*People Places Things:* Addiction, Identity and Performance.

In Duncan Macmillan’s *People, Places Things* (2015)we are placed in the theatre of nouns. In part, the nouns inform the audience about addiction, the ostensible topic of the play, but these grammatical descriptors also offer insights about how we understand ourselves as the personal subject. The play examines the formation or personal identity and the performance of self in both the public and private spaces. Through the motif of addiction, the play considers our construction of both the normality and difference of identity to reveal both what we see in ourselves and, how we come to understand and interpret this identity. While the play is about the story of Emma, the central character who is an actress suffering from drug addiction and alcoholism, it is also about the nature of theatrical representation- of social and health issues such as addiction - but also of personal identity through language and narrative.

The play begins this exploration of self and identity naturally enough through an examination of the nature of representation in its own medium. If this play is to present a ‘real life’ issue such as addiction, how will the theatre be able to represent this reality? Nouns may do their job when they refer to real objects and people and places, but how can we hope to understand real life though theatrical artifice and construction? The play reminds us that if we are to understand ourselves through theatre as a mirror up to nation, what is it that we find out about ourselves via the stage?

As if to address this this question immediately, the play opens with a representation of theatrical genre. The play starts in the naturalistic style, the theatrical form which purports to present life to the audience as-it-is, allowing us to see through the fourth wall to the real life that would normally be going on behind closed doors.

The opening scene being played by two actors is from a Chekhov play, often considered the most typical theatrical example of naturalism, *The Seagull*. But although we recognise the scene as that which should represent nineteenth-century Russia, something already seems wrong. The verisimilitude that we might expect from such a naturalistic stage is at odds with the set in front of us – a white box, more reminiscent of Peter Brook’s experimental 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* than a conventional naturalistic play is the background set and rather than the traditional representation of the 19th century room, only a few signifiers are present to evoke the period – a lamp, a table and chair and the 19th century costumes of the actors.

Something else is wrong - the performance is not working as a naturalistic piece. Emma, the actress playing Nina, is having trouble remembering her lines. She stumbles physically and vocally, her dialogue is uneven, and the unseen off-stage audience can be heard beginning to laugh. Emma is obviously drunk or drugged, she can’t remember what to do on stage and is physically unstable, a visual manifestation of the inadequacy of her theatrical genre to demonstrate lived experience accurately. While this scene has set up a naturalistic premise for the scene we are watching – Emma the actress is an addict who is clearly in need of treatment, the opening scene also shows that the form will not hold; something is unstable.

The actor as Konstantin does not know how to respond to Emma as she loses the connection with her on-stage portrayal of Nina. Instead of playing Nina, Emma begins to play herself and starts to muse upon one of the central concerns of the Macmillan’s play – whether or not theatre has the ability to represent real life accurately. Emma is also hallucinating, seeing on-stage with her what might be the figure of her dead brother or an ex-boyfriend

He didn’t believe in the stage. He laughed at me. I don’t believe in it either. Not now. *As Emma talks her acting becomes more genuine. She is talking less in character and more as herself.* Not now that I’ve had real problems. Real things have happened. My heart is broken (Macmillan 13).

The boundary between lived experience and the ability to re-create that reality on stage is immediately self-evident here. Emma’s dialogue is a blend of Macmillan’s character of herself as Emma, along with that of Chekhov’s Nina, blurring the verbal line between lived experience and re-created art. It is also ironic that, as the stage directions explain, Emma‘s acting *‘becomes more genuine’* as she appears on stage ‘*more as herself’*. Macmillan’s Emma is thus most convincing as an actress when she is playing the figure of herself, rather than her adopted role.

The line between what the audience will accept as a real and convincing portrayal of a self, and the fictional nature of representation per se, is being played out for the audience. How do we as an audience know what is real or true and how can we rely on what we see represented before us? The play makes clear that this is not a question which is limited to the question of verisimilitude in the theatre. *People Places Things* makes it clear that we are looking at a representation of addiction as a real social issue; narrative is part of our real life as much as art, and to be asked to reflect upon narrative will also be to re-consider how we construct the concept of the self in society.

Emma draws attention to the distinction between narrative and its representation on stage. Macmillan continues to blend Emma’s words with those of her theatrical predecessor, Chekhov’s Nina. The only difference is the questions are raised by Nina at the end of *The Seagull,* whereas Emma raises them for the audience at the beginning, suggesting that as a contemporary audience we are still starting now from where Chekov’s play left off with this topic. Emma reminds Konstantin

You shot a seagull. Do you remember? Earlier in the play?

