Radical Hospitality: Immersing the Audience in *A Seventh Man*

Frances Babbage and Michael Pinchbeck

Introduction

MP/FB: In 2020, Pinchbeck & Smith wrote and directed *A Seventh Man*[1], an immersive performance in S.H.E.D.[2] (8ft x 10ft wooden shed) for a micro-audience. *A Seventh Man* adapts the 1975 study of migrant experience by writer, John Berger, and photographer, Jean Mohr.[3] Berger states in the Foreword: 'This book concerns a dream/nightmare' and introduces inherent duality.[4] Joshua Sperling proposes that 'Through a series of interruptive shocks […], Berger and Mohr try to wake the reader from the dream'.[5] The performance is in three acts, Departure, Work, Return, like the book. What follows gives an account of this performance from the dual perspectives of audience and co-director. Berger asks, 'What are the possible relations between images and text? How can we approach the reader together?'[6]

Part One: Departure

MP: Berger describes his approach to writing: 'When people ask me about the plan for a book, I can never answer them properly. What I see in my mind's eye is a coming and a going, a widening and a narrowing, breaks and congestions, diagonals and a way through'.[7] Adapting *A Seventh Man*, we explored these moments of coming and going, widening – reading all of Berger and Mohr's work – and narrowing – editing our text. Devising always involves finding 'a way through' and navigating terrain that is unknown to you. Berger insists: 'The truth is at first always like a

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[1] *A Seventh Man* was commissioned by Lincoln Performing Arts Centre, Nottingham Playhouse and New Perspectives and devised between January and March 2020. Supported by Arts Council England. http://michaelpinchbeck.co.uk/a-seventh-man/

[2] S.H.E.D., Social Higher Education Depot, a flat-pack mobile research centre curated by Dr Rhiannon Jones, University of Derby. https://www.derby.ac.uk/shed/

[3] At the time of writing *A Seventh Man* in 1975, one in seven workers in Western Europe was a migrant. Berger and Mohr also cite 'The Seventh' (1932), a poem by Attila József.

[4] Jean Berger & Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man*. New York: Verso, 2010 [1975]. 11.

[5] Joshua Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time: The Life and Work of John Berger*. New York: Verso, 2018. 130.

[6] Berger & Mohr, *Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016 [1982]. 85.

[7] *Gambit*, Summer 1965. 27.

tributary – never look for it in the mainstream'.[8] We tried to find the story behind migrant workers in the 1970s, using Berger's words and Mohr's images. By shifting the pronoun from 'he, the migrant worker' to 'you, the migrant worker' we invited audiences to join us on a journey into the book as both observer and subject.

They are given suitcases when they arrive. They have chalk crosses marked above their heads to signify they did not pass the medical tests. They see images of the book projected on the wall. The work of the audience is to piece this material together whilst, at the same time, playing a part in the storytelling. They write it as well as read it, they make it as well as make meaning from it. Berger suggests: 'Every photograph presents us with two messages, a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity'.[9] The narrative of the immersive experience is discontinuous. Berger asks: 'And the narrative [or] the plot? The question must be returned: the plot is that *you* read'.[10] The 'you' is the audience.

FB: Berger describes the moment when emigration as possibility hardens into a plan:

> One day he says he will leave. Until he said it, the decision was not really taken. When he has said it, it is known. […] Some try to dissuade him. But they all recognize he has decided. Until he said it, he had not decided.[11]

As Pinchbeck explains, during rehearsal the third-person pronoun was changed in a way that implicates spectators, initiating a journey into the book: 'When you said it, it was known/Until you said it, it was not decided'.[12] Moving to second-person viewpoint alters the relationship of audience to performance content. Where the third-person 'he' or 'she' – like the first-person 'I' - highlights the perspective of the narrator, the second-person 'you' seeks to inhabit the place of the narratee: the voice 'inside' the text, the one addressed by it, its fictive reader. Second-person address approaches that position uniquely, as in Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*,

[8] *Ibid*.
[9] Berger & Mohr, *Another Way of* Telling. 88.
[10] *Gambit*, Summer 1965. 27.
[11] Berger & Mohr, *A Seventh Man*. 36.
[12] Pinchbeck & Smith, *A Seventh Man*. Unpublished script, 2020.

which famously begins: 'You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller'.*[13] Calvino's formulation appears to collapse the boundary between the space of fiction and that of its reader; he disturbs the patterns of power, situating the reader inside the book and relinquishing authorial invisibility.

