

Chapter 12

Let the Use of the Words Teach You Their Meaning

Sue MacLaine and Jonathan
Burrows in dialogue

This chapter is written by Sue MacLaine and Jonathan Burrows, who are discussing the play *Can I Start Again Please* written by Sue with Jonathan as outside eye. *Can I Start Again Please* is performed by Sue MacLaine and Nadia Nadarajah and was premiered as part of the Sick Festival at the Basement in Brighton in 2015. The performance went on to win a Total Theatre Award that year at the Edinburgh Festival, for ‘Innovation, Experimentation and Playing with Form’, and then toured extensively throughout 2015 and 2016. Sue is a theatre-maker, writer, and performer based in Brighton, England. Jonathan is a choreographer, teacher, and writer who is currently an Associate Professor at the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University. Although theatre and dance practices are sometimes rooted in quite different philosophies and methodologies, the two artists share a common interest in theatre and performance as a space of shared reflection.

Sue: ‘Why Wittgenstein?’ was a question often asked in post-show discussions. I always squirmed slightly because I am not, nor wish to be, a Wittgenstein scholar. In simplest terms he spoke to me and he spoke to the ideas I was trying to manifest. I knew I was writing about language and the incapacities of language, so I think I googled something like ‘incapacity of language’, or ‘when language fails’, and Wittgenstein’s ‘Whereof one cannot speak’ came up. This was 2015 and I had never heard of him or that quote, which I understand now as being quite well known. I was interested that somebody had articulated something about the subject. When writing about childhood trauma, any trauma, but particularly childhood trauma, finding people, other writers, respected writers, who seem to be an ally is a really wonderful thing because one lives in a world of disbelief. There is a demand for articulacy and the demand to know ‘what happened’: a testimonial version of trauma-telling. I like that Wittgenstein

offered a space to think with him. That he held himself in stillness and, by all accounts, did not force people to express themselves when teaching. He was happy in silence and understood that silence has meaning. He comes across as a free radical allowing others to attach themselves to him and his ideas. As the writer John Heaton observed, 'He understood that "It can be a relief to have nothing to say, because only then there may be a chance to be thoughtful".'¹ Being thought-full is a priority for me in life and in making work, and this is where Jonathan and I intersect.

Jonathan: I think perhaps one thing we share strongly is a particular view of the relationship between performers and audience in the theatre, that it's not about showing off or even being witnessed, but more like thinking together under the same roof. The effort is towards how you might invite that thoughtful attention, which is quite different from the idea of a passive audience under the spell of the performer or the language of the performance. And of course it doesn't always work.

Sue: Language always fails miserably and so, very often, does performance. When there is failure there is no choice but to keep going back to language and asking it to do better. This is true of any language. I was given the proposition by Wittgenstein that *how* something is said defines what is being said. 'Let the use of the words teach you their meaning.'²

Jonathan: For me with your performance *Can I Start Again Please* the interesting thing for the audience is that the whole set-up of two parallel monologues, one in British Sign Language and the other in spoken English, destabilizes from the outset our confidence in the idea that language will work easily to tell us a story. We have to suspend the usual ways we might take in what's going on and trust whatever clues emerge through the combination of language and physicality, until a sense of meaning begins to accumulate. And that slow accumulation, full of unexpected humour throughout, distracts us from blocking ourselves to the difficult thing that's being spoken about, so that we momentarily meet it in a way we may not have experienced before.

Sue: I'm very interested in the potential that opens up between performer and audience. So much of who I am as a person and so much of who I am as a writer and creative practitioner is influenced by having been in therapy for twenty-one years with the same person, and through that process discovering, conceptualizing, and inhabiting a 'third space'. By that I mean the space between myself and the therapist where the juicy stuff exists. This space is dynamic and what happens between us, the shifts happening in the room, is the space between. There is the attempt to articulate in ways other than language and the permission for articulation to happen without language.

Jonathan: My experience has always been that the meaning or what matters in a performance seems to arrive in the gap between one thing and the next. It's rarely about this or that particular word, sentence, gesture, or image, but more how one thing rubs up against what follows or precedes it. This sense which emerges in the gap between one thing and the next often has the quality of a

question or questions that stay in your mind long after the performance has finished.