*Emma laughs.* I mean the *story,* I mean a long time ago you shot a /

that’s wrong too. Not you. What was I saying? I was talking about

the *theatre.* (Macmillan 13)

The main part of Nina’s speech that Macmillan does not include here is Nina’s observation about how the seagull came to be shot

‘Remember you shot a seagull? A man happened to come along, saw it and killed it, just to pass the time. A plot for a short story. No, that’s wrong.’(Chekhov 114)

It is perhaps too obvious here for Macmillan’s purpose to include this line but what his play underlines is that the relationship between a real-life event and its theatrical representation is remains unresolved by contemporary theatre. In both of their speeches Emma, like Nina, draws attention to the number of framing devices we are subject to as an audience to see a story on stage. Here it is Konstantin the character, the actor playing his part, the play as artefact, the story of the play and the theatrical realisation of the text on stage, which the audience engage with at the same time, in order to respond to the story of a fictional creation as if it were the story of a real person. There is a level of hopelessness about the difficulty of the task in hand. But what the play suggests is that at the centre of all of these narratives in ‘the *theatre’*  is not only the postmodern distinction between narrative and storytelling, but also the is the nature of narrative as a theoretical concept in itself.

The opening scene functions as a theatrical prolepsis of a debate about identity and language which is enacted throughout the play. The contrast of theatrical styles of traditional naturalism, set against the postmodern experimentation of the rest of the play, prefigures the later opposition between the conventional psychological therapeutic treatments of addiction versus the post-structuralist rejection of grand narrative - particularly Freudian grand narrative of self- reflection and story-telling in the context of the treatment of addiction.

Both Chekhov’s Nina and Macmillan’s Emma, represent psychic confusion about their identity through continuing to confuse character and metaphor. Emma quotes Nina’s lines from *The Seagull* ‘I’m a seagull. No, that’s not right, I’m an actress’ (Macmillan 12). Though this on one level helps to establish Emma’s disorientation and her need for the subsequent therapy in Macmillan’s play, it also links her to an unresolved question of narrative explanation which Macmillan’s play seems to suggest, remains as unresolved in contemporary theatre as it was two centuries ago.

In such poetic ways the play works to remind the audience that theatre is an imaginative construct which continues unable to represent lived experience authentically. Instead, Macmillan’s play tries to work at representation from a different level, to create a sense of lived experience through expressing a dissatisfaction about containment in language and using the full range of theatrical techniques closer to the realm of physical theatre to convey its own story. But the play constantly works to remind us that whatever the medium the story the audience encounters will always be mediated - it is not documentary, it is simply art.

How then can theatre represent real life? If theatre cannot do so authentically, then what can it do? The play turns to a more post-modern approach to evoking emotion and a sense of experience, a synecdoche of life instead. To emphasise this dissatisfaction with naturalism the remaining attempts at realism are swiftly dispensed with on stage. Emma breaks a glass and collapses and as she does so the set begins to be disassemble around her. As she falls and staggers in performance at the Wyndham’s theatre transfer from the National Theatre, there was the most clear evocation of the collapse of the usefulness of naturalism when Denise Gough playing Emma literally began to tear through the white walls of the set, her breaking through the second wall while we the audience watched through the fourth. What was revealed was startling. Behind this white paper wall on stage was another audience, who had been shielded behind the white paper throughout this first scene. Now the watchers have become the watched. By destroying the wall the play removes any idea that the show can provide the audience with a straightforward naturalistic representation of addiction as a 21st century social problem. Brecht has replaced naturalism as the theatre form for the play and the audience must now remain alert to see whether Brecht is any more successful at portraying reality. As Jeremy Herrin the show’s director points out ‘When you’re not trying to replicate objective reality in naturalistic ways, theatrically it means the play can be much more dynamic’ (Herrin, 2015).

As the clinical postmodern ‘trapezoid set’ (Tripney, 2016) replaces the pseudo-naturalism of *The Seagull* stage, Headlong’s production in London underlined this change of focus not only through visual cues but also through their use of soundscape. Instead of ‘Naturalistic sounds’, we hear ‘*A low rumble. A whine of tinnitus’* (Macmillan 13). The theatre world is changing all around us.

