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of Glasgow

Heddon, D. and Howells, A. (2011) *From talking to silence: a confessional journey*. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 33 (1). pp. 1-12. ISSN 1520-281X

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/54210/>

Deposited on: 30 September 2011

## **FROM TALKING TO SILENCE**

### **A Confessional Journey**

Dee Heddon and Adrian Howells

#### **DEE: INTRODUCING ADRIAN HOWELLS**

Our culture is saturated with confessional opportunities, ranging from chat shows to “Reality TV,” from internet blogs to social networking sites such as Facebook. It seems that wherever you turn people are more than willing to engage with an unburdening of their deepest and darkest secrets. This proliferation of confessional technologies has been mirrored by an evolving genre of autobiographical, confessional live performance. In the UK, a considerable body of work based on the sharing of personal material has been created by artists such as Mem Morrison, Bobby Baker, Ursula Martinez, Curious and Third Angel, to name just a few.

Over the past ten years, performance artist Adrian Howells has made a significant contribution to this confessional performance landscape, creating and touring performances in which he confides in strangers hoping, in turn, that they will share details with him. Adrian structures his performances around dual notions of “transaction” and “transformation,” with exchange anchored in the dialogic: the oral/aural, the spoken and the heard. Most recently, Adrian’s work has tended to be performed for a single spectator at a time. In this form of performance practice – intimate, personal and interactive – the boundary between performer and spectator dissolves in the process of exchange, an exchange that asks for a very committed and at times vulnerable sort of spectatorship.

How does this performance work sit alongside – or in resistance to – the glut of mass-mediated confessions? For the past three years, in his role as a Creative Fellow at the University of Glasgow (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council), Adrian has been exploring further the nature of risk and intimacy in performance, asking what sorts of confessions might take place in a secular culture, and with what effects. My own long-standing interest in performances that use autobiographical material has allowed me to act as an “academic mentor” to Adrian – a critical friend and an informed interlocutor – for the duration of his fellowship.<sup>1</sup> I have had the privilege of seeing first hand how he works. I have also had the opportunity to participate in the work itself and to offer feedback from the inside, prompting shifts in the practice as it has developed.

Three years offers a considerable – and unusual – amount of time and space for an artist to pursue a defined “problem”: in this instance, the place of confession in live performance. Time and space affords the opportunity (too often, unfortunately, considered a costly luxury) to reflect, to question, to challenge, and to revise. Prompted by the personal frame of Adrian’s work, in the following pages we offer personal, reflective accounts of the research journey: Adrian’s, from the perspective of the artist; mine, from the perspective of the spectator. What both accounts reveal is the entirely unexpected shift

from a form of performance that places talking at its heart, as a prompt for and signal of 'intimacy', to the use of silence as a way to structure other types of intimacy and "confession." Adrian's three year journey saw him not only drop his drag performance-mask of "Adrienne," but also, more radically perhaps, what we came to recognize as the mask provided by "talking." In shared silence, Adrian found a different mode of risk taking, communication and transformation.

### **INTRODUCING "ADRIENNE": "THE CONFESSING ANIMAL" (AH)**

Whilst the ontology of theatre is one of communal experience, my work has been motivated by the sense that in this age of mass-mediation and technological advancement there is a necessity to prioritize opportunities for audiences to have intimate face-to-face, one-to-one encounters in real time with real people. My work prioritizes interpersonal connectedness and what I refer to as an authentic experience between two people (though the question of "authenticity" in the field of performance is always vexed). My presumptions about confessional exchange have been predicated on an entrenched, perhaps cultural belief in the therapeutic benefits of confession, it being akin to a "talking cure." Indeed, my own oft-repeated mantra is "a burdened shared is a burdened halved." Through my performance experience, I intuited that I needed to confess in order to give permission to and put at ease the audience-participant, encouraging them to do the same. So, the exchange was consistently dialogic, predominantly both an oricular (spoken) and auricular (heard) experience, performed within a wider cultural context of the mass-mediatization of the personal and private made public.