Sue: That image resonates with something I wanted to try and achieve with *Can I Start Again Please*, and which I want from all performance work that I make and watch; that thinking happens in this shared gap between performance, performers, and audience. An indication of meaning. A nod towards meaning with an openness towards different and differing interpretations of meaning. And with contemplation being sufficient: an end in itself. I know Wittgenstein was not a therapist, but his understanding of psychoanalysis as a space of shared thought resonated for me and gave me the encouragement I needed.

Jonathan: You sometimes hear people make a link between theatre and religious spaces, because it's perceived that both invite a particular kind of shared experience, but I think the contemplation you're describing doesn't ask for agreement in quite the same way as a religious gathering. Your sharing and invitation to be silent aren't reverent, and the lack of a demand for reverent sharing or silence is what makes *Can I Start Again Please* unusual as a piece of art that deals with trauma.

Sue: What gave us permission to not be reverent in the performance, despite the trauma we're dealing with, is something to do with that idea from Wittgenstein of not focusing on what is being said but rather the method of the attempt. In the play we hold up bits of his writing and one of them is the quote from *Philosophical Remarks*, 'Tell me how you are searching and I'll tell you what you are searching for.'³ This reverse thinking, this other way around, is like the unarticulated-through-language-silence that you find in therapy. Wittgenstein's ideas of silence are connected to his concept of what cannot be said, and together they fed the dramaturgical ideas for *Can I Start Again Please*.

Jonathan: The play uses two different languages to tell the same fragments of story simultaneously and I've heard you describe the Wittgenstein quotations as somehow speaking to the space between these two languages.

Sue: My co-performer Nadia Nadarajah uses British Sign Language whereas I speak in English and the two languages have very different modalities – the mouth and the hands – so they can work simultaneously without interrupting each other. I'm fluent in British Sign Language through being an interpreter, and through my work as an interpreter I've had the everyday experience of witnessing that what somebody is saying very rarely has anything to do with what they mean. As an interpreter there's a discursive process where you're trying to alight upon what is being said, but often miss what the person is really meaning. Do I make interpretation choices based on the intent of the source or based on the requirements of the target? This passage from *Can I Start Again Please* tries to articulate that paradox:

There is a story, I am uncertain if it is apocryphal. President Reagan was visiting Russia for the first time after signing a treaty that eliminated a whole class of nuclear weapons from Europe. At the end of a summit meeting, Reagan gave a speech of thanks ending with a joke about farmers and cowboys.

The Russian interpreter knew the joke to be untranslatable and so made the decision to tell a Russian joke instead. He ignored completely what Reagan said and went ahead with his own joke about Vodka and long winter nights.

The joke was well received. Reagan got the big laugh he wanted and the Russian politicians were appreciative of his sense of humour. All was well.⁴

Jonathan: When this moment comes in the play it's funny, but at the same time important dramaturgically because it gives the watcher permission to accept that they won't ever fully understand what you're describing: your trauma, but also what anybody might say. And the quotes you hold up from Wittgenstein reinforce the idea that it's ok not to know, that in fact the subject of the play is that you can't know. This is very different from a more conventional confessional trauma narrative and arrives somewhere more profound, because it gives the audience a uniquely different perspective. The Wittgenstein quotes are incongruous in the middle of a play like that and they have the effect of switching round what you're supposed to think. In a very unlikely way he becomes like a compere in a stand-up comedy show or the commentator in a wrestling match.

Sue: The idea is that there are two players in the performance, a signing body and a speaking body, and the kind of third space we spoke about before opens up between them. Wittgenstein is the host for this 'third space'. We hold up quotes from him and they're in written language so you're required to read them. They're never spoken and Nadia never signs them, but your reading rather allows you to occupy a third and separate territory between the signing and the speaking. The quotes host what you're watching as an audience and the thing is to keep an eye on this third space. Don't just watch Nadia and don't just listen to me, because if you do that then the piece has failed and you're not going to get what I want you to get from it.

Jonathan: What other forms of silence are there in the play?