Now Emma is on stage as the addict, arriving at a rehab clinic. The evocation of her sense of reality is acute as Macmillan’s play forces her to grapples with images of the walls around her melting, seeing double as two actors dressed exactly the same appear from the middle of the reception desk, conjuring an addicts visual disturbances. We see what it is like to be an addict, we can watch what addiction feels like, how it changes our visual perspectives and interferes with our inhibitions and we can empathize with the experience of alienation that Emma feels from the world around her. The audience could almost begin to relax into the comforting surreal nature of the distorted environment in front of them. But again the theatrical conventions of the alternatives to naturalism begin to implode. As Emma watches the walls decay in front of her, again the conventions of creating realism slip, even this de-nuded environment won’t maintain its stability. The audience is expected to feel and see the sensation of all that Emma experiences as an addict.

We listen for example as Emma makes a call from the Reception at the clinic asking the person at the other end to help her by going to her flat to gather together all her drugs into one box

Emma: Just the one thing, can you please do just this one thing for me please I am just asking for…Look obviously I called the wrong person …Yes it *is* that serious. I’m not being dramatic, that is such a cunty thing to say. I’ll stop calling you a cunt when you stop being a cunt. Listen.

,

Mum. (Macmillan 16)

The audience is led through a whole line of amusement, imagining that Emma is calling one of her similarly addicted friends and this is one unreliable addict to another. It is only as the word ‘mum’ is tagged at the end that the audience’s sharp intake of breath is released. If you are an addict this is how you talk to people, even to your mother, the inherent selfishness of addiction and its complete tunnel- vision is clear to the audience.

The practical details of addiction are not shirked in the play. On arrival at the rehab clinic Emma is asked what she has taken before her arrival there and the list is extensive

I drank a bit and smoked some weed….Some wine. Red wine….and gin…I took a couple of beta-blockers and some ibuprofen too….and some speed to balance me out…. A half a gram of coke…Benzos. Valium. And Ativan. (Macmillan 25-26)

On stage, this list-exchange with Foster on Reception is darkly comic, even as Emma is asked how she got to the clinic and replies ‘I drove’ (Macmillan 26). But the challenge of representing this level of intoxication in a way that the audience will find authentic is complex on stage. The play’s approach twofold; to depict Emma as the addict as she presents herself to the clinic in her public persona, but also to present the audience with the sense of what Emma must feel like herself at that moment with such an array of noxious substances inside her.

The intoxicated Emma is gradually depicted having a fit on the floor of the clinic, as gunshot sounds are heard, which along with jarring lights work to show a vision of her addictive state. As Emma blacks out after an injection sounds ‘*like a thousand television channels playing simultaneously, all rising in pitch’* (Macmillan 35) are blasted into the auditorium. Later, as she goes through withdrawal alone in her room, multiple ‘Emma’s’ - several actresses all wearing blonde wigs and dressed the same as Emma - climb out of her bed from underneath and beside her on the mattress, pace about the room space, hold their heads, vomit into her toilet, and have seizures on her floor. As *ArtsDesk* critic Marianka Swain puts it

We share her nightmarish hallucinations, watching in dawning horror as bricks fly out of the walls … multiple Emma’s appear from nowhere, writhing in shared agony.’ (Swain, 2016)

There is no escape from the horror of her own addiction for Emma’s character or for the audience. We hear about withdrawal from addiction in the media, but we can’t understand what it’s like from outside. Instead of simply discussing addiction for the audience at the point of language, which would inevitably be limited by nouns and language, Macmillan’s play instead attempts to convey experience of withdrawal for the audience from a the visual and aural point of view.

Even during the interval, there is no relaxing break for the audience from this evocation of the experience of addiction. Macmillan’s play attempts to challenge the audience in a similar style the ‘In-yer-face’ theatre tradition of the 90s. It is as if Macmillan challenges his audience: ‘You want to come and see a play about addiction? Well, don’t expect to have a comfortable experience.’ As the audience leaves the auditorium for the interval, expecting a break for a drink and an ice-cream the luxury of relaxation from the play is disallowed. Instead, the music from the end of Act 1 continues to play throughout the interval, a series of intense a-tonal sounds, played throughout the auditorium and the foyer increasing in volume as the interval progresses, making an audience look for somewhere to escape the cacophony to try to find respite from the assault of sounds. This kind of evocation of the reality of addiction, the incessant ‘noise in the head’ that some addicts describe as a means of explaining the experience of their compulsion, is replicated for the audience here with these aural triggers. Macmillan’s play does not allow the audience to become voyeurs to the pain of others, instead it evokes the pain for them. In Macmillan’s play representation does not stop when the language and the nouns stop. Narrative is replaced by intensity of feeling and disassocia.