For the six years prior to embarking on my fellowship, I adopted a performance persona, "Adrienne." Adrienne is less a drag queen than another version of me; a man wearing thick make-up and rather unglamorous, woman-next-door clothes. Adrienne is someone you can lean on and trust. The space which Adrienne occupies is equally "dressed." For *Adrienne's Dirty Laundry Experience* (2003), for example, performed at the Arches in Glasgow as part of the annual queer festival, Glasgay!, I transformed a bland basement room of a theatre space into a Laundromat-come-living room, complete with plumbed in washing machine, installed tumble dryer and washing lines; all the other paraphernalia that you would usually find in a Laundromat was added. Audience-participants were invited to bring me their dirty laundry to wash and for the time it took the wash cycle to run its course, I would get them to share their metaphorical dirty laundry over a cup of tea and a biscuit. I liked the fact that people left the space with a tangible, literal bag of clean laundry, but also that they might feel that their "souls" had been cleansed a little.

Embracing the idea of exchange, an entire wall of the "laundry" was covered with a display of photos of me: friends and family from childhood to teenager and into adulthood, depicting various looks and styles I had adopted, as well as states of drag. This was a photographic representation of my own dirty laundry of the past forty years.

*Adrienne: The Great Depression* (2004), was performed at the Great Eastern Hotel in London. For a week, I inhabited one of their rooms and lived with(in) several self-devised rules: I could not leave the room at any time for the duration of the week; I could not draw the heavy curtains so that I would never know whether it was day or night; every piece of crockery that was delivered by room service had to stay; and finally, that having put Adrienne's elaborate make-up on at the beginning of the week, I would never remove it, or indeed wash, shower or shave.

During the week I mounted all the usual photographs, but these took on a much more poignant aspect when framed by knowledge of a recent bout of severe depression. I also wrote a "stream of consciousness" text which I cut up and pasted around the room. My time with the audience-participant was committed to talking openly and honestly about the suffering of my depression and confiding very private details of attempted suicide, self-loathing, pain and despair. I hoped that this gesture of openness would encourage my guests to share their moments of darkness too, lightening them in the process.

Lulu Levay, of *The Guardian* newspaper, booked in for the last slot of the performance at the very end of my week's stay. I had seen people on the hour, every hour, for the previous 48 hours. Her visceral account captures the decomposition of both the room and me: "Darkness tumbled from the room, as did a rank, BO riddled musty smell... Adrienne was sprawled across the bed in a dramatic woeful fashion.... Her red blouse was stained, makeup swampy, and every spare inch of floor, dressing table, beside table was drowned in over spilling ashtrays, dirty cups, glasses, discarded newspapers and infinite trays of mould-encrusted plates harboring half eaten food.... The scene of a wallowing depressive unfolded."

*Salon Adrienne* (2005), meanwhile, presented in a hairdressing salon in Glasgow, was lighter in tone but nevertheless prompted both me and the participants to engage with the inevitability of aging, using the mirrored surfaces of the salon as a space for literal and metaphorical reflection.

As suggested by these examples, my Adrienne performances were located in familiar, frequently domesticated spaces. These matched my equally "domesticated" persona, both intended to reassure the audience-participant, engendering a sense of safety, familiarity and security.

#### **MEETING ADRIAN/ADRIENNE IN SALON ADRIENNE (DH)**

*I book in for an hour long appointment at Comerford Hairdressing, Glasgow. This is my first experience of Adrian's work. I have no idea what to expect. When I arrive I am met by a very friendly "Adrienne," a heavily made-up, peroxide-blond man dressed in a blue tabard, a pink blouse and denim skirt. Welcome to Salon Adrienne. For the next hour, I experience the caring hands of Adrienne, as she tenderly washes my hair; at the same time, I experience her gentle confessional prompting, as she asks me about the last time someone washed my hair for me. I tell her about those childhood baths,*

*when I inherited the dirty water left over from the person before, and my mum used a kitchen jug to rinse off the shampoo. From a distance of some thirty five years, I can still recall the persistently soapy smell of that white, deeply scratched, plastic jug. Adrienne tells me she had a jug that smelled just like that too.*

