asymmetrical, not based on knowledge or recognition. One does not discern threat in the face of the Other but weakness, vulnerability, the bereft (the widow, the orphan, the homeless, etc.), and is thus called to responsibility. The self experiences a sort of structural guilt, a debt that never can be repaid. For Levinas, ethical obligation precedes the self's particular entry into the social order:

> The ethical exigency to be responsible for the other undermines the ontological primacy of the meaning of being; it unsettles the natural and political positions we have taken up in the world and predisposes us to a meaning that is other than being, this is otherwise than being.[15]

Levinas contends that the face of the Other – which is no specific Other – calls one to ethical responsibility. This does not mean that ethics is purely abstract; human encounters are material and particular, but situated in a relationship that is prior to any significance ascribed or mediated by philosophy, culture, politics, or place.[16] Ethical relation for Levinas is a constitutive, phenomenological structure that orients the self in its becoming toward otherness. Obligation is not something taught but pre-given. As Dorota Glowacka summarizes Levinas, the I is made possible so it can "reach out and aid."[17] Levinas's writing is notoriously difficult, and his views find no easy translation into political program or specific injunction (or prohibition). In fact any moral codification would countervail the thrust of his assertions. Yet his passionate insistence on respecting the singularity of the Other extends a clarion call to responsibility, one that reveals the ethical aspect of every human relation.

On the occasion of Levinas's death, Derrida spoke at Levinas's funeral and credited the deceased with awakening him to an understanding of responsibility.[18] Indeed, Derrida's later writing owes a great deal to Levinas's ethical formulations. With varying degrees of approval, scholars have noted a shift in Derrida's work in the last decade, a movement from textual criticism to a messianic politics. Nina Pelikan Straus has described this turn as one from Nietzschean resistance to Dostoevskian self-submission.[19] This assessment highlights the Levinasian element, of the constitutive obligation between self and Other in Derrida's later work. It also sheds a new light on the aim and object of deconstruction. In Derrida's late writings, intertextual critiques of logocentrism morphed into messianic expressions of the ethical. Derrida has in fact claimed that deconstruction is justice. One finds that Derrida espouses the Levinasian notion of ethical singularity, a view that holds imposition of creed, law, or ideology as a violence upon the other.

Richard Rorty has criticized Derrida's late work as overly obscure and private, failing to demonstrate an applicable ethical principle that could

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be considered public.[20] Rodolphe Gashe argues in Derrida's defense that these late writings intend to avoid advocating moral precept or dictum. It is indeed the disavowal of legislation that informs Derrida's conception of justice, which views justice not as an appeal to general principle but as an occasion of singularity. Justice, for Derrida, is in sum a moment that dismisses moral or juridical mediation in favor of a unique encounter with the Other. In keeping with Levinas before him, Derrida holds that moral codes occlude and systematize relations, actually rendering the Other invisible through an appeal to law or principle. By deconstructing the normative ethical relation, the Other is granted honor, her singularity. Justice, according to Derrida:

> depends, *at every instant*, on new assessments of what is urgent in, first and foremost *singular* situations, and of their structural implications. For such assessment, there is, by definition, no pre-existing criterion or absolute calculability; analysis *must begin* anew every day everywhere, without ever being guaranteed by prior knowledge.[21]

This assertion is not meant to defer engagement or to invite anarchy so much as to respect and honor the eventfulness of the encounter, the occasion of the decision, and the unique being of the Other.

This insistence upon the singularity of the moment, the undecidable nature of the moment, informs Derrida's concern for the messianic – for that which interrupts the economy of the Same – and brings the self into an attendant posture, awaiting the call of the other. Christopher Wise has discussed this feature of Derrida's thought as a "universal messianic structure,"[22] a kind of "hopeful anticipation, or a waiting for the truthful word of the other."[23] The messianic does not involve any identifiable messiah, or any supernatural or transcendent intervention; rather, Derrida focuses on the messiah "effect" as a particular attitude of the self that keeps it open to interruption and difference. In this light, deconstructive gestures or encounters function to perform justice, opening the event "to the incalculable, non-programmitizable response by an Other for whose arrival they have opened the way."[24]

