

Fragmented Psyches and Devastating Testimonies: Staging the Post-Traumatic Experience in Iraq through *Heather Raffo's 'Nine Parts of Desire'* and *Judith Thompson's 'Palace of the End'*

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Abstract: *How to represent the trauma of others so that it can still affect the spectators, shock them into recognition, and, above all, prompt them to act against war – is a crucial question posed by both women dramatists, Heather Raffo and Judith Thompson, in their two prominent theatrical reflections on war in Iraq, namely, *Nine parts of Desire* and *Palace of the End*, respectively. The present paper aims to prove that the plays under consideration are attached to fact and research, yet they skirt the boundaries of what we conventionally consider 'documentary' theatre by shifting the emphasis from the mimetic to the poetic, from detached documentation to self-conscious performance and by changing the theatre into a ritualistic site of witnessing, mourning, and collective healing. By so doing, these plays mourn the stupidity of history, the irrationality of war, the tragedy of post modern condition, the disruption of normal life and the devastation of psyches. As such, the paper reaches the conclusion that Raffo and Thompson provoke our ethical responsibility for the vulnerability of the self and others, and renew our shattered faith in humanity by achieving a radical re-functioning of the genre of documentary theater .*

Keywords: trauma, documentary theatre, testimony theatre, war theatre, gender violence

1. Introduction

1.1. Research problem

All wars are hell. War in Iraq, however, is a unique sort of horror – a junction of environmental, political, and cultural factors make it the perfect nurturing pot for psychological damage. Iraq, "*the land between the two rivers*" (Fin Kelstein 1962: 73), which is rich in its natural resources, has become the land of sadness, due to the successful stages of troubled history and centuries of conflict : from the Ottoman empire to British rule, from Saddam's regime, the Iraq-Iran war, the invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf war, the UN sanctions, and Shi'ite and Sunni conflicts to the full American occupation.

The United States war on Iraq has led to the loss of lives and social capital, and has destroyed the Iraqi infra-structure. This substantially lowers the quality of lives, leads to the inability to provide essential services and renders state-building activities even more difficult. What is left from Iraq is a country devastated by years of war, a population reduced by violent death, and defeated survivors divided by the war and struggling against chaos, instability and insecurity.

The less discussed, if not totally ignored aspect of the Iraqi crisis, however, is the human tragedy that is unfolding amidst conflict and war in that country. The perception of Iraq's human tragedy in terms of the numbers of dead and wounded transforms it into a mechanical issue, ignoring its "human dimension". The wide spread media coverage of the day-to-day violence in Iraq also helps make this human tragedy an ordinary event, a mere news item, or almost a commonplace issue.

This approach is problematic and should be critically evaluated, especially in the case of Iraq. The lack of insight into the nature and severity of the human tragedy in Iraq leads to an under estimation of its seriousness. Seeing that the world's agenda is entirely taken over by the conflict, and the inadequate attention given to the human dimension may also result in failures in the provision of security in Iraq, the present paper, thus, analyses the human tragedy in Iraq and shows that it extends beyond our current perception of the situation.

1.2. Delimitation

Body counts don't quantify the war's emotional toll, but pieces of data are beginning to paint a grim picture. A 'tsunami' of mental health problems resulting from the war in Iraq is "*headed our way*," concludes Charles Figley, director of the Traumatology Institute at Florida State University. Neither the government, nor the mental health community, nor society is prepared to handle it. Many Iraqis suffer from major depression, vague anxiety, or behavioral problems at a rate three times greater than that before the war according to a BBC report (Tervor & Lee 2003:n. pag).

As the war in Iraq continues to draw comparisons to Vietnam, and as post – traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) emerges as this war's striking disability, Western theatre artists become engaged with making the theatre a site for dramatizing trauma and for bringing to the fore the voices of the survivors of this trauma. Conceiving that psychoanalysts, historians, cultural critics and literary scholars working in the burgeoning field of trauma studies have concentrated on traumatic narratives and have paid very little attention to theatre, these Western theatre artists assume that theatre, more than any other art form, is perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with, if not a representation of, trauma. For the theatre, according to them, has the power to question and undermine the spectator's construction of identity.

Karen Malpede (1996:168), a playwright and director, clarifies this argument by suggesting that

because theatre takes place in public and involves the movement of bodies across a stage, a theatre seems uniquely suited to portray the complex interpersonal (and intrapersonal) realities of trauma. It is the physical connection between bodies in a space that gives any theatrical experience its power; being part of the live event, watching bodies move in front of you, places you in a direct corporeal / phenomenological relationship between performers and with the representations / images being represented in the piece.

Traumatic remembering can be thus, according to these Western theatre artists, triggered and engaged through performance. It is through a connection to the action rather than the language that a felt quality of the performance can be incited. It is through a kinaesthetic rapport with the bodies of the performers that an embodied and experiential experience of performance can give the effect of trauma's presence (Malpede 1996:167-179).