*Ensnared safely in the seat in front of the mirror, I sip tea and eat biscuits. Adrienne reveals her dislike for her naked, aging body; the trepidation of standing in front of a mirror. "I'd like you to take a long, hard look in the mirror and tell me what you see there," she instructs me. I see a woman who is not much younger than her mum was when she died of cancer. Though the woman in the mirror looking back at me carries some lines marking her age, she does not look old; not old enough to die anyway. I feel ok about getting older, looking older. I also see Adrienne, standing behind me, protectively, encouragingly. She gently takes my head in her hands and begins to tenderly massage my scalp. We have talked a lot, sharing reflections. For this final moment we share, instead, a companionable silence. I am glad of it and let the weight of my head, filled with thoughts, rest in her hands and simply be held.*

*Whilst the difference at the heart of every "repeat" performance is a truism, every performance of Salon Adrienne is necessarily different. A skilful dramaturgical structure guarantees different degrees of intimacy/revelation and different textures, atmospheres or moods. However, there is also an element of improvisation since Adrian cannot script the conversation in advance. He remains attentive to the moment, responding to and feeding off what is being said by his co-creator. The performance of Salon Adrienne that I am participating in, then, is made just for me because it is made with and by me, albeit in the capable, experienced hands of Adrian. I am put at ease. I am solicited, courted, consulted, included, engaged, heard, responded to, attended to... This is bespoke theatre and as I leave the Salon I do feel really special. I have learnt about Adrian, but I have also learnt about myself. This is the value of exchange.*

### **HELD (2006) (AH)**

Beginning my Creative Fellowship in 2006, I was keen to extend my explorations into risk, intimacy and confession by engaging questions of physical intimacy, rather than just conversational intimacy. *Held*, staged in three different spaces of an apartment, tested different degrees of physical intimacy with individual spectators, each gesture reflecting the room that we were situated in. We held hands across the kitchen table, talking about hand holding, about what it means culturally and personal memories of hand holding. In the living room, we sat side-by-side on a sofa and talked about music and memories for fifteen minutes. In the bedroom, I spooned into the audience-participant, on a bed, for half an hour. Given a choice, participants opted for silence rather than talking.

This final action unexpectedly revealed to me the potential for bodily – or non-verbal – exchange: the way the body lying beside me was maintained (tense or relaxed), shifts in tensions, the rhythms of

breathing and depths of breath... During a Fierce Festival performance in Birmingham in May 2007, a Nigerian born-again Christian woman offered up her spoken confession to me in the first two stages – revealing that she had never been properly touched or held by anyone. Her disciplined and formal Christian background meant that she even had to kneel to speak to her parents if they were already themselves seated. In the final stage of *Held*, “spooning” into her on a bed in silence, I felt every sinew and muscle of her body relax and let go over the course of that half hour. In the context of what had taken place in the previous two stages this felt very much like a bodily confession and, for me, a different way of listening.

### **BEING HELD (DH)**

*It is Adrian's first research performance, Held. I enter a flat in the West End of Glasgow and am met by Adrian at the door. There is no “Adrienne,” just Adrian, but I am surprised how little that seems to matter. He sounds and acts just the same. Adrian welcomes me, ushering me into the kitchen where he makes us a pot of tea and offers me a plate of cakes as we sit at the kitchen table. Taking hold of my hands in his, I tell him I have always held the hands of my lovers, though when I first became a lesbian it signaled a proud, public announcement of sexuality as much as an act of intimacy between two people. I also, though, admit to a painful self-consciousness about my hands, which are always hot and sticky. I recall that as a six year old school girl, I was persistently in trouble because my pencil marks would smudge on the page, due to the sweat. The solution, provided by my mum, was a pair of surgical gloves. My mum was a nurse and this was a gesture of love on her part. Adrian holds my hands reassuringly, tightly, warmly.*

