

Cutting It Up

Fragments and Ruins In Julia Barclay's New York Theatre

Cathy Turner

At least there are clues left in the books, a burnt and charred map, some of it obsolete but not all. I hope to scratch through this maze with all of you here now . . .

(Barclay 2001a: 2)

*Dear Cathy,
Thank you so much for calling late last Tuesday
night (my time).¹*

She tells me of papers drifting across Manhattan towards Brooklyn: the papers of the world trade centre burned, torn, blown into hopeless confusion. I have an image of her sifting through them, searching for clues.

She tells me there are endless tapes of conversations between 'terrorist suspects' that no one has translated from Arabic, because Arabic speakers are distrusted.

She is a maker of collage and cut-up who works for a legal firm specializing in trademark law.

In her writing and directing, Julia Lee Barclay examines and reads across such incoherence and incongruities, rather than hoping to reassert order and supposed rationality, intellectual property rights, the norms of grammar, the assumption that all experience is 'translatable' into standard English narrative.

*I can't tell you how trivial the already trivial
trademark law seems now.*

The US Biologist, Lynn Margulis gave a lecture in Autumn 1995 entitled *What is Life?* In her abstract, she wrote:

'What is life?' is a linguistic trap. To answer according to the rules of grammar, we must supply a noun, a thing. But

life on Earth is more like a verb. It is a material process, surfing over matter like a strange slow wave. It is a controlled artistic chaos . . .

(Margulis 1995: 1)

Though I don't intend to stress an analogy between language and the activity of the biosphere, Margulis's statement both illustrates a 'linguistic trap' and suggests an image which might equally represent *language*: 'a verb . . . a process, surfing over matter like a strange, slow wave.' Barclay is influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of language as the vehicle for direct or indirect acts of social regulation, tending to confirm norms of representation and therefore social stasis. Her work is informed by the suggestion that only a marginal literature which breaks with conventional language use can creatively subvert representation, bringing linguistic variables into play and opening up new 'lines of flight'.

*I'm prepared on that weird level for surfing as it
were instead of walking on solid ground.*

Barclay's cut-ups, made with the avowed aim 'to undermine . . . that which we say 'that's-the-way-it-is' about,' represent one form of reluctance to see language as closed, as 'a noun, a thing' – refusing to answer according to the rules of grammar; preferring to surf the linguistic deluge.

*I am doing all I can to disinvest at the most
molecular level.*

Cut-Up

Production Details: Written 1999. Directed by Barclay for the Screaming Venus one-woman show festival, 'Eye's Apple', KGB Red Room Theatre, NYC, June 2000. Restaged August 2001 and shown at HERE, NYC as part of 'The American Living Room' season.

Description: A bride sits on a chair, as if posing for a photograph. A single point of light picks out her face. She is perfectly still, speaking slowly and deliberately, as if trying to connect with a world beyond the theatre.

Process: This ruthlessly fragmentary piece was constructed from found text (published and unpublished). Barclay's first 'play', *Cut-Up* was created during research and development with performers, based at The Present Company, NYC.

Randomly, one picks up *Waiting For Godot*. He reads aloud a passage, again picked at random. He tears out the page. There is palpable pleasure in it.

I went to ground zero with my parents on yet another bright sunny day to see the devastation.

He carefully selects a phrase and uses a student's fluorescent pen to highlight it. He speaks it, turning it over, finding a simple gesture to accompany it. He teaches the gesture and the phrase to the others on stage.

Cut-Up: Extract

Discovers, like chameleons,
she can change color to match
many dark rooms,
from drab to psychedelic in a
matter of
moments. They can even grow skin
to better
mimic laced rooms. The camou-
flage is both
defensive and offensive.
They are centaurs, ambush
hunters

forced to loving.

Void of thought, devoid of fantasy.
I could continue to stand new
results

What does it matter? My body
obeys
motherly legend.

Give me an ounce of my imagin-
ation.

the mother's ragged role has not
changed.
I speak in language where I am
nothing:
closely linked to the point of view
of broken umbrellas.

