

## The Possible Impact and Resonances of the Production

Theatre performances are at their most effective when they carry with them a poignant, contemporary message that encourages inquiry and or change in its audience. "Phantasmagoria" is a performance centred on drug misuse, specifically amphetamines (Speed) and its prevalence amongst counter-culture groups. Throughout the performance questions are raised as to the effectiveness of society's drug counter-measures and presents, in a stark manner, the effects and consequences of uncontrolled amphetamine misuse. Performed through a partnership of absurdism and physical theatre "Phantasmagoria" presents an ever shifting, impactful performance that will encourage the audience to re-evaluate their viewpoint on drugs and their use. "Phantasmagoria" attempts to counter the "black and white" right and wrong traditionalist views of drug use by presenting user's as both functioning individuals in the case of Dex, Angela and Adder and desperate victims represented through Angela's experience and ultimately her death. The absurdist performance elements in particular the "face-less crowd" enhance the universal nature of the action on stage. The addition of physical theatre communicates the rawness of emotion each character experiences by utilising the human body as a communicator of its own self-induced suffering. And finally the performance space upon which these two styles combine is further utilised as a means with which to impact the audience and communicate the shows message.

6,640 hospital admissions were made in 2010/11 for drug-related mental health and behavioural disorders this is a 14.3 % increase to the figures gathered in 2009/10. Furthermore 1,784 deaths in England and Wales in 2010 were attributed to drug misuse.<sup>1</sup> Despite rigorous campaigns drug misuse is not falling and as such there exists an educational vacuum that performances like "Phantasmagoria" could fill. Approaching the subject in an abstract and unbiased manner "Phantasmagoria" aims to alter or question skewed perceptions of anti-conformity and its association with drug misuse.

One of the most visually impactful elements of "Phantasmagoria" is the "faceless-crowd". Utilising simple blank prosthetic facial masks, as influenced by the theatre of the Absurd, the crowd will be effectively de-humanised and stripped of their own individual identity. As such in typical Absurdist style the entire crowd becomes metaphor for the populous of mainstream-society, and in their blank faces their lack of individuality is effectively suggested. Absurdist theatre expressed "the total impermanence of any values, shook the validity of any conventions and highlighted the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness."<sup>2</sup> This idea of arbitrariness is highlighted by the four characters' attempts to distance themselves and achieve a higher plane of being and in the attempt prove life's precariousness. The crowd forming a physical barrier between Angela and the group gives the audience a visually striking representation of society's cold-hearted approach to drug and rebellion prevention. "The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are primarily intended to convey a poetic image or a complex pattern of poetic images; they are above all a poetical form."<sup>3</sup> As such the staging and blocking of the crowd serve to flow from one

<sup>1</sup> "Statistics of Drug Misuse: England, 2011 | The NHS Information Centre." *Home | The NHS Information Centre*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles/drug-misuse/statistics-on-drug-misuse-england-2011>

<sup>2</sup> Culik, Jan. "THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD." *The University of Glasgow :: Faculty of Arts*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Absurd.htm>.>

<sup>3</sup> Esslin, Martin. *Absurd drama*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1965. Print (5)

set action to another in lyrical fashion, as if presenting their argument in poetic physical form. The red lighting in the prevention scene further serves to suggest a rage, passion and anger, emotions that are not presented in language as "one of the most important aspects of absurd drama was its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language had become a vehicle of conventionalised, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Words failed to express the essence of human experience, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface"<sup>4</sup>. The rage that society has towards drug-users and non-conformists is physically displayed, a rage born of a fear, a fear of the unknown and a fear that what is considered the consensus gentium could be misguided.

The principle performance decision made in the attempt to resonate with the audience is the addition of the hydraulic centre platform. Utilised as a means with which to breach the gap between audience and actor, the platform raises the four lead characters out of the crowd below and to the eye-level of the audience. This performance decision was driven by the fact that the Theatre of the Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams"<sup>5</sup>. The raising of the platform effectively communicates both a sense of surrealism and additionally, in its point of use and staging, a ritualism. This specific set design forces the audience to question how they view themselves as members of society, whether they connect with the melancholic crowd below them or the emotion-filled individuals before them. This questioning raises debate amidst the audience; crafting a conflict between the accepted and the unique. Additionally the platform serves as representation for the extent to which Angela has been separated from her previous existence; her ascension from the dregs of society ironically presented in her association with drug-culture an ironic reflection of the absurdist transcendence.

Physical theatre is, as the name suggests, a theatre of the body; it adheres to the principal that "the somatic impulse is privileged over the cerebral in the making process"<sup>6</sup>. With this focus upon the physical self, a heightened rawness is granted physical theatre, a gift that ensures a more precise and effective communication of theme and meaning. Lecoq states that "the body knows things about which the mind is ignorant" and as such the intensity of emotion that carries throughout "Phantasmagoria" is granted an inner-power, through its expression in physical theatre; a direct and poignant stab towards the truth hidden beneath the characters motives and driving emotions. The nature of the piece devised demands a sense of urgency and passion, as such physical theatre's "emphasis on exploiting the power of suggestion"<sup>7</sup> allows the platform scene an air of uncertainty and fragility, a perfect tone to present the nature of drug abuse.

Through a combination of specific set design, the absurdly influenced crowd. A critique upon drug use through-out counter-culture movements is presented as such "Phantasmagoria" endeavours to influence and stimulate discussion in its presenting a variety of perspectives, and in doing so achieving long-lasting resonance across its audience.

Word Count: 1,130

<sup>4</sup> Culik, Jan. "THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD." *The University of Glasgow :: Faculty of Arts*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Absurd.htm>.>

<sup>5</sup> Crabb, Jerome . "Theatre of the Absurd." *Theatre Database*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Feb. 2012. <[http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th\\_century/theatre\\_of\\_the\\_absurd.html](http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century/theatre_of_the_absurd.html)>.

<sup>6</sup> Callery, Dymphna. *Through the body: a practical guide to physical theatre*. New York: Routledge :, 2001. Print (4)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid (5)

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