It is this post-modernity which also underpins the play’s approach to addiction and the representation of reality on stage. The central anxiety of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* – that art may be parasitical on life itself – has not been resolved by a simple move between theatrical genres. The problem of representation remains. In a postmodern world, how do we represent one narrative as any more stable or valuable than another? Addiction offers a real-life health issue that crystalizes the debate about how we can define ourselves in a world where God is dead. Postmodernity may be liberating since it removes any notion of hierarchical unifying grand narrative, but if we are looking for something to substitute when the centre cannot hold, what can take its place?

For Emma the daily struggle to exist in the face of absolute choice, a plethora of options but also moral ambivalence in the world of post modernity is an acute problem:

I find the business of getting out of bed and getting on with the day really hard….The food pictures and porn videos, the bombings and beheadings, the moral ambivalence you have to have just to be able to carry on with your day. I find the knowledge that we’re all just atoms and one day we’ll stop and be dirt in the ground, I find that overwhelmingly

disappointing. (Macmillan 54)

Postmodernity has not led to happiness or security, for with more options and wider choice comes more anxiety and anguish. In such a way the play suggests that when food sits alongside beheadings with an equal status of media interest then the nature of the society we have created must be placed under scrutiny. Yes, Emma is an addict, but from where has her longing for something other than her own life emerged? The play asks whether addiction might have a social trigger and that rather than the conventional understanding of the addict as a kind of self-indulgent celebrity personal problem, addiction instead emerges from the nature of the social community we have created. In this sense the play suggests that in society, we create our own addicts. We are all, in some way, addicted to something – social media and chocolate may be less innocuous than benzos and diazepam, but addiction itself may be a 21st century disease which is growing because of our dissatisfaction with our own lives. Emma’s sobering conclusion about her own addiction might be a salutary lesson

Drugs and alcohol have never let me down. They have always loved me. There are substances I can put in my bloodstream that make the world perfect. That is the only truth in the universe. (Macmillan 55)

Nouns have failed, narrative has collapsed, and so substances have stepped in to take the place of a centralising narrative. If we can’t explain our own existence to ourselves in a narrative that we can be comfortable with, one that does not set discussions of food and human rights conflicts beside one another without taking action to intervene, then how can we find security of identity for ourselves in our own society?

The play examines the collapse of these kind of ideas as a logical consequence of the decline of religion as a grand narrative in the therapy unit. The Doctor assigned to treat Emma tells her that she has to explain the ‘context’ of her ‘using’, and Emma immediately recognises that this will require a consistent narrative - with which she makes clear she disagrees ‘That A led to B therefore C…Beginning, middle and end?... No.’ (Macmillan 47) Emma underlines that the religious narrative which underpins the treatment at the clinic will not work for her. Handing back the copy of the ‘12 step’ programme book she has been given on arrival at the clinic, Emma remarks to the Doctor ‘…I’ve made a few corrections…if this all depends on me having a spiritual awakening then we might all be wasting our time.’ (Macmillan 49) Emma comments on the contradiction she sees between the university qualifications of the Doctor, and the fact that she wears a crucifix. For Emma, this kind of narrative in therapy cannot work because she doesn’t believe in it – and she is surprised anyone else still does

I can’t surrender to a higher power because there isn’t one. There just isn’t. And you, as someone who lives in the twenty- first century you should know that too. (Macmillan 51)

Emma exposes an inherent contradiction in the treatment of addiction illnesses. If in order to recover from an illness an addict has to accept a narrative which for them is untrue, then to be ‘cured’ they would have to go back to accepting a narrative which they do not believe to be honest. If this is the only solution that the modern health service can offer as a cure for addiction, the play has exposed a problem for society to manage its own illnesses. If addiction is a physical or a psychological illness it makes no difference, since it is either rather like are asking someone to cure themselves of Ebola by giving themselves a good talking to, or, we are to are ask an addict to talk about something they no longer believe in as a means to their own salvation – a particular contradiction of therapy, since it requires ‘absolute honesty’ to be considered successful. Illness, the play points out, cannot be cured by narrative. As Emma concludes

I am not the product of the decisions I have made or the things that have happened to me. I will not be reduced to that. (Macmillan 51)

Emma will not be contained within a narrative, either of her own making or constructed by anyone else, since she does not wish to be reduced to a story. While this has some of the hallmarks of a juvenile rejection of the very structure that might help her to get well, before she has even tried it, Emma’s comments also suggest that humanity does not have a fixed narrative. The complexity and irreconcilable aspects of personality and behaviour are just that- part of what a person is, not who they are