Believing that trauma as an expressive and emotive force draws the audience deeper into the performance event, these theatre artists then become challenged by the nature of traumatic representation and presence in the theatre. They have responded to this challenge of representing pain in various ways. Some, like Sarah Kane, have chosen to involve the spectator in an Artaudian 'Theatre of Cruelty' in order to stimulate catharsis; others, like Jonathan Kalb and Caryl Churchill, have preferred radical abstraction and Brechtian alienation in order to provoke thought. On the other hand, a new approach emerges and becomes interested in searching for another possibility of regarding and representing pain. By this inventive theatrical approach, the researcher refers to the approach adopted by two prominent women dramatists, Heather Raffo and Judith Thompson.

1.3. Objectives

The present paper aims at (1) charting and revealing the course of both playwrights' unprecedented level of theatrical experimentation directed particularly at representing collective and individual traumas; (2) highlighting both playwrights' inventive approaches which are crystallized in employing personal narratives / monologues as alternative forms of communication - needed for objective critiques of war and as a kind of resolution or working through the trauma of the self they describe. The paper aims also at (3) assessing both playwrights' significance for political theater by asserting their (a) radical re-functioning of the genre of documentary theater from a Brechtian tribunal into a ritualistic site for mourning, (b) unique merging of the actual with the purposefully framed, staged, and performed; and most of all, (c) breaching our media – saturated indifference and training our capacity for ethical reflection.

1.4. Rationale

The two selected women playwrights are thus chosen and paired for a number of reasons: First, both playwrights' theatrical representations have sparked intense critical debate in American culture and unsettled familiar perspectives. Second, the theatre of both playwrights enables audiences to reflexively enter into an interchangeable universe that estranges the familiar and asks us to read the signs by holding our assumptions up to the mirror. Moreover, both playwrights look profoundly at and try to convey the complex and disturbing reality of being female in modern day Iraq by showing awareness of Iraq women's needs of freedom, of resistance, and of discovering and articulating their own experiences. Finally, what has attracted me to Raffo's *Nine parts of Desire*, in particular, is her painful attempt to bridge a gap between her two identities

(American and Iraqi), her dire need to balance and reconcile two separate, often hostile, social, political, and cultural paradigms.

1.5. Research questions

The present paper thus aims to answer certain questions regarding the two selected plays: In what ways are *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Palace of the End* excellent plays, with a lot to say about a highly controversial period in history? What are the many, different forms of violence addressed in the plays under consideration which make them a welcome addition to 'Trauma Theater' scholarship? To what extent do both playwrights succeed in allowing for the appearance of the unconscious and in surfacing repressed past traumas? In other words, how do *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Palace of the End*, as trauma narratives, complicate our reaction to war in Iraq?

1.6. Significance

The significance of this paper, it is presumed, lies in (1) assessing the human tragedy of Iraq society which has been brutalized and traumatized over the past half-century; (2) providing multiple perspectives on Iraqis' trauma, as both writers are accomplished scholars, living beyond Iraq's borders, a fact which possibly allows them a more critically distanced eye than traditionally located Iraqi scholars might offer; and (3) opening new outlooks for psychology, for literary criticism, and for a wide range of other disciplines concerned with the link between society and individual experience. However, the paper's greatest strength, it is hoped, resides in (4) filling a decided gap in gender studies by making visible the diverse forms of violence, from the psychological abuse to the physical abuse imposed upon women during war. Thus, (5) paving the way and setting the stage for subsequent feminist analyses; and (6) alerting the public conscious to the general inertia that has settled over Iraq with regard to the historical violence it systematically exerted against its others.

2. Methodology

2.1. Theoretical approach

Historically, trauma comes from the ancient Greeks meaning 'wound'. It has been associated with physical injury until the end of the nineteenth century; only afterwards that the concept began to shift from being a physical blow towards that of a shocking event, the impact of which is felt within the nerves and mind of the survivor (Caraballo 2014:1).

While trauma has been redefined and reconsidered over many decades, there is still no single definition or understanding of it. American Psychiatric Association (2013:463) specifically defines trauma as

a direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person... (Criterion A1). The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children,

the response must involve disorganized or agitated behavior) (Criterion A2).

Different experts in the field define psychological trauma in different ways. For Lacan, a trauma occurs when there is an encounter with the Real, which denies signification. Lacan (1988:164) notes that

there's an anxiety-provoking apparition of an image which summarizes what we can call the revelation of that which is least penetrable in the real, of the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence.

However, one of the most timely and useful definitions of trauma is that of Cathy Caruth (1996:91) in her brilliant study, *Unclaimed Experience : Trauma, Narrative, and History*. She follows Freud in defining trauma as "*the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomenon*". What needs, however, to be emphasized in the definition of trauma is its being a highly stressful event that overwhelms a person's ability to cope.

There are countless ways in which an individual can be traumatized. A list of potentially traumatic events include war, sexual and physical assault, robbery, being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attacks, torture, disasters, severe accidents, and life-threatening illnesses, as well as witnessing death or serious injury by violent assault, accident, war, or disaster. Childhood sexual abuse is included even if it does not involve threatened or actual violence or injury (Briere and Scott 2015:63-70).

