

The Theatre of Philosophy: A Neo-Socratic Method for Performing Public Philosophy

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Thus all our dignity consists in thought. It is on thought that we must depend for our recovery, not on space and time, which we can never fill. Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality.

Blaise Pascal (1966, s.200; p.95)

1. Introduction

Pascal famously said that ‘the heart has its own reasons that reason does not know’ (1966). I extend the metaphor by adding that reason has its own passion. That is probably what Pascal meant by that phrase: that reason and passion are not opposites but integrated parts of a unified mind. The *Philosophy Plays* project is an attempt to bring together reason and passion, the cognitive and the affective, through the integrated medium of philosophy and drama.

The objective of the philosophy plays is to introduce, promote and develop philosophy in the public domain. To this end the Philosophy Plays project aims at making philosophy, and especially Western Philosophy, accessible to the general public and render philosophy accessible to people who would otherwise not have access to it. This paper will explain and demonstrate the theoretical rationale and methodology of the Philosophy Plays project as a way of doing public philosophy. As performance and performative strategies are often used in art practice, the Philosophy Plays project should also be seen to be of interest to visual and performing arts audiences more generally.

2. Historical Background

I first conceived and founded the Philosophy Plays project in 1997 for the primary aim of taking philosophy out of the intellectually constraining spaces of university classrooms and professional conferences and into the liberating spaces of the public agora, as Socrates did 2500 years ago. It was a way of, once again, rendering philosophy relevant and resonant to the shared and common concerns and interests of the citizenry of the modern polis.

There have been several annual series since 1997. Each series is organized around a generic theme comprising six to thirteen fortnightly sessions most of which are repeated two or three times according

to popular demand. For example, some of the generic themes have been, amongst others, 'Philosophy East and West: Zen and Zeno' (1999), and 'Thought for Food' (2003) on various aspects of moral philosophy and applied ethics from Plato to the present.

In addition to the annual series, I have written and performed individual philosophy plays at arts and cultural festivals throughout Australia. For example, 'The Philosophy of Love: Love in the Age of Terror' was performed for the *Adelaide Fringe Festival* and the *Greek Festival of Sydney* in 2004. The venue for the 2004 performance for the *Greek Festival of Sydney* was the Sydney Opera House. It was also broadcast on ABC Radio National. In 2005 my philosophy play 'The Philosophy of Freedom' was also performed for the *Greek Festival of Sydney* at the Museum of Sydney. This is an indication of the versatility of the philosophy plays which have been performed in restaurants and taverns, theatre venues, vineyards (for the Adelaide Fringe Festival the venue was Coriole Vineyards in McLaren Vale) pubs, museums, and the Sydney Opera House.

3. The Structure and Design of the Philosophy Plays Performance

The structure of the philosophy plays comprises three inter-related essential components:

1. A 20-minute talk by a professional philosopher.
2. An original play performed by actors that illustrates dramatically the ideas in the philosophical talk.
3. Audience participation through discussion of the presentation and performance that sometimes includes a banquet of food and wine for all the participants.

The philosophy plays, like Platonic dialogues, seek to engage their audiences both dialectically (primarily through the philosophical talk) and rhetorically (primarily through the drama). The audience participation through discussion that follows is designed to culminate in a dialectical synthesis of those two components – a fusion between reason and sentiment. The public settings are designed to provide a popular forum where people from different backgrounds and different levels of philosophical sophistication can come together to discuss various philosophical issues. The public settings create a convivial atmosphere where the public audience, the philosophers and the performers come together in friendship, as in Plato's *Symposium*, to engage actively in a liberating and lively philosophical dialogical exchange. Thus the philosophy plays always aim to be at once entertaining and informative but most importantly, *transformative*.

4. Philosophy for the Public

In the preface of her book *Poetic Justice* (Nussbaum, 1995:xiv) Martha Nussbaum referring to Walt Whitman tells us that,

“Walt Whitman wrote that the literary artist is a much needed participant. The poet is ‘the arbiter of the diverse...the equalizer of his age and land.’ His capacious imagination ‘sees eternity in men and women’ and ‘does not see men and women as dreams or dots’.

Whitman’s call for public poetry is, I believe, as pertinent to our time as it was to his...Very often in to-day’s political life we lack the capacity to see one another as fully human, as more than “dreams and dots”.

Nussbaum goes on to say that the purpose of her book,

“Is to describe the ingredient of public discourse that Whitman found missing from his America and to show some roles it still might play in our own. It grows out of the conviction, which I share with Whitman, that the storytelling and literary imagining are not opposed to rational argument, but can provide essential ingredients in a rational argument.”

I shall use Nussbaum’s insightful comments as a departure point for explaining the rationale of the philosophy plays project as a method for performing public philosophy. Before doing so, I shall briefly explore Nussbaum’s claim in *Poetic Justice* that “academic philosophy in the United States has had relatively few links with practical choice and public life” (Nussbaum, 1995: xiv). Nussbaum is perhaps right about the *degree* of contact if not its scope, and her comment could apply not only to academic philosophy in the United States but equally to academic philosophy in the Western analytic tradition generally.