…if I tell you I was sexually abused or the child of alcoholics, if I tell you I returned from back-to-back tours of Iraq and started to self-medicate wouldn’t that all just be a massive simplification of the complexity of just being a human fucking person? (Macmillan 51)

Emma’s question is one of identity, since we may simply not have an explicable logical reasoned narrative for ‘who I am’. It may be that the logical consequence of attitudes towards identity and self-identification in postmodernity may need to become more fluid towards definitions of self, just as they have done towards sexuality. If gender can become fluid, changing to reflect different strands of selfhood then is there any longer a need for self-identity to remain fixed? Is the need for a fixed identity in fact a longing for a secure narrative of identity and self, which postmodernity has tried its best to prove is no longer necessary?

Throughout the play Emma will not stay fixed in her own identity. Although in the script she is referred to as ‘Emma’ consistently, she gives herself several different names, calling herself Nina from the Chekov play when she first arrives at the clinic, and later identifying herself as Emma and Sarah. There is strong sense of betrayal that the audience feels at the end of the play when Nina/Emma/Sarah reveals herself to have another name which the audience knew nothing about. There was an audible gasp from the audience when the character who has just successfully emerged from therapy, which is said to require absolute honesty in order to work, now reveals that she has still been lying. But the audience’s sense of betrayal is curious: why should we expect a personal name to be any more reliable than any other slippage in language? The play’s narrative has itself confronted our continued longing for resolution and truth in narrative on-stage as in real life. Macmillan also addresses this desire for completion as part of the problem of theatre’s ability to provide an authentic representation of a problem

Theatre craves a conclusion and there isn’t one in recovery – if you do it well you do it every day and forever. For me, it was about trying to find a theatrical form to do that that didn't feel painfully open ended, but felt conclusive. (Macmillan 2015)

The fictional character of Emma has not told us her ‘real’ name but why as an audience should we be surprised, let down or offended? Does our longing for the security of narrative and language say more about our rejection of the tenets of postmodernity than we want to admit? Perhaps Emma is simply demonstrating theatrically that she one part of the ‘Concert of personalizations called ‘I’ (Lodge 1988, 292) that Hélѐne Cixous draws attention to, particularly for women.

At the clinic the Doctor has explained to Emma how the programme has circumvented the traditional 12 step approach to addiction and the adaptation they have made to the original religious ‘12 Step’ narrative for the programme

…we admit that we are powerless over alcohol or drugs we admit we are powerless over people, places and things. People that make us want to relapse, places we associate with using and things that reactivate old behaviour. (Macmillan 54)

To be human, is to be surrounded by people, places and things. As an addict, if you are under threat from all these things, you are essentially at risk by simply being alive. As Emma points out later says to her mother ‘That’s basically you know, *everything*. As long as you steer clear of people places and things you’ll be fine’ (Macmillan 122-123). Again Emma’s comments point out the difficulty of negotiating a world full of descriptions and definitions. Once you quantify the world in narrative terms everything can become a threat to your personal identity and your sense of who you are. The problem of existence is therefore transferred to language. We define ourselves, our people places and things in the linguistic realm. Once we consider that a word such as ‘addict’ needs to be fully explained and does not have a completely definitive definition then the concept of language is under threat just as postmodernity had warned us. The plays points the conventional images of the addict into a more nuanced picture. Media images of the addict are varied, from the working-class pragmatic desperation of Begbie in *Trainspotting* to any number of fully –functioning show-business talents from Elvis to Amy Winehouse. In *People Places Things* however, the addicts are rather more silly like us – ‘*’normal people’* (Macmillan 67), as one of the clients in therapy, Mark, puts it; urban, educated, not trapped by poverty or disease , aside from that of their own addiction. As Macmillan points out ‘Addicts are often a punchline or end in death. I felt there was something more compelling and challenging to represent a daily struggle, which is quite boring actually, and never goes away. (Macmillan 2015) While Macmillan’s play does explore what addiction means, who an addict ‘is’ and where an addict might come from, in doing it also invites the audience to redefine ourselves.