Another type of dissertation?

no sense, you got theories,
suggestions, schemes for imagin-
ation

fifty thousand fascists each time I
feel content

Beneath is all the fiend which gives
a positive treatment to hell:

(Barclay 1999: 1-2)

Each of the other three performers picks out different texts and phrases until a palette of words and gestures is formed – non-sequiturs ripped from a book about style, a ghost story, a memory scribbled on A4 paper. They then play with these phrases, mixing them up, shifting the accompanying gesture, altering the focus of address, playing off each other. Text-based theatre dissolves into a performance in which we watch the actors at play with fragments of language.

'Wall Street definition: poor people are those with restricted access to capital markets.'

A range of exercises follows, developed through Barclay's investigations into cut-up techniques and their impact on writing, directing and performing. Two speeches are spliced together. The performers collage and elide 'cliché phrases' supplied by the audience. One performer tells an anecdote which gradually self-destructs as the others borrow phrases and gestures from it,

inserting these back into the monologue as it develops.

Barclay emphasizes the need to 'take time to listen to the words'; the action lies in 'taking the language apart as if it's a code'. She hopes to unpick the cultural assumptions hidden in language by observing the dissonance created through a

AWAITING REPAIR IN THE ETERNAL HOOTENANNY

In August 2001, I watch a performance which is the culmination of a series of workshops led by Barclay. Its cut-up title, *Awaiting Repair in the Eternal Hootenanny*, reflects the work it presents. In a small theatre on New York's Lower East Side, performers hurl armfuls of text onto the floor of the stage.

I hold to my original thought: this is the first truly postmodern war.

In Barclay's work, the performers' relationship to the words constantly shifts between distance and identification. The performers are present in the room, but alienated from language. As Fuchs suggests, writing precedes speech: writing surrounds the performers, but speech is something that is fleeting and achieved with effort. Barclay uses Chaikin's analogy, comparing the workshop improvisations to jazz and 'jamming', yet she discourages any attempt at alignment between text and performer.

In her scripted work, the process is analogous. Only occasionally does the writing become speech, as a phrase takes on an unexpected urgency. In these moments, the words may be temporarily

Rough Road

Production details: This play has not yet been given a full production. Barclay directed rehearsed readings at the Jean Cocteau Repertory, NYC, January 2001 and at Camera Obscura, NYC in April 2001, produced by Screaming Venus.

Description: Words become steps on the pedestrian's 'rough road' of non-conformity and independence. The multiple protagonist's thoughts bounce off other texts, in echoes which clarify her own choices.

Process: According to Barclay, the writing process followed a 'stream of consciousness' but with the cut up process in mind, and cutting up my own thoughts in a sense'. The poems of Sylvia Plath, and Lee Krasner's biography are key points of reference, but are infrequently quoted in performance.

Rough Road: Extract

I seem to want to go somewhere more personal.

I seem to not know how.

I seem to not be I.

I seem to seem.

I think I've left the country.

Are you with me?

We are still walking on that road now. My little Lee and Sylvia and I. They are not Lee and Sylvia. They are my Lee and Sylvia. Like in a dream – bundled into my imagination – left there like so many other images, random and specific. Recurring day trips. They are yours. They are not they.

They are us.

They are the inanimate animators. Looking at me through pictures, paintings and words – reaching out across the void of time.

(Barclay 2000: 10–11)

'owned'. Otherwise, language is revealed as a force to be reckoned with, invasive, impertinent, absurd (one workshop performer said she found cliché phrases in her knickers, after the show).

WHAT IS A VOICE?

Here, I wish I could explain how deathly the silence is.

Tim Etchells writes:

When provoked into discussing where their writing 'comes from', some of my students will invoke the notion of a voice. To be looked for intently and nurtured when found, this voice lives in them somewhere, deep down inside. When they find it, they want to write in it. This voice is authentic in some way, by its very nature profound. It comes *from them*. Often at night.

(Etchells 1999: 101)

In the UK, particularly in England, there is a tendency to think of theatre writing in terms of 'authenticity' and self-expression. It is less common for playwrights to think of writing as beach-combing or, as Etchells puts it, 'a kind of trying on of other people's clothes'.

Stockbrokers emerging from plywood structures in the frozen zone, fully dressed for work . . . the fires are still burning.