Individuals with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) exhibit four different types of symptoms, including: Reliving or re experiencing the event through nightmares, disturbing thoughts, flashbacks and psychological distress; avoiding reminders of the traumatic event (thoughts, emotions, people, places and conversations) that may trigger memories of the traumatic event; feeling emotionally numb or having reduced emotional experiences, detachment or alienation from others, and being less interested in previously enjoyed activities; and constantly being on guard, having difficulty in concentrating and feeling nervous or easily startled (Briere and Scott 2015:75-90). So, it's useful to think of all trauma symptoms as adaptations that help a survivor to cope at some point in the past and at other point in the present. Moreover, the higher the dose of trauma, the more potentially damaging the effects, the greater the stressor, the more likely the development of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In short, enduring, recovering from, and succumbing to trauma are all aspects of the human condition. And, when a traumatic event, an uprooting, or a social turmoil strikes, the community as well as the individuals within a society are affected.

The war in Iraq, Bush's administration and the ubiquitous war on terror have, thus, generated numerous theatrical productions that envision the subjectivities of perpetrators as well as victims of violence. As troops mobilize,

so do directors and playwrights on stages around the world. Among the timely plays which bear witness to the realities of war in Iraq is *'Stuff Happens'* (2004) by David Hare. The latest in the surge of political theatre, the play ruthlessly exposes the dubious premises on which the war was fought. We can see a similar approach in a play like *'Iraq: Speaking of War'* (2005) by Karen Malpede. Here the play provides a far more inflected view of the complexities of the war in Iraq through the words of Iraqi civilians, American soldiers and independent journalists than the simplified and monolithic narratives of the media and most political commentators.

There is also that rare and rewarding theatre work, *'Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue'* (2006) by Quiera Algeria Hudes. The play manages to be a deeply poetic, touching, and often funny indictment of the war in Iraq. Meanwhile, Rajiv Joseph's *'Benegal Tiger'* (2009) is an evocative reflection on the alienation and absurdity of war, its psychological impact on both the invader and the invaded, the infinite reverberations of violent acts, and the deadly toll of war on faith and spirituality, culture and history. Finally, Margret Lewis's deeply-felt play *'Freshly Fallen Snow'* (2012) looks at two different wars World War I and the Iraq War through the lens of medical ethics, with intriguing but also frustrating results.

On the basis of this, just like all serious theatre, documentary theatre is no exception in being affected by traumatic events and in thus showing their effect on the people who live them. 'Documentary Theatre' is a term coined by Derek Paget in 1987 to describe a form of theatre which places interviews with people, journalistic accounts, and court transcripts at the heart of the process and product, since such personal stories provide a foundation from which a script is developed into a dramatic text that questions the relationship between facts and truth (Paget 1987:317).

Just like documentary photography, documentary theatre relies heavily on sheer facts and intractable data. In contrast to fictive theater, it does not merely attempt to imitate reality and resemble truth, but it actively deploys it, integrates it into its very dramaturgy via technological projections of photographs, film footage, sound bites, as well as the extensive (sometimes even exclusive) integration of verbatim quotes (Schweltzer 2007:54-60). Documentary theater has been, thus, a stable resource for committed artists seeking to bear witness to systemic violence against ethnic, gendered, or sexual others, and to instigate personal and collective processes of mourning and healing.

Modern documentary theatre artists include Anna Deavere Smith, Sarah Jones, Nilaja Sun, Brooke Haycock and Mike Wiley. The basic tension among some of these artists is the battle of the actual versus the fictive, the mimetic versus the poetic, or the authentic versus the theatrical. Heather Raffo and Judith Thompson, however, follow the views of both critics, Carol Martin and Susan Sontag, who believe that the documentary theatre should strategically deploy the appearance of truth while inventing its own particular truth through elaborate aesthetic devices. As such, both Raffo and Thompson assert through their works that the various processes of selecting, editing, staging, and performing archival

material have less to do with documenting the past than with constructing a past specifically designed to make a particular future more likely to occur (Ozieblo 2012:131-135).

2.2.Content analysis

Heather Raffo (1970-) is an Iraqi–American actress and a playwright. Born in Michigan from an Iraqi father and an Irish American mother, Raffo visited Iraq twice, one when she was only five years and the other one in 1993. During her 1993 visit to the Saddam Art Center in Baghdad, she saw a painting – created by the Iraqi famous artist Layla Al-Attar- in a backroom called 'Savagery', which depicted a naked woman clinging to a barren tree. Raffo wanted to connect with the artist (later on appeared as one of her characters in her play), unfortunately she could not because the artist had been killed by an American raid, a few months before Raffo's visit. Raffo's curiosity about the artist and the work, however, let her begin interviewing Iraqi women inside Iraq and in exile. The composites she has drawn of their lives – stories of hardship, violence and unsafe survival – comprise her play *Nine Parts of Desire* that she wrote in 2003.

Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire*, thus, is a solo performance of multiple characters. The play invites the audience members to see both the shared suffering and the resilience of women under Saddam's brutal, misogynist regime and the US-led invasion. Terry Teachout (2005:13) in her article *Invisible Women* says that "*Heather Raffo ... brings us closer to the inner life of Iraq than a thousand slick-surfaced TV reports*".

The title of the play comes from a hadith attributed to Al-Imam Ali Ibn Abi Taleb – "*Almighty God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women, and one to men*" (Eichman1995:12). So, the title's significance stems from its originality in referring to the physical place of Iraqi women in the world, to their desires. It has come to represent the profusion of wants of an entire people: the desire for friendship, for love, for memorializing the murdered and for survival.

The women's prototype monologues summon up the traditions of a culture that audiences might only know through televised images of destruction. The women's stories, however, convey the complex and disturbing reality of being female in modern – day Iraq by referring to the rape and violence committed by Saddam's sons, as well as the particular effects of war on women inhabiting different classes, regions, and political affiliations during the escalating US-Iraq crisis and the bombing of the country.

To emphasize the tragedy of Iraq, Raffo performs the nine characters herself and starts her play with the monologue of the Mullaya – a professional mourner, who responds and leads calls to women at funerals. This Mullaya, carrying a great bundle on her head and emptying her load of shoes into the river, mumbles:

Early in the morning / Early in the morning I come to throw dead shoes
into the river Today the river must eat / This river is the color of worn
soles (Raffo 2003:3).

It is obvious that starting with Mullaya refers to a historical fact that Iraq is the land of sadness, due to the successive stages of its troubled history. Moreover, Mullaya's placing the shoes of the dead in the river that runs through Iraq and the juxtaposition of soles / souls of the dead are representative. It seems that Mullaya – who is usually hired by others – bemoans a whole nation, its culture, its history and its people. Her prolonged mourning involves trauma as a national experience since all Iraqis share the same traumas of loss.

As to Layla's character, she is the play's main speaker and a reflection to the real Iraqi artist, Layla Al-Attar, who was killed by US air strike in 1993. This fictional character – described by Raffo as sexy and elegant woman – wants to survive, to live freely, yet she rejects leaving Iraq, despite having the means to do so. She says, "*I will never leave / Not for freedom you do not even have. Call me what you like, look at me how you will*" (Raffo 2003:6).

Appearing with a contradictory identity, Layla is a sympathizer or a collaborator, and a critic and victim of the regime. Such a contradiction shows the trauma and horror she has suffered from, that she does not dream but of survival. However, in order for Layla to survive, she has to negotiate her gendered position vis-à-vis the oppressor, and this experience per se can be traumatizing. What escalates her traumatic state is the unforgotten stories that she witnessed or heard : like when she silently witnessed one of her friends being taken by the old regime and stripped, covered by honey, and eaten by Dobermans. She says, "*These stories are living inside of me / each woman I meet her or I hear about her / and I can not separate myself from them*" (Raffo 2003:9).

As to Amal, she is a Bedouin woman, a pursuer of freedom and change. She leaves Iraq to marry a man in London, whom she leaves later after betraying her with one of her friends. She then gets married to her father's friend, an Israeli tribesman. She leaves him, however, for not keeping his promise to leave the Middle East and go to Canada. Returning back to Baghdad, Amal begins a phone relationship with a friend of her ex-husband. After a year they finally meet in Dubai, but he rejects her. Too ashamed to return back to Iraq, Amal decides to return to her first husband in London, thinking that she can get more freedom, peace or love.

It is quite obvious that Amal is desperately searching for someone to listen to her, to fill the void she feels deeply. Thinking naively that when she will find the man, the void will be vanished, Amal says, "*I do, I very much feel this void / I have no peace / Always I am looking for peace*" (Raffo 2003:11).

There is also Huda, the seventy – year – old London expat, who speaks more like a westerner – a fact that separates her from other characters. Though she has left Iraq a longtime ago, she still indulges in her past painful traumatic memories from her old country. By trying to fight these brutal memories, Huda – however – some how grows numb to them. Her addiction to alcohol might be an escape from her memories and from the conflict inside herself.

When Saddam's Ba'th came to power in 1963, Huda with other members of resistance were arrested and thrown into prison. She voices her experience:

We could hear things, all night, always rape / or rape with electronic instruments / But their way, I promise you, their way / was to torture the people close to you / that is how they'd do it (Raffo2003:18).

Having thus experienced the brutality of Saddam's regime first hand, Huda turns from an outspoken opponent to war to a supporter of the American invasions in Iraq. She announces her preference to chaos than to permanent repression by cruelly saying : "*Because Saddam / Saddam was the greater enemy than, I mean, / imperialism we all can say / congratulations / the regime is gone / Saddam is gone*" (Raffo 2003: 20). Moreover, Huda's inability to reconcile her past with her present moment and future is just like her inability to reconcile her love to her hate for Saddam's regime and the American invasion. Huda states: "I am in a period of disheartment everywhere. / May be I should be there . / I don't know what to do with myself now, I have doubts, yeah, well / About my whole life" (Raffo 2003:21).