Emma demonstrates that we have learnt to play many versions of ourselves in society each day as the work of Erving Goffman and Anthony Giddens had suggested. As an actress Emma is well-placed to make this point in the play. Towards the end of the play Emma successfully completed her session in rehab and has left with her leaver’s diploma. She goes to her parent’s house, back to her old childhood bedroom which is still stocked with all the evidence of her teenage interests – a tennis bat, a lacrosse hook, and boxes of abandoned toys which act as signifiers of her previous selves. Emma calls her parents into her room to make the speech to them that she had been advised to prepare in the clinic. The audience have already seen her ‘rehearse’ this scene in a sense, since this is exactly what her therapy required her to do – patients practice the narrative scenarios they will play out with loved ones in the supportive environment of the clinic first. Emma seats her parents on her bed and thus they have taken up the position of her new audience. Now Emma can do what she does best – perform

I’ve been unhappy and self-destructive. I’ve self-medicated with drugs and alcohol ….I’ve made some terrible decisions and I’ve taken you for granted. I wasn’t there for either of you / I wasn’t there when Mark died….I want you to know I’ve worked really hard at getting better. And I’ve started to find peace. And I’m doing it for you two as much as anything. And for Mark. And it should have been/me. (Macmillan 120)

However, in this instance the performance is not successful. Emma has not convinced her audience of her veracity or the reality of her role, since one of her two audience members, her father, interrupts, and stops her performance

Alright enough. …Look, whatever you’re into now,

all of this is just words. You’re saying you’ll be less selfish, then talking about yourself even more. I can’t listen to it. (Macmillan 120)

Emma’s father has refused her performance, because he recognises it as inauthentic. Emma however, has no choice but to perform for it is not simply what she does, it is who she is. When her father leaves the room, she turns to her mother instead

I’ve worked really hard Mum

,

I’ve taken myself apart and put myself back together.

If you could see what I went through I think you would be proud of me

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*Emma doesn’t get the response she wants, she smiles to herself, sadly and takes a deep breath in and out.* (Macmillan 122)

Emma’s smile may be one of regret that she cannot get her mother to admit to any positive feeling of pride towards her daughter, or it may simply be that she is aware that her own performative skills need improvement in her latest role. Her mother is no more convinced by her daughter’s latest performance than her father was

Who are you being? …I know you sweetheart, you think I can’t see when you’re lying. (Macmillan 124)

Emma’s mother feels that this is simply another one of Emma’s personalizations coming to light. And for her mother, it is one of Emma’s less interesting portrayals of herself, in fact, Emma’s mother prefers her in her role as an addict

It doesn’t suit you darling, the self-righteous pleasure denying role. It’s boring. If you want honesty, real gloves off truthfulness sweetheart, drink and drugs were the only things that made you any fun. (Macmillan 125)

This apparently harsh response sounds very similar to a critic’s response to the play itself. Chris Bennion’s review for The Telegraph online suggests

One of the most intriguing aspects of the whole production is that it is at its best when Emma is at her worst. When she is in full raging, raving, foul-mouthed *Withnail* -mode, it becomes something that you can’t tear your eyes from, and you feel – literally thanks to the shudders and booms that bookend many of the scenes of excess and withdrawal – a terrific rush. When she is subdued and introspective – dare I say, a bit dull – so too is the whole thing. (Bennion, 2016)

It is ironic that Bennion’s review echoes the views of Emma’s mother. But the review also reflects unfavourably on us as a theatre audience – we are watching play about other human beings who miserably find themselves addicted to something, and we want to watch their pain and suffering, because this is what we find ‘terrific’. Perhaps we are not as far away from watching the videos of beheadings as we thought. Susannah Clapp however, resisted this descent into self-recrimination as somewhat too easy

...strangely, the treatment of the treatment is the least interesting part of the evening. Macmillan gets rather dogged with his metaphors. The heroine is an actress; therapy involves role play; everyone has only a provisional identity. (Clapp, 2015)

For Clapp, it is Denise Gough’s performance as Emma which remains the most interesting part of the play, and in a sense Clapp has rejected the narrative for the performative.

Emma had also tried to reject the impetus to narrative while she was at the clinic, taking part in the group discussion sessions only once initially. While Emma was telling the story of her background Mark, another addict in the group keeps trying to interrupt her, for he has realised that the story she was telling the group was fictional, or rather, theatrical. After the session ends and Emma chides him for being rude and interrupting her he simply points ‘But that wasn’t your life story. It’s the plot of *Hedda Gabler*’ (Macmillan 65). Emma couldn’t tell her own story so take recourse to what she knows – theatrical narratives.

Emma points out to Mark that being an actress simply reveals to her the fundamental banality of a real existence and the narrative of her own life.