On the other hand, collage, quotations and cut-ups are key elements of the current tool-kit of experimental theatre (or work at the theatre end of performance). Etchells' current solo performance, *Instructions for Forgetting*, makes use of home movies, interviews, letters and tapes from friends alongside recordings of world events in 'an intimate documentary'. In Reckless Sleepers' *Terminal* soundtracks from the last 10 minutes of four films are played through headphones, enabling the spectators to move from one to another, as they watch a collage of actions. Uninvited Guests' new show, *Offline*, uses text entirely downloaded from the internet, but 'presented in an off-line, distinctly low-tech performance' (Clarke 2001). Whether these performances have much else in common, other than the

collage of thematically related texts. Is this realistic? Does this fragmentation of language produce new movement, or mere chaos?

Since this work takes place in the theatre, perhaps it is implicit that its impact is not made through the new arrangement of language alone, but through a demonstration of speaking and writing as a process. These workshop performances are less about particular verbal juxtapositions, than about the action of listening, of focusing attention onto language – cracking, folding, choosing, discarding, rearranging the words.

Barclay termed her first showing of this type of experimentation a ‘Progress-in-Work’.

FROM LANGUAGE TO SPEECH

Since moving to New York from San Francisco in 1989, Barclay has been an increasingly energetic participant in the city’s downtown theatre scene. She was a resident artist at Mabou Mines in 1995, developing a methodology for directing work with the now-defunct Monkey Wrench Theater. She began writing scripts in 1999, evolving these from discoveries made through workshop experimentation. Though *Word to Your Mama* has now been published and won an award from *Off Off Broadway Review*, she has yet to become well established. She continues to work, despite a lack of resources, to develop strategies informed by Joseph Chaikin’s collaborative exercises on the one hand and the textual experimentation of Richard Foreman on the other.

Between Chaikin and Foreman, the relationship to language has shifted. Discussing the work of artists such as Foreman, The Wooster Group and Stuart Sherman, Fuchs, writing in 1985, identified a break from the automatic equation of dramatic text with speech and a correspondent undermining of theatrical presence:

There appears a kind of acknowledgement, unthinkable in the earlier avant-garde, that culture inescapably takes place within language and writing. . . . One might say we have been witnessing in contemporary theatre, and

Word To Your Mama

Production Details: Directed by Barclay for Screaming Venus as part of their ‘Kallisti’ festival, March 2000, at Camera Obscura, NYC. Also shown in the New York Fringe Festival at The Present Company, August 2000, where it won an award from Off Off Broadway Review for general excellence. A staged reading, directed by Jennifer Johnson, took place at 13th Street Rep., NYC, February 2002.

Publication: *Word To Your Mama* is published in Martin Denton (ed.) *Plays and Playwrights 2001: An Anthology*, The New York Theatre Experience.

Description: Each performer represents the same protagonist, dramatizing the many voices creating tumult in the mind of a New York secretary.

Process: The script was made by cutting up a range of autobiographical material and fragments of found texts taken from the bulletin boards around Barclay’s desk. Some additional material was then inserted, including several longer speeches.

Word To Your Mama: Extract

Revise script.

We sat in his apartment.
He was dying.
He had said
'I don't want to leave you.'
He was asleep.

I was looking out his 14th floor window at a bright, crisp
October sky –
wind whipping through the trees.
The life of the Village noisily, relentlessly moving forward
on the street.
In that moment, I knew –
all that is important is that we are Here
Now.
Alive.

Venice is drowning in water –
The buildings seem like stone boats.
But Venice doesn't drown.
Instead,
it floats.

A woman with a tiara stands amidst rubble. She poses for
a camera.

A Hindu god dances encased in a bronze circle.

On a postcard, John Lennon still stares out from his sun-
glasses in Central Park.

We're still here, motherfuckers.

We're still here.

Now,

What are we gonna do about it?

(Barclay 2001b: 166–7)

especially in performance, a representation of the failure of the theatrical enterprise of spontaneous speech with its logocentric claims to origination, authority, authenticity – in short, Presence.