*In the living room, sitting side by side, on a couch, with Adrian's arm draped around me, I am invited to select a track from an eclectic range of CDs (ranging from Joni Mitchell to Abba) and to talk about why I have chosen it. I choose an Eagles song, *Hotel California*, because it reminds me of Moira, a girl I knew when I was a teenager. She loved this song. I lost touch with Moira when I was 15 and doubt I've heard this song since then.*

*In the final stage, the bedroom, Adrian explains that we are going to spoon into each other. I can have a pillow placed between us if I wish, and we can talk or simply be silent. I choose not to have a pillow and not to talk. We simply lie together for thirty minutes. I am extremely conscious of the weight of Adrian's arm embracing me, and the size of his body next to mine, which feels so different to that of my partner. I never realized till this moment how much my body had absorbed and remembered her particular shape, and the shape we make together. I lie very still next to Adrian, the silence allowing my mind to wander: What sort of intimacy is this? Can one be intimate with a stranger?*

*My reflections resonate with others':*

The experience itself was fairly challenging but not uncomfortable. I felt that Adrian and I went through a sort of accelerated friendship and we ended up sharing the sort of moments that I haven't even shared with many of my closest friends and family. [Participant, Cork, *Held*]<sup>2</sup>

It was moments of nostalgia, all those times that I've been held in different ways and for different reasons. It was personal confessions from Adrian that [made] me sympathise with him, whilst being comforted by him. It was an exchange of stories, and exchange of intimacy. It has left me reminiscing of times when I've been held. And when I'm in similar positions of intimacy with others I'm transported back to the performance. It made me appreciate being held. [Participant, Birmingham, *Held*]

### ***FOOT WASHING FOR THE SOLE (2008) (AH)***

Thematically and conceptually this attention to body language was significantly developed in my next research-led performance, *Foot Washing for the Sole*. I sought to explore further the opportunity for an audience-participant to experience an internalized, silent response to a physical and sensorial stimulation. Could there be a dialogic exchange between two bodies in close proximity that was not dependent on the oral/aural? Is "body language" confessional? The phrase "listening to our bodies" is commonplace but what is it to listen to the body of another?

Having attended a foot washing service at St Columba's Church in Glasgow, in connection with another project, I was struck by the intimacy of this act – an intimacy often structured between strangers and framed as an act of "giving." Reading the account of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper in St John's Gospel I was struck by the words he uttered as he performed this task: "What I do for you now, go and do for one another." Foot washing was framed as generative.

For *Foot Washing for the Sole* I knelt on the floor at the feet of a single audience member, and performed the simple tasks of washing the feet, drying the feet, anointing the feet in frankincense and sweet almond oil, massaging the feet and finally kissing the feet (if permission was granted). My intention was that during the foot washing and drying I would facilitate a minimal, spoken exchange; during the massage, however, there would be an opportunity for silence and a bodily "conversation" between my hands and their feet. This silent time was also intended to provide opportunity for internal contemplation and self-reflection. I sought to shift the focus and attention away from the experience being about me and my inclination – or habit – to perform as Foucault's "confessing animal."<sup>3</sup> I asked seven questions during the foot washing stage that ensured the focus remained on the participant and would simultaneously allow for a body-memory connection and either a verbalized or an internalized confession. These seven questions were:

1. What is your relationship with your feet?
2. Do you ever give your feet a treat like having a pedicure or a foot massage?
3. How is it for you to have me kneel here washing your feet for you?
4. Has anyone else ever washed your feet for you?
5. Could you wash somebody else's feet for them?
6. Would you be prepared to wash a total stranger's feet?
7. Do you think your feet are capable of picking things up and leaving things behind (beyond the literal, physical sense)?

