

Ways of seeing 7734, August 2010

By Nina Steiger, Associate Director Soho Theatre / Dramaturg for 7734

One of the main themes of Jasmin Vardimon's 7734 is "points of view" – the way perspective and identity are linked and how they shift as we adjust the way we look at things. The ensemble change roles from perpetrator to victim as easily as slipping off the jacket of authority, helping us see that, very easily, "we could be next" and it could happen to anyone. The story of the wedding photographer who only takes pictures of the day's ugly details is dramatised and debated because it can be looked at in different ways - as a radical support for the artist's freedom to represent the world as he sees it or as an act of cruelty to the newly-weds. Do we view Wagner's opening overture, as genius or as the driving soundtrack to the rise of the Third Reich? Indeed, one scene (that was eventually cut) showed two young men surveying the landscape at their feet, seeing a potential enemy and in fact, upending themselves in their chairs in order to see the ground differently and thereby, neutralise the threat. Perspective is everything in 7734 --- it is a world in which what you see depends on how you look at it.

I'll highlight three main ways of looking at 7734.

First, it is most obviously a reflection on genocide, man's universal capacity for cruelty and the horror of our continued and systematic violence. At the same time, this co-exists with man's equally powerful urge towards creativity and 7734 seems to ask how the same creature that can create the magic of an orchestra could possibly orchestrate a massacre; the piece can be seen as a choreographed treatise on the role of art and the imagination. And finally, somewhere near the heart of the piece is the theme of legacy, the inherited memories we receive from our parents, our ancestors and as a collective society. 7734 asks whether, as individuals and in communities, we may look at the past in new ways and reconcile our experience through the act of re-imagining.

These questions are very much of the moment – in our globalised modern world, nearly every culture shares a diasporic memory, at the heart of which lies a legacy of violence, distance or exclusion. The passage of one episode of genocide seems not to reduce the likelihood of the next and we ask ourselves how to make meaning of the catastrophe and cruelty in our collective midst.

7734 grapples with these questions, tracing personal and social connections to the wider theme. In one scene, the sculptor shapes a mother and child into a tableau. As the image is shaped, we see the mother whisper into her child's ear and the child's face become a mask of fear as well - they seem to be looking in terror at an approaching threat. The implication is that along with memories, our parents pass us their fears, phobias, and prejudices. And so, one's cultural inheritance is made up of these elements – this is particularly acute in the case of 2nd and 3rd generation children who are reared on survivor stories – they become "memory

candles,” metaphorical lambs of God that carry their parents’ suffering and embody a legacy of sorrow.

7734 concerns itself deeply with the fate of creativity. In the piece, we see a photographer, a sculptor, dancers (dancing within the dance), an orchestra of musicians and their conductor, all working within the harsh camp-like world of the piece, exploring and expressing their power, victimhood, collective loss and shared responsibility. But how does art deepen our capacity to understand the horror of the camps?

In a scene entitled Inheritance, a 3rd generation memory of the Holocaust is passed along a line of friends in a game of Chinese Whispers, beginning with a man struggling to understand his grandfather’s experience of the war.

As the story passes along down the line, it changes, “experienced” by more people but distorted by the misinterpretation and distance from the first speaker. This idea of distortion through repetition becomes part of 7734’s central metaphor – and yet, by the final line, the original idea has got a greater sense of truth to it, namely that the details of the Holocaust have been forgotten, leaving only the urge – and obligation – to remember. Perhaps the re-telling has brought out this essence or perhaps the abstraction itself has exposed the truth – as memory is fallible and as time passes, it is art and the abstraction that affords us the chance to find our way towards an authentic and measured perspective on the past.

And this is a powerful contemporary tension – do we remember our histories better by repeating them at the risk of distorting them, or do we make an attempt to abstract and render them, so to find a deeper truth? In his book *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, Mark Godfrey asks^[1] “how a particular art work might engage the memory of the Holocaust” and also “how this very engagement participates in, or cuts against the wider concerns of the artist.” He goes on to describe the power of art’s abstraction and metaphor to reckon with atrocity and I believe his description is apposite here: “[it] will not tell us any stories of the Holocaust, or treat its images...but it creates a resonant place for memory. It does this without forcing meaning on the viewer; instead, its meanings are balanced on delicate props.”

7734 offers the chance to experience personal memory within a communal sense of reflection – together we look at the familiar, the horrific, the personal and the unknown in new ways.

[1] Godfrey, Mark, *Abstraction and The Holocaust*, Yale University Press, 2007