Second-person address is distinctive in being defined 'not by who is speaking but by who is listening'.[14] The performance's shift of pronoun is apt for adaptation of a text which, as novelist Ben Lerner observed of Berger's work, unusually cultivates a space of listening.[15] While the designation 'you' might threaten to impose upon an audience, in *The Seventh Man* the negotiation of relations provoked is subtle and nuanced: since the circumstances of those watching are *not* consistent with this 'you', that address both invites and precludes identification.

Part Two: Work

MP: Berger wrote: 'I travel to places. I live the years. This is a book about keeping rendezvous. (The ones I failed to keep are another story.) Each account begins with an image which conjures up something of where the meeting took place'.[16] Our reader is our audience. Our book is the performance. Our places are its pages. Our account begins with an image being torn up. A photograph of a migrant from the book. It becomes a gesture we explain, inspired by how migrants would be escorted across the border by a guide, who would use the torn photo as proof of transit.

Berger concludes by saying of these places: 'Some would not be easy to find on a map, others would be. All of them, of course, have been visited by other travellers. I hope readers too will find themselves saying: I've been here…'[17] We are aware that

[13] Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. 3.
[14] Matt DelConte, 'Why You Can't Speak: Second-Person Narrative Voice, and a New Model for Understanding Narrative.' *Style* 37:2. 2003. 204-219 (204).
[15] Ben Lerner, 'Postscript: John Berger, 1926-2017.' *The New Yorker*, 6 January 2017. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/postscript-john-berger-1926-2017 (Accessed 1 May 2020.)
[16] Berger, 'Note to the Reader' [1992]. In Geoff Dyer ed., *Selected Essays: John Berger*, London & New York: Bloomsbury: 2014. 473.
[17] *Ibid*.

our theme, migration, has been visited many times, not least by the book that inspired us. We are aware of its topicality and explore parallels between the text written in 1975 and the situation today and locate the audience in this ambiguous space between then and now, there and here. As we say in the text: 'You have arrived. You are here'.[18] The text talks across and between times. The performance, like the book, looks beyond a news story's life cycle. Berger wrote, years later, that: 'It can happen, that a book, unlike its authors, grows younger as the years pass'.[19]

FB: Mohr's images are fundamental to the language of *A Seventh Man*, book and performance alike. In the confined interior of the shed, the array of pinned-up photographs evokes the darkroom: that resemblance seems appropriate, since historically the darkroom has manifested as regularly in a rough and ready space as in a studio contrived for the purpose. From a 21st century viewpoint, it is tempting to romanticise analogue film, lingering on grain, blur, tiny imperfections: digital technology can 'correct' these qualities, or, perversely, apply filters to mimic them. Nonetheless, the darkroom process was Mohr's method and this lends his photographs a distinctive character; their grain or haze is not a 'look' but an effect of technology. Reflecting on Mohr's work, in and beyond *A Seventh Man*, Ben Highmore comments:

> [t]he image is not mobilized as illustration, or proof, but as a disconcerting singularity. This isn't a realism that would ask you to forget the presence of a photographer: but nor is it a photography that insists on your recognizing, endlessly and finally, the photographer's constructed vision.[20]

Highmore highlights a quality that is almost self-contradictory: Mohr's shots convey artlessness, while simultaneously exposing – apparently, without judgement - the socio-historic conditions of which their subjects are a part. Elsewhere, Berger

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[18] Pinchbeck & Smith, *A Seventh Man*.
[19] Aimee Shalan, 'A Seventh Man: Migrant Workers in Europe by John Berger and Jean Mohr – review', *The Guardian*, 18 December 2010. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/dec/18/seventh-man-john-berger-review (Accessed 1 May 2020.)
[20] Ben Highmore, '"Then Turn the Page": Berger by the Book.' *Journal of Visual Culture* 11:2, 2012. 124-6 (126).

employs different terms to reach a comparable conclusion, remarking that Mohr's images display 'something strangely casual, off-hand […]. A kind of nonchalance. Yet a caring nonchalance'.[21] This characteristic admixture suits the aims of their joint project: *A Seventh Man* is, humbly, a 'little book of life stories, a sequence of lived moments – such as one finds in a family photo album', but one unmistakably powered by political 'thrust'.[22]

When on arrival spectators are given a Mohr image fragment, it feels already a responsibility: the torn face - half a real someone – is a small piece of history we are tasked to mind. This gesture of the production exhibits 'caring nonchalance' too: the unassuming scrap is all-too losable but its import is clear. During the performance, Mohr's photographs accumulate in varying manifestations: their paper forms are nailed onto walls by the actors; others flicker transparently across the panelling in projections of the book's pages. Towards the end, the actors construct a metropolis in miniature at the audience's feet, a night-time city in birds-eye view made of train-track roads, toy cars and strings of lights. More pictures are placed, with care, around its edges: these faces bring the conurbation alive, even as the ritualistic laying down underlines their owners' passing. The addition of photographs to the model reveals the role of the migrant workforce in powering the capitalist 'machine' and implicitly reinstitutes the humanity of individual members.