There is also the British educated, unnamed woman doctor who- out of a sense of obligation- chooses to return to her roots Iraq and its people. However, she is shocked by the dramatic increase in cancer rates and growing number of deformed babies being born in a country - she fears - is contaminated with uranium depletion. She narrates her traumatic experience as a doctor by saying: "Six babies no head, four abnormally large heads now today another one with two heads." (Raffo 2003: 20-21). She also narrates her painful experience as a wife to a husband who – similar to many men in Iraq – has lost part of his body because of war : "*My husband he sits at home without his legs*" (Raffo 2003:22). Though living in a world subdued with death and deformity, she has to live. And though fully knows the consequences of radiation in Iraq, she shocks her audiences by announcing that she is pregnant, for she also might give birth to a double – headed baby.

Further more, we witness the unemotional testimony of an Iraqi girl, Samira, who is only nine years old. This little girl gives a fresh glimpse to the fears and frustration of living and growing under the American occupation. Samira complains that her mother deprives her from going to school, for fear that she might be endangered by the American soldiers. Unlike her father who disappeared after the war, Samira's mother discourages her by saying that she is so stupid to go to school.

Fascinated – like any other child of her age – by watching different American programs, Samira reaches the extent of wishing to be stolen and taken to another country, "may be I should get stolen / so I could leave my country," she says (Raffo 2003:25). What is more shocking for the audience is that the terrible experiences of losing her father and the fear of losing her mother cause trauma for anyone, nevertheless, she, out of boredom, has learned to distinguish between the different kinds of weapons by listening to the type of shot sound. "*I am not stupid,*" she says, "... I can tell if it is RPG's or American, tank or armor vehicle, / Kalashnikov or M16" (Raffo 2003:26). An attitude that let one think about the kind of future for this new fresh generation.

There is also the monologue of Umm Ghada who testifies the massacre of over 400 civilians, including her own entire family, by American troops in a laser-guided attack on a public air-raid shelter. Umm Ghada makes her life's mission to let the world aware of this tragic event. She gives a horrifying tour of the shelter as if it were a museum:

This is Amiriya bomb shelter. /Here they write names /in chalk the smoked figures. /Here, on the ceiling, you can see /charred handprints and footprints from people who lay in the top bunks. /And here a silhouette of a woman vaporized from heat. /This huge room became an oven, and they pressed to the walls to escape from the flames (Raffo 2003:29).

Though still alive, Umm Ghada's real life ceased with the last night of seeing her daughter. Feeling guilty for her survival, Umm Ghada ceases her life to let all people witness Iraq's horrible events. "Now you sign the witness book / your name will be witness, too" (Raffo 2003:31).

We also witness the Iraqi – American young woman, who is living in New York, and whose family still lives in Iraq. We see her "transfixed in front of the T.V., watching the progress of the Iraqi war and caught in a frenzy of worry over relatives there" (Raffo 2003:55). She narrates:

I watch T.V. /looking for faces of our family /So all I do is cry. I'm on my knees usually /in the middle of my apartment with my mom /We're on the phone /I'm watching /I'm holding a rosary / watching CNN /I want to pray /but I don't have /words (Raffo 2003:36-37).

After being grown to identify herself an American, she feels an alienation while watching the bombs come down on her family's neighborhood. Suddenly, she becomes the other, the enemy. Growing numb to what surrounds her, she engages herself with different activities so that not to be crazy. However, she cannot escape her memories and the tragedy of her people in Iraq.

The old Nanna is the last of the nine women performed by Heather Raffo. "[She is] an old woman scrappy and shrewd; she has seen it all" (Raffo 2003:45). She thinks she lives for a longtime, and she – like others – has this sense of guilt for being surviving. She testifies to the ongoing sellout and systematic erasure of her country's rich history by saying:

I saw /Iraqi people /bringing petrol, /Shhh / and /burning /all /National Archives, Qur'anic library /all .. our history is finished. /Sunni, Shi'a, Kurd, /Christian even, Jew .. /if they take what we share /it is easier /to finish (Raffo 2003:46).

In contrast to Mullaya, Nanna not only accepts her nation's break down as punishment for the Iraqi people's complicity in their own oppression, but also actively hastens it by selling whatever bits and pieces of Iraqi history she can find in the ruins of plundered museums and archives: books, carpets, shoes, paintings, 'very old' things (Raffo 2003:46). However, the last item she tries to sell is Layla's painting 'Savagery'. This painting functions – as explained by Raffo in the production notes – as an epilogue to remind us finally that "everything we have witnessed has a price" (Raffo 2003:47).

