

Dr. Brown and the Volunteer

Siân Robinson Davies, August 2013

*Review of the final show of Dr. Brown's Bexperiments at the Underbelly on 13th August 2013. Bexperiements was a series of eight back-to-back shows. Dr. Brown started the first show with no material and built up the rest from the best of the previous.*

As we filtered into the theatre, Dr. Brown was sat in the middle of the seating, dressed in a poncho and wig, calling out "Antonio! Antonio? Antonio!?" It was clear that there was no Antonio and that the role was up for grabs. One of the last people in offered himself up by answering. Dr. Brown, now seated amongst a full audience, instructed him to go on stage and do something, anything. Antonio obliged by doing an asymmetrical handstand and everyone cheered. He then returned to his seat and Dr. Brown took to the stage for some of his usual stuff; He dragged two friends up and got them to slap each other in the face. They were trying not to hurt each other but Dr. Brown kept getting them to do it harder while we all laughed and jeered. Hilarious. But something interesting started to develop half way through the show when Antonio, who we later learned was called Lee, was brought back up on stage.

Lee's manner was incredibly important for what developed; he had submissive body language and smiled coyly but did not seem intimidated by being asked to volunteer. He watched Dr. Brown curiously and almost lovingly for the entire time, which added an awkward erotic tension. Dr. Brown asked him how he got the mark that was on his forehead and he answered, he had hurt himself on stage during his own show, so it was clear that he involved in physical performance. Dr. Brown started to play some improvisational games with Lee and it turned out Lee was very good at them. Gradually, Lee began to build on Dr. Browns initiations, occasionally taking the lead himself, which the audience seemed to enjoy, clapping and cheering whenever he did so.

There was a scene where Dr. Brown started chasing Lee around the stage wielding an invisible knife. After a few circuits he encouraged a reversal, getting Lee to chase him with a second invisible knife. It was a beautiful moment where I was trying to work out who is in control when one person is asking the other to chase them. It was a tension that exemplified the whole show, because here we had a loveable volunteer, who's contributions the audience demonstrated they enjoyed, who wasn't trying to dominate, but yet every time he initiated something I couldn't help feel a tension brought about by the fact that this was Dr. Brown's show and a volunteer is not suppose to contribute in this way.

In fact there are generally a couple of ways that a volunteer contributes to a performance. The first and most common is by displaying embarrassment and making visible that they are volunteering grudgingly. This is a form of defence that prevents anyone from judging their contribution, because they are making it clear from the start that they are not invested in what they are doing. The second is by being overly enthusiastic, trying to dominate and often causing frustration for everyone who wants to watch the main performer. This volunteer is usually humiliated or shunned in some way, in order to get them to stop and bring the focus back to the show. An example is a heckler or someone with a very loud and particular laugh.

Generally it's easier for the performer if the volunteer is nervous and wants to sit down because then the performer remains clearly in control. I felt Dr. Brown wanted Lee to leave the stage at times, so that he could move onto something else. He said "You can stay..." hinting at a "...but..." and Lee just sort of stood there at the back giggling sheepishly with the audience's supportive laughter. Dr. Brown also said, "Would you rather be there?" (pointing to the audience) and after a long thoughtful pause Lee said very sincerely, "I Like working with you", which was wonderfully unexpected due to the more common behaviours of volunteers, and also disarming. Despite the fact that Lee was not trying to dominate the situation, the backing he was receiving from the audience was putting him in a position in power, and it was this power that was making it difficult for Dr. Brown to ask him to leave.

There is an element of celebrity and authorship that comes into buying a ticket to see 'Dr. Brown' at one of the main venues of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It creates the weird feeling that Dr. Brown should be the author, or he should at least switch volunteers, in the way Damien Hirst gets his studio painters to rotate around the paintings so that no one painting is solely by any one of them. This allow's the artist to protect his authorship. But in this show, Lee's his meaningful contribution (in the sense that he played a creative part in its direction) lead to a collaborative relationship enabled by Lee's skill and sensitivity as well as Dr. Brown's openness (and tiredness) to let it come about. Dr. Brown could have found a way to refuse his volunteer and have the audience to himself. The experience sets up the possibility that next time I buy a ticket for Dr. Brown, I might be paying, not to watch, but to perform.