### POINTS OF CONNECTION (DH)

*I am in a warm room, bathed in red. I sit in a large chair, with Adrian at my feet. I close my eyes, and together we inhale seven times. Adrian then takes the weight of my feet in his hands and washes away their tiredness. I don't remember anyone ever washing my feet for me, other than when I had a foot massage in Thailand. "Could you wash somebody else's feet for them? Would you be prepared to wash a total stranger's feet?" Given the intimacy involved in washing another's feet, what I am actually being invited to "pass on" is the performance of intimacy, of holding another, of taking care of another, of attending to another:*

*But perhaps Adrian also washes away the gap between us. Like the points of connection he seeks to activate between my feet and my body, his actions serve to connect us. Conducting this part of the performance in silence, my eyes closed, I am keenly attuned to my other senses: to the smell of the oils; to the warmth in the room; to the touch of fingers between my toes; to my smooth, wet skin, in contact with another's skin. My primary sense is haptic, touching, an acute awareness of myself in combination with another. As Laura U Marks writes:*

*In a haptic relationship our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface. When this happens there is a concomitant loss of depth – we become amoeba-like, lacking a centre, changing as the surface to which we cling changes. We cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting.<sup>4</sup>*

*Where does his body end and mine begin? I give myself up to this touching and being touched. I wonder if Marks's loss of depth equates with an extension of self?*

*Whilst the connection is between these two bodies, his and mine, here and now, the wider political agenda is made explicit in the final action. Taking my right foot first, Adrian kisses it gently, saying "Shalom" (Peace), following this with a kiss to my left foot, and the phrase "Salaam Alaikum" (Peace be with you).<sup>5</sup>*



A generous act connecting two human beings profoundly in one space at one time.... I will take this in every step, knowing that everybody and every country are joined in some way.  
[Participant, Glasgow, *Foot Washing for the Sole*]

### **THE GARDEN OF ADRIAN (2009) (AH)**

My final research project, *The Garden of Adrian*, again taking a cue from religious frames, placed the bodily, performer/participant exchange and the potential for individual contemplation and internal dialogue/revelation within a garden environment. This garden was built inside a theatre which had, appropriately, originally been a church. The constructed garden, designed by Scottish artist, Minty Donald, contained real plants, trees, growing grass and other materials which I hoped would conjure calm, stillness and silence. Developing out of *Foot Washing*, in this performance I privileged the idea of experiential knowledge and sensorial experience over the cerebral or intellectual.<sup>6</sup> I was also determined that this final project should further explore ways of prompting particular kinds of silence (silences that are reflective, perceptive, focused, wandering), recognizing too that silence is not just an absence of sound, but might be a space carved out from the contemporary culture of particularly cacophonous noise (a noise to which mass-mediated confession contributes).

In reflecting on my practice over the three years, I realized that I had used “talking” as a mask, something to hide behind. Removing my incessant speaking in the previous pieces had, in fact, felt more risky than speaking intimate details. The introduction of silence has also concentrated my attention on the spectator-participant. In *The Garden of Adrian* exchange became a more solitary and internalized monologue – an exchange with/for self. I remained, though, a catalyst for the participant’s silent journey. The devising of structures for bodily exchanges prompted body-memories (for example, I washed the hands and fore-arms of audience-participants in a bird bath; I rested my head on their lap as they sat on a rock; I fed them strawberries, from my fingers to their mouth). Such acts often triggered strong autobiographical associations. Feedback also highlighted that it was the environment itself which served to transport participants to another world, another time and place. This “internal journeying,” mirroring the journey through the physical garden environment, was facilitated by a sense of time slowing down, an escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life that took place just outside. The garden provided an oasis where there was plenty of time, space and stillness in and around each interactive element of the garden to allow for contemplation.