Through *Nine Parts of Desire*, Raffo thus intends to write a piece of drama about the Iraqi psyche, something that would inform and enlighten the images we see on T.V, and would give voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. The play presents us with the lives of Iraqi woman, all of whom have been terrified by war. Through their monologues, Raffo projects a fact that in each part of Iraq there is a sad story where women, in particular, are victims. Besides, she asks us to look past our preconceptions and prejudices and to view these women and girls as human beings with the same aspirations, difficulties, and desires that all of us share.

Each woman in turn offers her own perspective on the country's harrowing history. Each woman seeks peace in both her country and within herself. What connects all these women - in spite of their diverse ages, classes, events, histories, ethnicities and experiences - is a profound sense of trauma manifesting itself in various post-traumatic stress syndromes. Their traumas also link them to their country's long harrowing history, which has left its wounds on them individually and collectively. By thus expressing the hardship of their lives, Raffo allows these women to write their own history as it is never before.

Moreover, Raffo's role as an interviewer, playwright and performer makes her represent and speak for these various women, bring their traumas into conversation with each other as well as cite them figuratively through her own body. And, with the help of few props – some old shoes, a paint brush, a whiskey bottle, and, most importantly, an abaya, a traditional Islamic garment – Raffo transforms herself onstage from one woman to another. In a way, the audience thus perceives not only nine but ten women, who give testimony to their various experiences of violence in Iraq. In the body of Raffo, thus, working through trauma becomes a collective experience – both for the women she represents as well as for us, the audience. Raffo's unprecedented level of theatrical experimentation and inventive approach lies, thus, in designing the circular movement of the narrative, obscuring the boundaries between characters, embodying and fusing all of them in the figure of the artist, and building up the ritualistic crisis in order to open up a space for collective mourning.

Believing that telling the truth of the 'actual people' and 'actual events' is insufficient to promote emotional catharsis and attain political insight, Raffo's interest and goal in documenting war is, hence, not so much an investigation into the cause and effect of war, not primarily our political awareness of the casualties of war but, first and foremost, arousing our ethical responsiveness. For according to Raffo, who seems to take up Judith Butler's call for an ethical engagement of trauma, responding to pain, being it our own or that of others, unintentionally also affects the self and vice versa (Butler 2004:46). According to Raffo, as well as to Bulter, awareness of this interdependency could fundamentally change our sense of responsibility in the world.

Indeed, one is struck not only by the detached documentation, the decided mimetic shift from an exercise in truth telling' to Raffo's explicitly theatrical

mourning ritual but also by what this shift – this self-conscious performance – affects in us, the spectators.

As to Judith Thompson (1954 -), she is a widely recognized director, screen writer, actor, producer and, most of all, one of Canada's most highly regarded playwrights. Her work has enjoyed great success internationally. A Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* once declared that "... in this country, a playwright as good as Judith Thompson is a miracle" (Farlane 2009). She has twice been awarded the *Governor General Award for Drama*, and is the recipient of many other awards including the *Order of Canada* (Farlane 2009).

Thompson is particularly interested in the theories of Freud, and is more absorbed in the psychology of her characters than in their actions. All of her plays confront the horror and violence in modern society that is apparent to anyone who reads the newspapers or watches T.V. Her work encompasses inherent and subconscious elements of human experience which are seldom seen on stage. While the ambitiousness of Thompson's scope can occasionally result in plays which seem somewhat uneasy in their form, she has an astonishing gift for providing theatrical experiences which profoundly reach the deepest recesses of her audience's imaginations (Farlane 2009).

Like Heather Raffo, Thompson incorporates aspects of docudrama and poetic soliloquy into monologue theater. Her *Palace of the End* marks her first attempt in global politics. *Palace of the End* is a carefully crafted set of three monologues that revolve around the trauma and tragedy of the Iraqi war. The three distinct monologues - each a highly sophisticated exploration of personal investment, values and moral conflict – tell real-life tales of Iraq before and after the 2003 US invasion, and offer a detailed and graphic portrayal of what is often unheard and unseen in the media frenzy that surrounds such events.

Basing her characters on real public figures, yet Thompson invents their soliloquies, ponderings, and personal reflections. She has made the lives of these figures function as a lens onto fateful moral choices during escalating violence; and through their narratives, she has made visible the gender dynamics operating in the exercise of power. Moreover, all three of Thompson's figures represent the return of the repressed, the absent, the unavailable, the dead and the disappeared. Two of these figures are already dead, and their presence adds a surrealistic quality to the alternate universe of horrific events and creates the potential for theatre and its audiences to "*transcend the past and affect the future*" (Barnett 2005:92-96). Each character exists isolated in a lineal space through the looking glass, where values have shifted and where they struggle to understand the nature of inhumanity and their own complicity in it.

The opening monologue, "*My Pyramids*," is inspired by the media frenzy surrounding Private Lynndie England, (Teri Lamm), the young American soldier photographed in the act of sexually humiliating Iraqi detainees in Abu Gharib prison. Lynndie was imprisoned for actions that had been ordered or sanctioned by her superiors, including the father of her child, Specialist Charles Grainer, who staged the photos. Very pregnant and not very bright, she ineffectively tries to explain her actions: "*I guess I'm a bit of a martyr*," she says.