Dominant Philosophy Domains

Leaving aside the degree with which it does, there are several ways in which academic philosophy makes contact with public life. There is to begin with the contact in the *education domain* through the traditional educational model of philosophy found in universities and other tertiary institutions. Though indirect, this is by far the primary contact of academic philosophy with public life. Aligned to this but not directly related is the teaching and practice of applied and professional ethics that targets particular groups of professionals such as the Police, the Media, Medicine and Health Care, Engineering, Social Work, the Public Sector, Business, and other professional groups in the *professional domain*. This *professional* model of philosophy has by far a more direct contact with the public than the traditional educational model and one that has had an exponential growth in the last few years. Philosophy also makes contact with the *political domain* that targets government both locally and globally on issues of human rights and other issues of political governance.

Cultural Domains of Philosophy

However extensive the degree of this contact of philosophy with public life is, the *cultural domain* is a large area of public life that philosophy traditionally has had very little contact with. This is the domain

where most people spend their daily lives. Going to the movies, to the theatre, to concerts, eating out at restaurants, visiting friends or family, lounging around cafes, socializing in bars, going to church, playing sport or hanging out in gyms. This is primarily, although not exclusively, the domain of the affections and the sentiments. If there is anywhere where reason is perhaps the slave of passion, it is, if David Hume is right (Hume, 2007) in the cultural domain. If philosophy is going to make contact with public life in the cultural domain, then its approach has to be one that can appeal to the affections and the sentiments of the public. A public moreover who by and large is not acquainted or familiar with philosophy, and especially, Western philosophy. To do so philosophy has to employ rhetorical devices that can appeal directly to popular culture.

The philosophy plays employs two main rhetorical devices that have popular cultural appeal. First, is the setting that can take the form of a theater venue, a restaurant, a pub, a vineyard, arts and cultural festivals, which sometimes includes a banquet of food and wine. These settings provide a convivial atmosphere where people can mingle freely, converse, eat, drink and relax among friends. This is the setting familiar in Plato's *Symposium* (Plato, 1997) and it is this setting that first inspired the structure of the philosophy plays. Secondly, the drama that accompanies each philosophy presentation also provides, both as a form of entertainment but also through its emotional content, the means for engaging the audience affectively in motivating their attention and participation. In combination, the philosophy presentation, the convivial venue that sometimes includes a banquet of food and wine, as well as the dramatic performance, when presented and performed well, can engage the public audiences both cognitively and affectively.

Talking of the reading of literature as a way of animating public thinking and public debate Nussbaum tells us in *Poetic Justice* that "the reader's emotions and imagination are highly active as a result, and it is the nature of this activity, and its relevance for public thinking, that interests me" (Nussbaum, 1995:5). In the case of the philosophy plays it is the audience's emotions and thoughts that are of relevance to public thinking. And the discussion that follows the philosophy plays performances is crucial in providing the public audience with a dialectical evaluative assessment.

Citing Adam Smith, Nussbaum refers to this kind of evaluative assessment as one carried out by a "judicious spectator" (Nussbaum, 1995:72-74). According to Nussbaum, Smith's judicious spectator

"Offers an artificial construction [that] supplies a filtering device for emotion of just the sort that Smith thought necessary for emotions to play the valuable role they ought to play in public life."

For Nussbaum thinks, and I concur, that

“The spectator’s responses are not just willed attitudes of concern, they are really emotions; and Smith plainly believes that the cultivation of appropriate emotions is important for the life of the citizen”.

One of the central concerns of the philosophy plays is the cultivation of appropriate public emotions through the dialectical structure provided by the philosophy plays. This is achieved through the balance between the dialectical framework of the philosophical presentation and the rhetorical structure of the drama, which are then subjected to an evaluative assessment by the ‘judicious spectators’ that comprise the public audience.

The audience participation through discussion helps provide a dialectical evaluative assessment of the topics presented and performed in the philosophy plays. Following Wayne Booth, Nussbaum refers to this discursive process as “coduction” since as she says it is,

“A nondeductive, comparative type of practical reasoning that is carried on in cooperation with others. In the process of coduction, our intuitions about a literary work will be refined by the criticisms of ethical theory and of friendly advice, and this may greatly alter the emotional experience that we are able to have as readers...” (Nussbaum, 1995:76).

Although the philosophy plays are primarily dialogic they are also, and not less importantly, designed to be conceptually visual through their dramatic format. The performance of the philosophy plays acts rhetorically and heuristically to stir and enliven the aesthetic imagination of the audience. It does so by visualising and animating the philosophical concepts that literally come alive through the characters in the drama. Philosophy plays are designed to engage the audience not merely cognitively but aesthetically and affectively in the same way as art does generally be it visual, audio or performative. The philosopher, as artist, must therefore become not merely the disinterested presenter of historical ideas but also the active creator of philosophical images and sounds that animate the imagination and engage and cultivate the public mind through ideas and sentiment.