With a play you get instructions. Stage directions. Dialogue. Someone clothes you. Tells you where to be and when. You get to live the most intense moments of a life over and over again, with all the boring bits left out. And you get to practise. For weeks. And you’re applauded. Then you get changed. Leave through the Stage Door. Get the bus home. Back to real life. All the boring stuff left in. (Macmillan 83)

The fictional world of the theatre gives the actor the narrative of how to be. It defines their world and personal parameters, the play is a safe and controlled space and as an actor you know what to do, what to say and how to play your part. Essentially, you know who you are, your identity is secure. Off-stage this lack of structured narrative is disorientating,

If I’m not in character I’m not sure I’m really there. I’m already dead. I’m nothing. (Macmillan 85)

Emma thinks she can’t take part in the therapy because she is no one and has no story. Twice when Mark has asked her about her identity she has fallen back again into identifying herself only as the metaphor that stands for her as an actress - the seagull

Really. I’m not an actress. I’m a seagull. […] I told you the truth. I’m a seagull. (Macmillan 67-68)

Sarah does not see herself as one story. She is not a fixed identity or a fixed personality. She can tell the therapy group *a* story but not *her* story, since either she does not feel she has a story worth telling.

Emma demonstrate a level of self-awareness of her both her role as actress as a woman whose job it is to act. As Erving Goffman has it, we can either completely believe that the social self we are playing in society is real, or, we recognise our own performance of self and know that we are performing

…one finds that the performer can be taken in by his own act; he can be convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. […] At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine. This possibility is quite understandable since no one is in quite as good an observational position to see through the act as the person who puts it on. (Goffman 1959, 28)

Emma demonstrates both of these aspects of Goffman’s understanding of role-play in society and certainly no one is as good a position to recognise an act they are putting on as an actor. Mark on the other hand wants Emma (calling herself Sarah at this point) to make this mismatch between what is and what might be by speaking the traditional form of admittance at the beginning of the therapy class. Mark tells Sarah what she should say

Hello. I’m Sarah. I’m Sarah and I’m an alcoholic and a drug addict […] I’m Sarah. Possibly. Who really knows? I’m Sarah and I’m brilliant other people and totally useless at being myself. I’m Sarah. (Macmillan 87).

But for Emma as Sarah, nothing she could say herself can match the power and passion, the apparent authenticity of what she can say as an actress. She outlines the joy of being a performer and points out that ‘Acting gives me everything I get from drugs and alcohol’ (Macmillan 85). Playing parts means that the intensely emotional aspects of being alive are emphasised and lived every day. As an actress

You get to be onstage and say things that are absolutely true, even if they’re made-up. You get to do things that feel more real to you, more authentic, more *meaningful* than anything in your own life. You get to speak *poetry*, words you would never think to say but which become yours as you speak them (Macmillan 84).

In performance, the obvious irony of an actress saying these words has even greater resonance for the audience and the plays’ awareness of its own attempts to represent the real which can only be expressed in fictional theatrical terms are not lost on the audience. Emma as Sarah quotes the words of Antigone about her dying brother and explains that she felt broken- hearted on stage every night but felt nothing when her own brother actually died and in doing so she expresses an artistic anxiety that the play itself shares in a way Brecht would be proud of– if we expend our emotional energy on fictional narratives, can we continue to care for real stories?

Yet by the end of the play there seems very little left that can be done for Emma or for us, an ending which might seems at odds with the Brechtian style and politics of theatre leading to social and political change outside the space of the auditorium itself. But Macmillan has remembered that we are in a postmodern period, no grand narrative has the answer, be that Brecht or Foucault. Instead, the play leaves us with the chilling alternative – the rise of the corporation and the language of management-speak. After her dénouement with the box of drugs collected up and left in her room by her mother, Emma has just fixed another AA meeting and begins to rehearse a speech for an acting job, which she has described earlier as her first ever acting role ‘a corporate – advertising basically’ (Macmillan, 99). Emma is back at square one, auditioning for the same kind of performance work that she auditioned for when she had just come out of drama school. She begins to audition, at first unable to repeat her lines, we are in danger of going back to her performance at the beginning of the play. But the stage lights brightening eventually turning to a spotlight ‘*Emma speaks more naturally, more sincerely. She really means what she says.’* (Macmillan 129). We have come full circle to the beginning of the play, where Emma sounded more ‘natural’ the more she performed Nina’s role successfully.