Sue: The most important thing is that there is a chosen silence from me as a writer to not say. To never give a testimonial account of the incident. There is a silence in that. You could take Wittgenstein's most well-known quote, 'Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent' as meaning there is no point in trying to speak about something that's traumatic or oppressive, but for me it doesn't really say that. I've interpreted Wittgenstein as meaning that the ways in which, for instance, trauma is spoken about can become what the poet Louise Glück describes as a 'cult of exhaustive detail' which is 'a reprimand to imagination'.⁵ The language of the cult of detail says nothing, and I understand Wittgenstein as saying keep silent if this is the only language you wish to use. If as a performance writer I keep silent about the direct narrative then it liberates me or forces me creatively to find another route. You can take it that Wittgenstein's writings about silence and language are a way of saying 'don't bother', but that isn't how I understand it. I understand from him that there are ways of saying things that are not worth saying, which means that you need to find better ways. I've felt encouraged by his writing that it is worth the effort.

Jonathan: There's one quote from Wittgenstein which you describe as being central to the play, which is a quote from *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* where he's talking about changes of aspect: 'What is incomprehensible is that nothing, and yet everything has changed.' It comes after a section of chanted Wittgenstein ducks and rabbits that takes the audience from laughter into a sudden shift of understanding, where the real narrative of the play begins to appear:

It is a duck
It is a rabbit
It is a duck but it could also be a rabbit
It is a rabbit but could also be a duck
It is a rabbit and not a duck
It is a duck and not a rabbit
It is both a rabbit and a duck

It is a happy duck
It is an unhappy rabbit
It is not a duck
It is not a rabbit
It is not a lamp

Can you tell what it is yet? Can you tell what it is? Can you tell?
Can we tell what it is yet? Can we tell what it is? Can we tell?
Can I tell what it is yet? Can I tell what it is? Can I tell?

A duck or a rabbit. It is one or the other
The mind cannot allow for nothing.
It has to be something
A duck or a rabbit.
It is one or the other
The mind cannot allow for nothing.
It has to be something
And so to make things easier:
(shouts) I am the duck and I am the rabbit
And now all of this can stop

Everyone knows where they are
Knows their place.
Wittgenstein said

WHAT IS INCOMPREHENSIBLE IS THAT NOTHING,
AND YET EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED.
THAT IS THE ONLY WAY TO PUT IT.

I looked at the lamp on the bedside table and I said lamp
 I said lamp because I could not say dad
 That's dad D.a.d.⁶

Sue: For me that quote is central to the idea of trauma and how one experiences the aftermath. Trauma holds one in the space of absolute change and absolute sameness. And in between there is incomprehensibility, because trauma – childhood trauma – is invisible. The labour of holding both of these spaces of change and sameness is invisible. I wanted the play to communicate something of that burden and offload some of it too. So there is labour for the audience in having to manage sign language, English, Wittgenstein, bells, paper. There is a sense of the audience joining in the labour, and Wittgenstein is a life raft for audiences and for performers. Sometimes it's both of us holding the paper with Wittgenstein quotes or sometimes it's just one of us, but together we host Wittgenstein into the piece and equally he hosts us. Both Nadia and I feel great love and gratitude towards Wittgenstein for saying these things that really summarize or help give specificity to the felt experience we're dealing with. The play is struggling towards the idea of the 'thisness' of trauma. Not the experience of it, because that implies you were cogent during it, but rather the absolute and sudden change of landscape which happens and how that alters your DNA and everything about who you are in the world. What I observe is that the 'thisness' demands less of a linear narrative and more an assemblage of the experience.

Jonathan: How do you work towards that kind of assemblage? What methodologies or approaches are useful?

Sue: I'm making a new performance at the moment called *I May Be Some Time* and the interesting thing is that all my collaborators are dancers. This physical base to the collaborations was true also to a certain extent for *Can I Start Again Please*. The work is perhaps located in choreography rather than in writing, or perhaps you might describe it as 'choreographic writing'.

Jonathan: Is your choice to work with choreographic writing something to do with the absence of spoken or written language, or is it something else about choreography?

Sue: I think the methodologies of choreography are able to help devolve or diffuse the autobiographical 'I'. With *Can I Start Again Please* the performance was diffused by being shared equally in a choreographic way between Nadia Nadarajah and myself, and between our two languages.