"like them pretty – eyed Palestinian girls who wear the scarf and walk into a supermarket and blow themselves up? That what I done; I done blew myself up" (Thompson 2007:12).

Lynndie clearly sets up the larger context of the war in Iraq and obviously highlights the relationship between the American soldiers and the Iraqis; the latter who - according to this soldier – were treated as no less than animals in the hands of their captors. Staying almost aggressively singular in this performance and creating a somewhat limited version of events that are intended to shock an audience, Lynndie – in her address to the audience – indignantly holds them responsible for scapegoating her as a woman who humiliates men, and for not recognizing the alternate universe she inhabits as she recalls "*those secret nights when my breathing went funny and there was dry ice in my heart and I laughed like I have never laughed before*" (Thompson 2007:18).

The second monologue, "*Harrow down Hill*," is drawn from the publicized account of the so-called suicide or murder of Dr. David Kelly, (Rocco Sisto), in 2003. Kelly, a former UN weapons inspector, was recognized as the source of a BBC report claiming that the British government had exaggerated its assessment of Iraq's weapons program in its leading role in the war. In Thompson's play, Kelly's admission follows first hand reports of US soldiers' fatal abuse of a young Iraqi girl, daughter of his close personal friend in Baghdad, whose entire family perished afterwards in the US military hunt for insurgents. After a public hearing before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee which investigated his role in the media scandal, Kelly was scandalized in the media, often in cruel terms. Two days later, he was found dead in a wooded area near his Oxfordshire home.

The monologue mentions these events as Kelly inflicts his moral wounds and is in the process of dying. He apologizes to the audience but asks them to witness his confession and guilt over his earlier silence, and his horror and agony over the lies he has told himself to justify behavior. We see him in his final moments, trying to explain his suicide: "*Do you say that a soldier who loses his life in the name of freedom, truth and compassion has killed himself?*" (Thompson 2007:24-25).

The play, then, ends with the third and emotionally painful final monologue, "*Instruments of Yearning*". The astonishing Heather Raffo, herself, plays Nehrjas Al Saffarh, who was an Iraqi detained, pregnant woman and a well-known member of the Communist Party of Iraq during Saddam's rise to power in the 1970s. She was Saddam's target and, later, part of the huge damage of the Gulf War when her home was bombed by Americans.

In order to obtain information about her husband who was a communal party leader, the Baathist police repeatedly rapped Al Saffarh in the presence of her sons, and forced her to witness her son's torture in interrogation quarters. With bitter irony, she echoes Kelly's vision of a parent who knows that a child – in this case her child – is being tortured and does nothing to stop it. Meanwhile, the other two monologists remain on the stage during Al Saffarh's painful tale. Then, just before the lights go down, Lynndie ties the three seemingly unrelated

stories together with a simple look at her swollen belly: Where Iraq is concerned, we understand, something has gone seriously wrong with the cycle of life.

Thompson's innovation lies in exposing the ugly truth behind the headlines of the current situation in Iraq. Each monologue represents layers of consciousness. Each monologue brings in "*the cracks and fissures*" as well as "*the eruptions*" that "*seep or explode through psychic and social surfaces*" in traumatic circumstances (Knowles 2005:22-23). Thompson's aim is to prove that the personal is inseparable from the social and that history is present in her characters, living or dead, as is the hidden presence of past trauma that cannot be denied. Besides, Thompson's hybrid genre—namely, merging the documentary with theatrical ritual—invites audiences to imagine the private agonies of each figure and to identify with facets of their stories while witnessing their confessions. As such, the characters' direct address to the audience breaks the fourth wall, implicates spectators who attempt to distance themselves from conditions that they feel ill-equipped to alter and, most of all, opens up a space for collective mourning.

Thompson makes all the characters speak of their ability to cause pain as they concurrently punish themselves for their deeds and attempt to repress disturbing images. Lynndie – the speaker of the first monologue - defining herself against the misogynist discourse about her on the internet - alternates her response between indignation at her accusers and justification of her actions. In her effort to gain important strategic information, Lynndie exploits what she has been taught to humiliate the prisoners. She shares the attitudes of the US military elites who amuse themselves by administering these forms of torture : Piling up naked bodies in a pyramidal structure and leading a man around by a leash – acts that are doubly humiliating since the perpetrator of these shaming acts is a woman. As she says:

As far as I am concerned I was doin what had to be done, to get to the intelligence and that is, according to their culture, me laughin at their willies was worse than a beatin way worse ... I had a smile on my face but this was SERIOUS – INTELLIGENCE – WORK (Thompson 2007: 12).