The Brechtian focus on Emma increases during her final speech. She stands on a podium of which the four corners create a shadow , eerily the shadow is not of her human figure but of a triangular block of light at each corner, as if the figure of the performer is no longer even human enough to create their own shadow. The stage becomes increasingly dark while she is in ‘*bright spotlight’* standing on a podium. This is Emma in full performance mode and while she looks very successful ‘*She is compelling, moving, in her element’* the content of her speech is very far from the emotive lines of Chekhov and Sophocles that she has quoted earlier in the play. Instead, we listen to an example of corporate advertising copy, as if drawn from the text of a book on positive thinking

What a thing it is to be alive.

What a thing it is to swim in the sea.

To look up at the wide clear sky.

To feel the sun on your skin.

To climb a mountain or just a flight of stairs

To eat a donut. (Macmillan 129)

Macmillan cleverly structures this banal intervention at just the point in the mantra where we might be beginning to be taken in as an audience. Yes, as an audience we do want to appreciate the power of the natural world and all it can offer, but corporate psychology is being used to commodify this for us – we are asked to appreciate the free beauty of nature, but make sure you also buy a donut.

What is deeply troubling about this point in the play is that if this is Emma ‘in her element’ then what does it suggest about the power of acting and performance in our society? How are we being persuaded to believe such evident hogwash as inspiring? Is it because successful actors like Emma can sell us a corporate narrative via their performance? We are all susceptible to lies – as an audience we have believed Emma was Sarah but found out she might be Lucy at the end, and we might be easily as gullible towards corporate story-telling too. The play highlights performance and identity because that is what we most need to think about in an age which is increasing visual and consumer orientated. Enactment is all, we increasingly perform ourselves on social media and in real life – whatever that means – as if we are allowing ourselves to be consumed by popular culture. Conversely in an age when we are rejecting narrative, it might be just the thing we need to pay attention to.

In her final line of the play Emma says to the unseen person conducting the audition ‘Thank you for seeing me.’ (Macmillan 130) But the audience is left with the question - who is it that we have seen? The character who has four names? The actress who has multiple personas? The adult who was once the child Lucy? The figure we are seeing could be all of them and none. Macmillan’s play suggests that the theatre does not have answers to such topics, only questions. Maddy Costa points out that the staging of the play, with the audience on-stage shows that ‘as you watch the character who lives in theatre, you watch the audiences who live through theatre.’ (Costa, 2016) This is exactly what Macmillan’s play is anxious about. The play is more Brechtian than it wants to acknowledge. The audience is being encouraged not to rely on theatre do their living for them, but instead, points outside the auditorium and the noise of the discordant music in the foyer, to the world outside, where the corporate performance is everyday becoming more ‘compelling’, just as Emma’s performance of their mantra has escalated towards successful repetition at the end. As if to emphasize this, Emma is surrounded at the end of her audition by long queue of actresses who look just like her, who are waiting to perform the same speech at the same audition. The lasts actress to take the podium begins the first word of the corporate speech ‘Why’ as the blackout falls at the end of the play, leaving just that question in the minds of the audience. Why are we taken in by such mantras? Why do we seem to believe what we are told if it is presented to us convincingly? Why are we not more analytical and detached about everything we see and hear around us?

The political overtones of addiction are underlined for us in Macmillan’s play. The final lines of the corporate speech that Emma has had to learn for her advertising audition is chilling in its vacuity

To love and be loved.

What a thing it is.

I am now.

You are now.

We are now.

This is the beginning. (Macmillan 129-130)

If this is ‘the beginning’ of postmodern narrative of equality and the dispersal of hierarchy, then this corporate narrative must be as meaningful to us as the words of Shakespeare. And that is the play’s central anxiety. If such speeches are ‘the beginning’ of the narrative of ‘now’ what kind of society will we create? What kind of identity can we create for ourselves as individuals and as a community nation state in the midst of such meaningless sentiments and will we be able to make our experience of living in that world meaningful and significant?

As Michael Billington suggests ‘Macmillan also offers a critique of a society in which addiction is partly a response to the surrounding chaos, and where the generic uplift of marketing-speak pervades everything from politics to religion.’ (Billington 2015) In *People Places Things* Macmillan demonstrates that theatre is the one environment that can most alert us to the performative. When we see narrative in performance its artifice is even stronger than on the page. Performance makes us alert, both to who we are and who we would like to be. Macmillan’s play keeps our senses alive ‘At times it feels like Macmillan has taken one of those little spoons, the ones with the serrated edge, for grapefruit, and scooped something out of you.’ (Tripney 2015). Macmillan’s play is coruscating as Tripney suggests but his examination of who we are and how we perform ourselves is ever more necessary.

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