### **GARDEN OF DELIGHTS (DH)**

*I sit in a deck chair, inside a well-worn garden shed and remove my socks and shoes, as instructed by a notice, putting on a pair of flip-flops left there just for me. There is a flask of tea and some shortbread in a Tupperware box, which I am invited to help myself to. The light seeping through the wooden slats of the shed attracts me like a moth. I try and peer through the tiny gaps but can see nothing. A sign on*

*the door in front of me teasingly asks “What are you looking for?” I can’t see what’s outside, but I can hear the sounds of bird song. Some fifteen minutes later, hearing Adrian gently calling me my name, I open the door of the shed and look down onto a beautiful garden, the garden of Adrian.*

*Looking up at me with a generous smile, Adrian invites me to join him and takes my hand. Over the next forty or so minutes, he leads me to five different places in his indoor garden. We take off our flip flops and stand, bare footed, in the cool, smooth soil. I realize, with some regret, that it is many years since the soles of my feet felt this particular texture. We spend many minutes looking, in detail, at a freesia planted in the soil. I gingerly pluck strawberries from Adrian’s fingers, letting the juice dribble down my chin, marveling at the depth of the flavors. I sit on a large rock, feet resting on cold smooth stones, cradling Adrian’s head that rests in my lap. Adrian gently washes my hands and arms with cool, sparkling water. I stand barefoot on buoyant grass, its blades peeking up between my toes, remembering summers in my gran’s garden. Adrian and I lie together on a check blanket laid out on the grass square and I drift off, a million miles away.*

*For the duration of my time in Adrian’s garden, I speak less than twenty words, and he only speaks to tell me what is going to happen next and check I am ok with that. In *The Garden of Adrian*, the final performance of Adrian’s three year research fellowship, the “babble” of confession has been exchanged for silent contemplation. My physical and literal journey through the internal garden is matched by an internal reflection that carries me on a journey through childhood reminiscences, remembering tastes, smells, sounds, and textures. We tarry long enough in this space for me to encounter other versions of my self on this journey, slowing down, allowing details to rush in, and then staying with them so that the information they carry is revealed to me, is re-inhabited, re-lived, re-encountered, re-membered, re-stored, re-storied, and then carefully re-turned.*

*Adrian has said almost nothing. I have said almost nothing – or at least not aloud. But I have had a full dialogue with my selves, prompted by Adrian’s careful actions and instructions: look, taste, hold, touch, feel, smell, be...*

*My final action, before I leave Adrian’s garden, is to take a little seedling with me, leaving in its place a plastic label carrying my name. When I get home, I transplant my seedling to the window box outside my kitchen. For the rest of the summer, I watch as it grows and strengthens and finally blooms into a riot of deep purple. And I remember Adrian’s garden and my journey through it, the things I saw, felt, tasted, touched, smelt, heard and thought...*

## **TOWARDS SILENCE (AH)**

Three years ago, my performances were filled with talking, mostly my own. My motivation for making confessional work was the sense that within a mass-mediated culture, what people sought was a genuine connection. I still believe this, but my sense of where that connection might be found has

shifted. At the end of this first post-millennial decade, swamped by the mass-mediatization of confession and the proliferation of such manifestations of it as occurs in “Reality TV” shows, it occurs to me that what people perhaps really crave are opportunities to escape from this version of synthetic “real life.” Rather than contributing to the deafening “white” noise, an alternative performance strategy might be to carve out other spaces, other modes of connection than the spoken exchange, other forms of the dialogic. In a noisy culture like mine, silence rings out loudly, offering another place to “be” or to become: to reflect, to imagine, to project, to re-connect – with self and others and other selves – through the unique relationship of a quiet, considered, one-to-one encounter. I feel that this is a place I might stay, at least for a while, even though it is not where I anticipated arriving.

Blessed, soothed, approved, loved, without a word. [Participant, *Garden of Adrian*]

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>. See Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, Basingstoke: London, 2008.
- <sup>2</sup>. Howells was invited to show his performances at a number of festivals. At each event, he either collected feedback in a post-show book, or via questionnaires emailed to participants.
- <sup>3</sup>. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, London: Penguin Books, 1990, 59.
- <sup>4</sup>. Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002, xvi.
- <sup>5</sup>. Howells’ has subsequently performed this piece in Tel Aviv and Nazareth, to both Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews.
- <sup>6</sup>. There was an intention for the interactive garden to emulate a Five Senses Meditation which I had encountered on a yoga and meditation retreat on the Holy Isle, off the west coast of Scotland, conducted by an elderly Tibetan Buddhist monk in the Mandala Gardens.