5. The Philosophy Plays as Public Therapy

The central inspiration of the philosophy plays is the Hellenistic belief that philosophy must be practical. Not just ethics, but all aspects of philosophy, including, logic, metaphysics, and epistemology. Epicurus tells us that

“Empty is the philosopher’s argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sickness of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul”(Nussbaum, 1994:13).

Cicero speaking on behalf of the Stoics expresses the same view. He contends that

“There is a medical art for the soul. It is philosophy, whose aid need not be sought, as in bodily diseases, from outside ourselves. We must endeavour with all our resources and all our strength to become capable of doctoring ourselves” (Nussbaum, 1994:14).

In her book *The Therapy of Desire* (1994), Martha Nussbaum takes up and expands on the Hellenistic arguments that support the claim that philosophy is therapy for the soul. She argues that the Hellenistic philosophers

“Saw the philosopher as a compassionate physician whose arts could heal many pervasive types of human suffering. They practiced philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery” (1994:3).

According to Nussbaum, these philosophers’ focus was

“The state of desire and thought in the pupil which made them seek a newly complex understanding of human psychology, and led them to adopt complex strategies – interactive, rhetorical, literary – designed to enable them to grapple effectively with what they had understood. ...In these ways Hellenistic ethics is unlike the more detached and academic moral philosophy that has sometimes been practiced in the Western tradition” (1994:4).

As Nussbaum reminds us, for the Hellenistic philosophers, philosophy was a “βίου τέχνη” or the art of life (1994:5). By doing philosophy one learned how to live a good, ethical, and most importantly, self-fulfilling life.

The philosophy plays inspired by the Hellenistic notion that philosophy to be of value must be therapeutic, are designed to present philosophy to public audiences as a form of social therapy: a therapy of the soul for the sane.

6. Philosophy as Public Knowledge and Rationality

The only legitimate authority in philosophy and by extension that of the philosophy plays is the authority of reason, which is engendered through interactive dialogue that engages both the mind and the emotions. Philosophy as presented in the philosophy plays is primarily a dialogue in which each contributor, philosophers, actors and the public audience, play an equal part in their shared cognition and emotions and their evaluative assessment through the discussion that follows the philosophy plays performance. It is a process in which the subjective experience of each participant becomes

objectified though interactive dialogue with others and objectivity becomes authentically subjective though the discovery of shared truths and values. It is through this process that transformation takes place. A transformation that potentially leads to enlightenment and liberation from the shackles of subjective biases and ignorance and the arrogance of an externally imposed unauthenticated and often unsubstantiated 'objective knowledge', including that of the media in all its different guises.

Paraphrasing from Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (Freire, 1996:48), in order to achieve this kind of philosophical transformation, 'it is necessary to trust in the ability of people to reason.' According to Freire, 'whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate dialogue, reflection, and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues, and instructions' (Freire, 1996: 48). This reminds me of a poignant moment in Brecht's play *The Life of Galileo*. In responding to his friend's advice to be careful about expressing his dangerous cosmological views, Galileo replies that if he didn't have trust in people's ability to reason he could not get out of bed in the morning. It is perhaps this conception of public reason that Nussbaum refers to as "the multivalued conception of public rationality" (Nussbaum, 1995:xv).

The unreflective intellectual authority that Galileo was opposing is akin in spirit to the intellectual arrogance opposed by Socrates. Socrates' metaphor for true knowledge was midwifery. Namely the idea that true knowledge cannot be imposed by experts from without, nor generated from within through unreflective dogmatic and self-serving thoughts but rather, generated internally both individually and collectively through participation in interactive reflective dialogue.

Following Socrates' metaphor we can say that philosophy takes place in a 'public nursery'. This introduces both the dual concepts of love and innocence, cognitive sentiments that I believe are essential to the pursuit of truth and wisdom. Paulo Freire correctly points out that 'dialogue cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people' (Freire, 1996:70). It is for that reason that I consider Plato's dialogue on love, the *Symposium*, to be central to Plato's philosophy. If philosophy is the love of wisdom then wisdom cannot exist in the absence of love. The innocence comes through philosophy's enchanting ability to transform us into curious children encountering the world for the first time. Without stretching Socrates' metaphor too far, we do not only give birth to knowledge through philosophy but are also born anew through philosophy. This is how death and birth come together in Plato. We die to the world of arrogance and ignorance and are reborn into the world of truth and wisdom through the mediation of love. This intricate connection between death and birth through the transformation of love is clearly evident in the thematic continuity between Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedo*, Plato's dialogues on Love and Death.

It is my conviction that public philosophy as argued for in this paper can provide Nussbaum's missing "essential ingredients in rational argument" for without 'public rationality', there cannot be adequate rational and psychological motivation for creating a more reflective, just and enlighten society. To that end, public philosophy has to become part of the very fabric of our political, professional, social and

most importantly, cultural lives. The philosophy plays project offers a tried and tested method of providing a way for doing so.

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