As to David Kelly, the second of Thompson's trio of figures, he has committed '*the greatest sin of our time*' in not denouncing earlier the British government's devious claims about Saddam having WMDs*. It is a sin that has caused the death and destruction of untold numbers of Iraqis. Unlike Lynndie, Kelly regrets as he walks through the looking glass and attempts to solve the 'riddle' of how to defeat the agents of war as well as the mystery of his earlier silence and his self – deception. Struggling to see his death as a heroic political

* WMD is a three letter acronym that refers to Weapon of Mass Destruction, munitions with the capacity to kill large numbers of human beings indiscriminately (<http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/WMD>).

act, he finds a path to redemption through suicide or, as some assume, by becoming a target for assassination.

It is not only Kelly's confession that Thompson asks us to witness, but also the horror of his humiliation as he sits against a tree in the woods, his pant legs pushed up, a cut at his wrist, blood on his knee, his glasses and watch beside him, and, of course, the empty bottle of pills – the price of speaking out against injustice. As the "*ghost of Harrow down Hill*", he will be forever present as a reminder of past deeds repressed and of future responsibility (Greene 2006: 83). In his invisibility, he will have a stronger presence than he had in life.

As with all of Thompson's figures, repressed trauma hovers at Al Saffarh's border of consciousness. Al Saffarh is Lynndie's "Other" – the enemy that must be sacrificed, but also the martyr with whom she identifies. In Saddam's terms, she is the unpatriotic mother who must be sexually abused and must witness her son's torture. As with all of Thompson's figures, Al Saffarh's unforgivable sin is that she did not try to prevent her son's torture by revealing the truth of her husband's whereabouts. She has sacrificed her son for others' freedom. And, like Kelly, she asks, on very different terms: "*Why did I not speak then?*" (Thompson 2007:58). Was it Al Saffarh's place to save the resistance ? Was it Kelly's place to protect the government ? On this side of the looking glass, we ponder these questions.

This alternate universe, this violence elsewhere and within, is only seen through a mirror held up to the characters' moral choices, actions, and inactions, and through a reflection that allows for the appearance of the unconscious and for the surfacing of repressed past traumas. Thompson's mission and innovation as a playwright is that she makes visible to audiences "*what is invisible and covered up with piles of everydayness and everyday life*" (Wachtel: 37-41). Moreover, by metaphorically turning the mirror on the audience, Thompson enables them to experience the painful thing of looking in the mirror, to reflexively enter into an alternate universe that estranges the familiar, and to read the signs by holding their own assumptions up to the mirror.

3. Conclusion

On the whole, both Heather Raffo's and Judith Thompson's *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Palace of the End*, respectively, show that trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise un accessible. The truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.

Notably, the plays under consideration uncover a hidden reality, not an imaginative one, of what was going on in Iraq. This reality is uncovered by tracing its prolonged and troubled history of war, and by narrating the individual's traumatic experience that transcends Iraq's historical and geographical frame work. Having thus used the war in Iraq as a raw material to shatter the walls of silence, to give voice to those often silenced, ignored or brutalized in official stories, by politicians and the mass media, both Raffo and

Thompson have, also, created women characters who are swept up in the events surrounding 9/11, or incidents directly related. As such, both playwrights share an interest in the female experience of this war – as combatants, casualties, or spectators – a common experience that has left all of them with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Like other documentary playwrights—Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, Emily Mann and others – who insist by way of stressing on the factual nature of their documentary works, Raffo and Thompson also assert the credibility of their dramaturgical approach and the notion of the documentary theatre as 'an exercise in truth telling.' However, unlike documentary playwrights, both Raffo and Thompson refuse minimizing the role of the playwright in the poetic process to be merely that of a recorder and editor in order to emphasize the affective force of the supposedly authentic. So, while documentary playwrights apparently step back to let the voices of their protagonists speak more clearly, Raffo and Thompson step in. Though remaining just like others anchoring their work 'in fact and research', yet, both Raffo and Thompson are less concerned with the 'actual person' and the actual event' than with the poetic truth that highlights the experience. Notably, they have succeeded in transforming the stories and testimonies of the women they have met into crafted composites of experience.

Raffo's and Thompson's innovative approach to documentary theater extends, as well, to the staging of their plays. As for Raffo, she performs all nine women's stories herself. This device of performing multiple and diverse personas in monologue theater enables audiences to envision unlikely and unseen connections among individuals, and provides an imagined '*intervening space*', where these links can become visible and reversionary projects can be undertaken. As for Thompson, she creates also this kind of intervening space through three evocative monologues – entirely imagined by her – of the scapegoated female soldier, the remorseful weapons inspector, and the Iraqi mother who inhabits many more subject positions as they recount their stories. The characters share this imagined space on stage in three different sets situated side by side, separated only by large fragments of glass. Thus, Thompson's characters, and by extension her audiences, see through mirrors as well.

As such, Raffo and Thompson have transcended common boundaries by speaking for and about those who suffer history not those who make it and by transforming testimony into mourning. By confronting us with the traumas of others, Raffo and Thompson assert that they are so much concerned with sharpening our ethical responsibility rather than our political awareness of the casualties of war.

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