In examining the ethical writings of both Levinas and Derrida, one may identify two different kinds of violence conveyed in imagistic and conceptual form. For both theorists, the egoistic inclination of the self always threatens violence upon the Other, always threatens to deform or appropriate the difference of the Other, and to bring the Other under its own knowledge. In this light, a recognition or representation of the Other is tantamount to subjugation. Both writers denounce rationalist presumption and decry the violence of systematization and legalism. The other type of violence described by these authors, however, concerns the rupture of the self and its egological prerogatives. In this type of violence, for Levinas,

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the Other wounds the self, breaking self-containment and composure. For Derrida, this dynamic is given messianic implications; the opening of the self allows for the "coming" of something other. In the work of both figures, this kind of wounding or laceration proves hopeful, revealing the intersubjective nature of the self and its primary formation.

This sort of ethical modeling found in Levinas and Derrida may spur fervor and a passionate regard for otherness, but their insights can prove frustrating when brought to bear upon particular, material moments of cultural exchange. And while their writing prompts valued speculation as to the nature (and possibility) of ethical social actions and utterances, they give no clear directive as to how an ethics of otherness might inform aesthetic acts or performative gestures, especially those pertaining to violence and trauma. One can at best only surmise how a performance event might evoke, represent or respond to an engagement with otherness.

The insights of Levinas and Derrida urge both caution and imagination for a theatre artist. Often these writers cite the Old Testament injunction against "graven images," a reference that highlights a dubious regard for representational practices. Levinas is profoundly distrustful of any representational or mimetic mode. Seen as a grand egological enterprise, he argues, representation mutilates, denies, and erases. The high degree of emphasis that Levinas extends to the Other suggests that the self should (and can) never speak for the Other and should never attempt to embody or represent the Other (which would translate into a form of idolatry). Indeed, such a view cuts to the root of theatrical representation. For Levinas, the Other can never be brought under the self's knowledge, and any representation would thus prove a deformation. As Jill Robbins observes, in "objecting to the 'theatricalization' of ethical rapports in figural interpretation, Levinas seems also to object to the possibility of theatrical representation itself."[25]

This profoundly anti-representational bias in Levinas invites consideration of alternate modes or tactics. Robbins notes that Levinas often mentions novels and dramas in his writing in favorable terms. Levinas cites Dostoevsky, and often the tragedies of Shakespeare. Robbins suggests that Levinas as a rule disapproves of mimetic forms, but that he seems fascinated with works that approach the experience of trauma, that come to the limits of representation. Levinas indeed extends favor to artworks that grapple with the Shoah. According to Glowacka, Levinas does leave open the possibility that certain poetic language may function outside the economy of representation and thus may work in a non-mimetic fashion, effecting an experience of shock and disturbance; Levinas claims this effect in the language of Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*.[26]

A possible alternative to representation is suggested by Lyotard, who asserts that representation cannot hold incommensurabilities. He thus argues for non-mimetic art forms, negative and nonfigural, that "witness" before the impossibility of containment.[27] Lyotard's argument suggests that

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witnessing may prove an alternative to representation, and certainly the "call to witness" runs throughout contemporary ethical writing. What witnessing involves and how it can be conveyed in a performance event bears close scrutiny and considerable theorizing. Vivian Patraka's work on Holocaust museums, which explores the complexities of representing or commemorating genocidal violence, asks the sort of questions that theatre practitioners may profitably confront.[28] How can actors witness onstage, honoring the singularity of the Other? How can dramatic texts avoid the representational violence of surrogation or appropriation? How can performance provide the violent laceration that opens the self to the Other? How can theatre be justice?