(Fuchs 1985: 171–2)

assemblage of found material is debatable, but each of them offers a challenge to univocal traditions of dramatic authorship. Such techniques are not new in themselves, having roots in the visual arts, via performance, and in the group authorship of devised theatre. But in each of these works we might also identify a current concern with the multiple voices of the media and/or global communication and the placing of individual (and local) experience within this context.

I quit smoking again, by the way.

Another reason for embracing polyvocality is a move outside the theatre building. On my return from the States, I have a conversation with AnnaMaria Murphy, who writes for Cornwall's Kneehigh Theatre Company. She tells me that the spaces of open-air performance sometimes make it difficult for an audience to follow lengthy speeches. The wind has blown holes in her text, so she has come to create what she calls a 'driftwood' language, assembling fragments gathered from tourist brochures, washed up images, the words on rubbish. In Wales, Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes's recent work *Polis* sent groups of audience members out into Cardiff and a story was told through an assemblage of documentation including video, anecdotes, polaroids and fragments of text laid out on tables. So the current interest in the siting of performance is also having an effect on form, as the environment provides its own texts and structures.

In another context, Kaite O'Reilly has written about the use of a montage of dance, BSL and spoken or sung text in her work with Common Ground Sign Dance Theatre. This company rejects the term 'sign interpretation', which implies the dominance of spoken text. Instead, they present a dialogue between the multiple languages of their performance, which creates a different experience (different silences) for deaf and hearing audiences. In this case, the collaging of language is an overt resistance to the conventional modes of representation. O'Reilly, who is partially sighted, writes: 'My sight is not broken. Rather, it breaks the world'(O'Reilly 2001: 47).

Barclay's *Word To Your Mama* presents action backed by an American flag and uses collage to evoke a contemporary consciousness. However, rather than attempting to portray a nation, her work suggests the struggle to find any point of identification or place for oneself (a voice?) in a society whose values (and therefore modes of speech) seem frequently alien.

Just a lot of fucking flags.

Her writing also implicitly questions the idea that one can satisfactorily 'disinvest' since there can be no clearly established boundary between one's own words and those of the media or one's social group. Even words which have once seemed one's own may not survive to serve an older self. This perspective increasingly leads her to offer up the text to the performer as material to play with, use and abuse. It could seem a precarious path for a writer.

*And the bill of rights is lying in a heap on the floor
... this is truly terrifying. Much more terrifying
to me than Anthrax, that much I can tell you.*

Yet how is the work so recognizably Barclay's own? What is the quality that enables us, or seems to enable us, to recognize a writer in a constellation of words? Is 'voice' an attribute, like eye colour? Is it a question of vocabulary? Or is it something more dynamic? Is it a noun or a verb?

The struggle with the language that surrounds her (and it is quite a particular verbal environment) may be what constitutes Barclay's recognizable 'voice', her self-expression. Her desire to question the static elements of language remains constant throughout her work and keeps her sifting through found and chosen fragments, over and over, re-arranging and reinventing them in an effort to find a language she can use. Her work is performative: it does not articulate a transparent statement. Here, language is something within which the individual operates, an art material, rather than something that bubbles up from within. By avoiding the assumption of a stable 'individual voice', or indeed any linguistic constants, she makes it more apparent that strategy is all we ever have and that all authors and

speakers are editors, adapters, creators of cut-up and montage, scavengers, plagiarists.

I'm not even sure yet how many voices there are in the piece.

GROUND ZERO

'2, 400, 000 Pop-tarts were dropped on Afghanistan as part of the US airborne food aid effort in the first month of bombing.'

Barclay's most recent work, *No One*, represents a new development in her writing. While in the past she has avoided notions of characterization, this text explicitly confronts them. The script begins in a mode similar to that of *Word To Your Mama*, combining cut-up material with fragments of autobiography, stream-of-consciousness and observation. However, the text gradually begins to suggest the presence of two personas who call themselves 'Bob' and 'Mike'. Since these characters can only be deduced from the content of unallocated lines, we cannot be sure where their words begin and end within the verbal collage. They also seem aware of their own insubstantiality, uncertain who is speaking, where they are and whether they or an unseen author are in control (see extract).