Jonathan: This choreographic sharing of the monologue has the effect of making you wonder who is leading and who is translating: Is it the spoken word leading or is it the sign language? There's the feeling all the time of an uncertainty as to how the two elements touch each other and a sense of the 'gap' that we spoke about before. What's the role for you of this kind of translation in the play?

Sue: There were different stages of arriving at this use of mutual translation of the text. Initially, I doubted the presentation of the text in British Sign Language, because the ideas were complicated and could bring real challenges. I

knew we were going to have to create signs for the piece that deaf audiences would never have seen before, because the language used would need to be poetical in a particular way. Sign language is a visual language and part of that is to do with its iconicity, where for instance you're representing a cup with a gesture towards the mouth. However, the same handshape and movement is used for 'cup' and for 'drink' and it's only the context that tells you which one is meant – a duck or a rabbit, a dad or a lamp. I think there's a view that sign language is easy to comprehend because the vocabulary is often iconic like this, but of course that isn't true because understanding the contextual meaning of each sign is a complex process. Some signs have a back story to explain how they came into being, for example the sign for biscuit is the right hand tapping the left elbow, which came from the way biscuits on ships in the olden days used to be tapped to allow weevils to fall out before being eaten. So like with any language you can find the etymology of some of it in this way, but there's a whole swathe of sign language that doesn't have a traceable etymology and doesn't easily translate without context. We use the word 'if' a lot in *Can I Start Again Please* and in the context of a manual language reliant on space, hands, and face, the concept of 'if' is complicated. How do you represent something that is not concrete? So we worked with Nadia to find forms of poetic signing that might articulate what we were dealing with. There's something important about having sign language so centred like this in a piece about the failure of language. I think some people think that sign language doesn't permit full expression and articulation and this is not correct. Sign language is not responsible for failures of expression and articulation. If it can be articulated it can be articulated in sign language. It is a silent language in the sense of not being reliant on sound, but it's not a 'silencing' language. Wittgenstein proposed that no language is ever inherently concrete or clear, and the silence and space inherent in the translation between any two languages is not reductive but rather full of meaning. In the case of *Can I Start Again Please* audiences have to find that meaning rather than be spoon-fed.

Jonathan: You said that the performance isn't concerned with closure, but rather offers an ongoing and resonant conversation. How does that connect to your ideas about what theatre can or should offer?

Sue: In terms of the staging of this play we are onstage when the audience come in and we are in exactly the same position when they leave. We don't move until the audience is gone. On a very simple physical level I enjoy how this image provokes in the audience an empathy that we're going to have to do the show again, and also in terms of psychic resolution there's the sense that although a small increment may have been made during the piece, it ends with us still there. The idea is that whatever psychic expansion has happened it will probably contract again fairly quickly once the show has finished. In other words it's not about a recovery narrative or those clichéd ideas of autobiography which I think are somehow loosely based on the idea that 'Christ has risen' – this image that Jesus had a hard time, was punished, died, but came back to

life and has done quite well. His life is often the model when people are writing autobiographically. There are things to do with memoir that I've discovered since *Can I Start Again Please* and I see autobiography now as a root that plants itself downwards and expands, rather than a horizontal line that pushes ahead of the body and leaves a trail behind. If you are expanding downwards like a root there is no end, whereas the idea of a horizontal plane of life is about always pushing the front plane behind you and then you're done with it. I don't believe in that and it doesn't float my boat creatively. Like Wittgenstein I agree that there is possibility in coming back to the same ground. You just keep coming back and it will always be joyous and full.

NOTES

1. Heaton, John M., *Wittgenstein and Psychoanalysis*, London: Icon Books, 2000: 10.
2. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Revised, 4th Edition, eds. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009: 231), 'Philosophy of Psychology – a Fragment' (PPF), 303.
3. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. Rush Rhees, tr. Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998: 12.
4. MacLaine, Sue, *Can I Start Again Please*, London: Oberon Books, 2016: 25.
5. Glück, Louise, 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence', *The American Poetry Review* 22, no. 5 (n.d.): 30.
6. MacLaine, Sue, *Can I Start Again Please*, London: Oberon Books, 2016: 45–47.