Claude Lanzmann's vigorous assertion that his film *Shoah* should evidence "no moralizing gesture" points toward a kind of aesthetic posture that may honor the ethics of otherness.[29] What may prove a central and crucial element in an aesthetic form of witnessing is its conversational aspect. Both Levinas and Derrida renounce monologic assertion and suggest a type of aesthetic encounter in which the self attempts to remain open and attentive to the Other, as a listener or a witness. For Levinas, this relation may be understood in the differentiation between the Saying and the Said, the latter indicating a fixity of assertions and relations, and the former highlighting a continuous interaction that remains open to change and difference.[30] The Saying and the Said, in essence, embody different attitudes to the Other. Saying, which Levinas privileges, should be understood as a mode of address or a type of greeting. It is, in short, a verbal acknowledgment of the Other that functions as a sort of invitation. Conversely, the Said pertains to content, to the constative impact of the utterance, which implies thematizing and knowledge, that is, the Said operates in a declarative mode, conveying a content that has already been determined or thematized by the outlook of the speaker. For Levinas, an emphasis on the Said seeks to bring the Other under the subject's knowledge, and this translates to an act of subjugation and violence. As Glowacka explains, ethical language enacts a kind of dispossession, where the I is evicted by the Other from its home in language.[31]

While an ethics of otherness can both challenge and inspire, its implications for theatrical practice warrant increased investigation and scrutiny. Both theatre scholars and practitioners may benefit from further exploration, from experiments in staging the Saying as opposed to the Said. Before concluding this chapter I wish to engage in a brief assessment of the recent David Hare play *Stuff Happens*, a work that foregrounds Western politics, ideological imperatives, and the violence enacted upon nameless others. Hare's play serves well as an ethical test-case, as the work generated very heated and often polarized reactions, drawing attention to the delicate and complicated nature of political commentary and the docudrama approach. In identifying and addressing key elements of the play and its varied critical responses,

I hope to forward a few compelling questions and speculations concerning this work and its particular manifestation of ethical relations, questions that might invite broader consideration of the stage and its efficacy as a vehicle for witnessing and justice.

Premiering in the fall of 2004 at the Royal National Theatre, *Stuff Happens* dramatizes the political maneuverings of the Bush administration in the run-up to the Iraq War, representing onstage a wide array of contemporary figures, from Tony Blair to Donald Rumsfeld to Jacques Chirac. Focusing upon a recent historical flashpoint, Hare's play exhibits curious parallels with Moisés Kaufman's much-discussed piece *The Laramie Project*. While the latter explores the local context of Laramie, Wyoming in response to the murder of a gay college student, both works highlight and emphasize their use of factual transcribed material; both convey multiple personal and political viewpoints; and both investigate an instance of violence that reveals wider cultural tensions and ideological commitments. On a basic level these plays function as indictments of aggression, as pleas for respect and moral responsibility. Jill Dolan characterizes Kaufman's intentions as "sympathetic and benign,"[32] and Hare's motives too – presumably enlightened and compassionate – seem in keeping with a Levinasian outlook, exhibiting a concern for difference and a wariness of political expediency.

In *The Laramie Project* Father Roger Schmit, the local Catholic priest, challenges the Tectonic company with this cautionary note: "I will trust you people that if you write a play of this that you [...] say it right, say it correct. I think you have a responsibility to do that."[33] The burden of such responsibility does not escape David Hare, who acknowledges the obligation that comes with staging historical events. In the author's note to *Stuff Happens* he conscientiously accounts for his methods and material. Quoting sources verbatim, he assures that his work has been "authenticated from multiple sources, both private and public" (Hare enlisted the services of a professional researcher from Columbia University).[34] While Hare does not identify the piece as a documentary and forthrightly acknowledges that many private scenes derived from his own imagination, as speculations, he affirms: "Nothing in the narrative is knowingly untrue."[35]

This quasi-ethnographic approach gives platform to various voices and perspectives; it gives the impression of Saying, of bringing disparate utterances into a kind of open dialogical debate. Many critics reported some astonishment that Hare did not assume a more polemical, censorious authorial stance, given the malfeasance of the Bush administration. The Reviewer for *The Daily Telegraph*, for instance, found the piece "admirably fair and even-handed."[36] Most viewers did not encounter the expected, facile caricature of George Bush, but a sphinx-like figure of complicated resolve (if anything Blair comes off worse in Hare's dramatization). One of the most highly charged speeches in the play proceeds from a war supporter, the "Angry British Journalist," who decries the luxury and excess of the West,