'Bob' and 'Mike' could be US soldiers or they could be politicians. They seem to be in a foreign country, a desert, probably Afghanistan – 'Filled with mirages and shit. False fronts, veils and weird fucking music' (Barclay 2001d: 14). They are reminiscent of Vladimir and Estragon, waiting for Godot as writer to supply them with background, motivation and coherent psychology. But as their 'dialogue' is increasingly disturbed by voices they cannot identify, so too the tumult of words gives way to dance, a surrender to

My First Autograce Homeography (1973-4)

Production details: Barclay directed a reading in February 2002, at Manhattan Theatre Source, NYC.

Description: Disjointed reminiscences are flung between two selves who struggle to make them cohere into a history.

Process: Memories and an old diary are cut up and fragmented almost to the point of incoherence.

My First Autograce Homeography (1973-4): Extract

I'm in a rush, but I have to tell you I haven't written in you yet.

The loss of her is beyond pain – a bolt of it, like lightning.

To extricate myself from the actual facts or tasks with radically different small topic, not to a dull roar so heroic or oppressed when I vacuum.

I am trapped again in a bedroom – the phone mortified by my actions – popping pills into her mouth – yelling at her brother to get out and raving: We are alone and we are trapped.

He tries to dance around his room, I don't think he did anything in my underwear.

Memory of why I want to leave, but preparations for the late night 'brunch'. Vague memories of my love of science and the circus evaporated. I would not take the knife.

I am in a bathtub with my stepfather. He seems huge. I am staring at it – feelings attached to this memory in some weird standing over me while I take a shit or toilet paper.

A memory I don't have.

A warm memory. No memory, just a story. I have sex with other men.

(Barclay 2001c: 10)

confusion – a dissolution of individual identity that is celebratory, even redemptive.

Not that there isn't a dance of uniqueness and difference, but it is a dance I believe . . .

This is an overt attack on both the US celebration of individual success and the US government's insistence on 'American values' as if American values were self-evident. Both imply the existence of a constant individual as well as social homogeneity and stasis.

Pop-tarts are silly breakfast biscuits which are all sugar and completely without nutritional value, just like US foreign policy.

While Barclay adamantly believes in dissent (she quotes Thomas Jefferson 'Dissent is the highest form of Patriotism'), her politics are not expressed through polemic, tending rather to attack the basis of polemic – the norms of capitalism, the categories and identities that make it possible to disconnect from other social groups or nations. The very structure of *No One* suggests that a sense of self might be a linguistic accretion, the trace of diverse cultural currents drifting through us and connecting us to others.

While she acknowledges that at times her own convictions are expressed with vigour, Barclay makes a plea or prayer in *No One*: 'May I be free from me'. She prefers to explore the idea of the 'Me who you are', a phrase which implies that one might search through the debris, the documents of capitalism, a ground zero simultaneously personal and national, for traces of the unfamiliar, the unacknowledged and the unwritten other.

NOTES

This article is based on interviews and correspondence with Julia Lee Barclay, 2000–2. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are taken from publicity material and correspondence.

No One

Production details: Barclay directed rehearsed readings at Arthur's Dress Shop, NYC, January 2002 and at Manhattan Theatre Source, NYC in February 2002. Jennifer Johnson will direct a reading at 13th Street Rep NYC, in March 2002.

Description: Characters appear on Barclay's stage for the first time, emerging from a cut-up of found and autobiographical texts, responding to the September 11th attacks.

Process: Barclay describes *No One* as 'more like Word in that it's a mix of cut up and my own brain . . . and of course something almost like dialogue, which is new.'

No One: Extract

I'm exhausted.
 Who isn't?
 She is exhausted, too.
 Mike?
 Yeah.
 Bob?
 Yeah.
 And we like it that way.
 You have been opened.
 Me who you are.
 Row row row your boat
 gently down the stream. . . .
 merrily
 merrily
 merrily
 merrily
 life is but a dream.
 What needs to be done for
 the children?
 Duck and cover!
 Alone with yourself.
 You can live.
 There are no rules here . . .
 there's just a lot of fucking
 sand.
 What precisely did you
 expect?
 I don't know something a
 little more, you know, definite
 . . . a reason to be here,
 something along those lines.
 You're kidding, right?
 No, Bob, I'm not kidding.
 So I'm Bob now?
 Well, someone has to be.

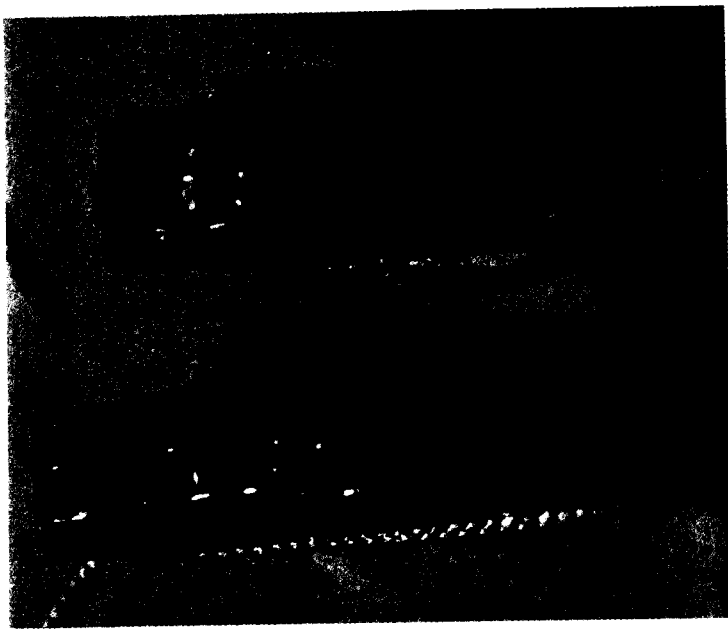
(Barclay 2001d: 20–1)

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emendation and history

The history of any text is also a history of its interpretation, and to elucidate a crux is not merely to solve a riddle. Riddles have solutions; but cruxes also have histories of debate and disagreement, and even if they ultimately seem to be resolved, their solutions do not cancel their histories. When Theobald decided in 1733 that Falstaff's death had nothing to do with "a table of green fields," but rather that in dying, " 'a babbled of green fields," the emendation, indisputably a stroke of editorial genius, seemed to have restored what Shakespeare must actually have written. Bibliography here communicated with Shakespeare himself – or at least, with Shakespeare's manuscript before it reached the printer. The revision, or restoration,



which was almost universally accepted thereafter, also rewrote the history of Henry V.

But what happens to that history? If we agree that Theobald was correct, and that a compositor setting the type in the printing house was misreading Shakespeare's handwriting, what happened before the compositor? "Table" is the 1623 folio's reading; so the folio's printer is the culprit. But the 1602 quarto at this point reads not "babbled" but "talked," and it is apparent that the folio text was not set up from the quarto, but from Shakespeare's manuscript; so neither of our two primary sources reads "babbled": "babbled," even if it is impeccably correct, is all Theobald. The quarto seems to be a reported text provided by two actors, but if the folio's "table" is a misreading resulting from a visual error in deciphering Shakespeare's handwriting, so would the quarto's "talked" seem to be. In a reported text, however, the error ought to be an auditory one. If the quarto is really a reported text, then, the counter-argument here would have to be that the reporters heard "babbled" but remembered it as the simpler concept "talked." This argument would be more persuasive if "talked" looked less like "table." Moreover, even if we agree that "babbled" was what Shakespeare wrote, it might also be the case that Shakespeare's handwriting was hard to read for everyone, and was misread not only by the folio compositor but by the scribe who prepared the promptbook, who also would have been working from Shakespeare's manuscript – and the promptbook, after all, would have been the source of the reporter-actors' scripts too: maybe the actors were (incorrectly) saying "table" or "talked" all along. For Theobald's purposes, however, what the actors said, what all the audiences from 1599 to 1733 heard, was irrelevant; his communication was with Shakespeare's mind – or at least, with Shakespeare's handwriting.

Not much is at stake here. The stage history of *Henry V* is, in fact, very short: the play was not a popular one, and does not seem to have been revived after the early years of the seventeenth century – there was a performance before the king in 1605, but the next recorded production was not until 1738, five years after Theobald's edition was published. Theobald's intuition could effectively abolish the performing tradition because what little stage life the play had was more than a century in the past.