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its disputation over the "style" of the invasion, and its devaluation of "the splendid thing done." He honors the Iraqi liberation – "freedom given to a people who were not free."[37]

Stuff Happens, nonetheless, may invite the criticism that has targeted other practitioners of docudrama, such as Kaufman and Anna Deveare Smith, that the factuality of the interviews feeds the rhetorical design of the author's intent. Stephen Bottoms emphasizes this point in his analysis of Hare's work, noting that "such plays can too easily become disingenuous exercises" obscuring the manipulation of authorial motive and opinion.[38] In this view, the multiplicity of voices (gained through transcripts) produces the semblance or effect of polyphony, while a prevailing aesthetic structure controls and shapes. In Hare's work an overt theatricalism frames the play; like *The Laramie Project*, *Stuff Happens* opens with a sequence that foregrounds the "actors" who will appear in the subsequent drama. Serving as something of a narrator, the figure identified as "An Actor" introduces the historical figures and gives commentary through the course of the play. On several occasions this figure is less than impartial. When Cheney declares that he had "other priorities" that prevented him from enlisting in the military during the Vietnam War, An Actor retorts: "Cheney proves himself willing to take on responsibilities others shirk."[39] The play then cites a 1974 memo in which Cheney admits he cannot correct a "drainage problem" in the first-floor White House bathroom. Other instances reveal a stronger authorial hand, such as the scene involving the phone conversation between Blair and Bush that suggests the Bush administration called a halt to the British Army's advance upon Osama bin Laden at Tora Bora so that US troops could intervene and gain the headlines. And numerous critics have noted the "ennobling" characterization given to Colin Powell, who is made to serve as a dramatic foil to the president, emerging as a sympathetic Brutus figure.

While *Via Dolorosa*, Hare's short play on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, reveals the moral incertitude of the playwright and his reluctance to take sides, *Stuff Happens* may demonstrate a different authorial posture. In interviews Hare has spoken of the Iraq War with clarity and conviction; he characterizes the war as a "crime," the "biggest mistake in foreign policy since Suez."[40] Detractors of *Stuff Happens* consequently view the cultivated ambiguity of the play as a ruse, regarding the work less as a play than a political lecture. Such criticism draws attention to matters of intent and audience – for whom is the play intended? For what end? Whose position is affirmed and empowered?

Hare's harsher critics regard the play as self-serving and self-congratulatory. Alastair Macaulay observes: "There's a narcissism with Hare's theatre-as-journalism [. . .] elegantly making a spectacle out of his even-handed humanity."[41] Such an assessment sees *Stuff Happens* performing a kind of openness that the text in fact undercuts. Many note Hare playing

to a receptive leftist audience, offering images and perceptions that only corroborate already-held assumptions. For Rosie Millard, "Nothing was challenged, no surprises were sprung"; she continues: "Weedy jokes about how jejeune the Bush rhetoric is got a riotous reception, as if left-wing London had never heard anything so right-on."[42] The reviewer for *The Independent* also recognized the sympathetic alliance of author and audience and opined: "Those who described the National's staging of David Hare's *Stuff Happens* as 'brave' should perhaps have paused for a moment to think about how much nerve would have been required to put on a play which argued that the Prime Minister was right to go into Iraq."[43] Such criticism points to Hare's surety of viewpoint and finds that the play's conclusion preceded its investigation and execution.

American critic John Lahr expresses admiration for Hare's work and views the drama as a kind of redress, a counter to Rumsfeld's obfuscation – that "stuff happens." If we, as Lahr, see the play as "rectifying that omission," then Hare's piece on some level promises understanding, revelation of the motives and machinations that brought the United States to war.[44] This promise, however, points to a fundamental dilemma in the theatrical enterprise, that is, how to "fill" an "omission" in an ethically responsible manner. Such theatrical surrogation brings up crucial concerns of authority and assertion. *Stuff Happens* functions as an in-depth investigation of power, the limits of knowledge in the service of power; yet, we can question the play in terms of its own authority (and limits). To what degree does the play's "knowledge" accurately or ethically compensate for the lacuna attending the war (as we may question whether *The Laramie Project* fills the "loss" of Matthew Shepard with its own politics of tolerance and inclusivity)?

Jon Erickson is one of the first theatre scholars to have explored the implications of Levinas's thought on theatre practice, and he warns against "mere self-serving attitudinizing" in performance; he writes that the stage "is there not to 'teach' the audience a lesson."[45] Erickson's injunction points to an element of *Stuff Happens* that is both powerful yet suspect, that is, its implicit condemnation of aggression and abusive political prerogative. Few would argue for the glorification of war, the indiscriminate slaughter of innocent civilians, or any unilateral colonialist enterprise; yet, Levinas draws caution to moral certitudes (how to take sides), to the imposition of ideals on the singularity of others. Despite the play's best efforts to operate in a dialogical fashion, to convey a laudable message of conscience in face of Bush's militarism, *Stuff Happens*, like *The Laramie Project*, may promote a heart-felt call to ethical responsibility while reducing the Other in so doing. The play's didactic affirmation, an assertion of the Said, may overshadow and pre-empt any interrogation of the Saying.

While *Stuff Happens* implicitly condemns the arrogance and presumption of the Bush administration, which has acted unilaterally in its invasion, revealing itself as deaf to the call of the Other, Hare exhibits his own

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presumption. In this light, Bush and company emerge as the Other for Hare, and the playwright exhibits little reluctance in assigning motive and intent to these individuals. The focus on Western political figures leads to a striking feature of Hare's work, that is, the absence of Iraqi voices in a play about the Iraq War. And when such an Iraqi figure does appear, he comes at the closing of the drama, arguing that nothing will change until Iraqis take up the banner of freedom for themselves. Such a closing may introduce an Iraqi viewpoint (though this pronouncement may affirm a Western individualism). Still, the ending seems somewhat strained; the play concludes with an unsettling sense of anonymity, that bombs will fall, and nameless innocents will die.

What may be at stake is the very singularity of the Iraqi, of any or all Iraqis, that their otherness may be subordinated to the advancement of a moral or political vision (Hare has been quite outspoken in his critique of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and has linked it to the Iraq war). Viewed in this way, the aggression of violence implicit in *Stuff Happens* does not bring a destabilization of the self, a rending of assurances, but an opportunity to "represent" or "replace" alterity with a surrogate moral imperative. As Jill Robbins argues, "to approach the Other armed with a concept such as community [...] (or any other humanistic platitude) would destroy the alterity of the Other in the very guise of respecting him or her."[46] To explore the injustice of the Iraq War – to attempt to "understand" the violence directed at nameless victims – as an occasion to theatrically advocate for tolerance and community would, for Levinas, itself prove an occasion of violence and injustice. Jill Dolan has criticized the New York production of *The Laramie Project* with representing "the citizens in the play as a means to an end, rather than ends in themselves."[47] Dolan's concern points to the over-valuation of ideas or politics at the expense of individuals. In its surety of purpose, *Stuff Happens* may assert its conviction as a declarative act and in so doing prove deaf to the call of the Other.

That plays such as *The Laramie Project* and *Stuff Happens*, so profoundly political (and moral) in content and orientation, can engender ethical complexities indicates the depth and difficulty of claiming and embodying ethical relations on stage. Conventional representation enacts violence upon otherness, reforming alterity according to the knowledge of the self. Moralizing enacts violence, bringing the singular under universal law. For theorists such as Levinas and Derrida, salutary violence is that experienced by the subject when confronted with the irreducibility of the Other, when the self is torn and wounded. One can perhaps only imagine a theatre that achieves this effect, that operates as an invitation, an opening for the arrival of the Other, and a witness to a momentary justice. What intrigues me is the possibility of performing the Saying, the address to the Other that invites, that demands no closure or thematizing, that serves less to interpret than to interrupt. Such a theatre might liken itself to the dwelling described

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by Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, a place disordered by the coming of the unknown:

> You surprise me by coming to me. Even if I invited you, your coming disturbs my world. Indeed, your entering into my dwelling place interrupts the coherence of my economy; you disarrange my order in which all things familiar to me have their proper place, function, and time. Your emergence makes holes in the walls of my house.[48]

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