The darkroom is inherently a space of transformation, whose methods take composure and care: lucidity demands patient development. The fragility of images within this process reflects the vulnerability of life in action to recorded capture; where digital speed allows photographers to shoot first and think later, each of Mohr's pictures seems to frame person or moment by lucky chance. The darkroom empowers revivification whereby flesh regrows on negative bones. Performers and audience, pressed close in a small shared space, participate in something similar: seeking a living history in records and statistics; asking what relationships can be forged with subjects not here to speak for themselves.

[21] Berger in Mohr, *At the Edge of the World*. London: Reaktion, 1999. 11.
[22] Berger, 2010 Preface to *A Seventh Man*. 7-10 (8, 7).

Part Three: Return

MP: In *Opening a Gate* (2001), Berger describes the room where he is writing.[23] It is a simple device that invites us in in the present tense to explore the present space. Georges Perec does something similar in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1974) when he lists an inventory of a room and arrives at the pen and paper with which he is writing the list. Elsewhere Perec states: 'I write: I inhabit my sheet of paper, I invest it, I travel across it. I incite *blanks*, *spaces* (jumps in the meaning: discontinuities, transitions, changes of key)'.[24] The 'discontinuities' in Perec's ludic writing echo Berger's 'shock of discontinuity' in photographs. Smith and I described the idea of giving the audience a way of 'inhabiting' the show whilst at the same time having a dramaturgy that allowed for these 'interruptive shocks': a siren wailing when the authorities confiscate suitcases; a loudhailer used to deliver safety instructions. We talk to the audience directly about the space we are in, the journey we are taking, into and beyond the book, and the suitcases and photos we give them.

We borrow Berger and Perec's device of placing the audience in the room with us. When we are describing the barracks where the workers live in cramped conditions, where 'time off is time wasted' as there is nothing to do there, we tell the audience: 'You sleep four to a room'.[25] This turn from the third-person (he/the migrant worker) to second-person (you/the audience) is critical to how we have reconfigured the text. As performers describe the space, they are drawing out an outline of the barracks on a chalkboard; they invite the audience to help them measure the shed, drawing the measurements in chalk on the walls and floor. The audience are workers too. Outside the shed, Smith and I found we could bang on the walls and shout in other languages when the text talks about how you can hear noise from the next room to enable further immersion of the audience. We take suitcases from performers at one point to represent them being passed out through a train window, and wearing hard hats, and eating bread, we become workers too, part of the 'experience machine'.[26]

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[23] Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* London: Penguin Books, 2009 [2001]. 8.
[24] Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Penguin: London 2008 [1974]. 11.
[25] Pinchbeck & Smith, *A Seventh Man*.
[26] Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre, Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation*. Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2016. 3.

FB: During the performance, the S.H.E.D assumes a series of characters: a rattling bus, train and van, where we audience clutch onto our suitcases; a doctor's waiting-room, when chalk crosses 'brand' some of us, reasons undisclosed; rough lodgings, where it seems that too many cohabit in too little room; a factory in microcosm, which narrows the world of the worker to one machine and one all-but-mindless process. Simultaneously, each fictional appropriation signifies beyond this, evoking more than is outwardly conveyed: where in the book Mohr's shot of the wall behind a bed takes in photos, posters and garments that speak of distant home, in performance the handling of objects or inflow of music communicates the ways in which we can all 'occupy' more than one place at one time. In Berger's analysis of migrant experience, this kind of mental splitting extends from and exacerbates a threatened sense of self: 'Everything he sees reminds him of what he can no longer see; and what he is reminded of becomes the essential experience, not what he sees'.[27]

However, Berger and Mohr show that the environments – each at best functional, at worst hostile – through which the worker is passed represent stages in an economic process whose logic is relentlessly cyclical. In this context, the migrant experience is shown as alienating to the point where imaginative withdrawal from its immediacy, to live instead 'by way of memory and anticipation', is, paradoxically, an act of survival.[28] The book documents a situation whereby inhospitable surroundings render the elsewhere of home and past more appealing, even more 'real', than the temporary 'reality' of the present. By contrast, the doubling or splitting that the theatrical condition inherently promotes is pleasurably entertaining for its audience, not traumatic: it is also more multi-layered, since we audience are not heating milk on a solitary gas ring, remembering meals with family; we know ourselves to be inside the S.H.E.D, pretending to be *a* shed, pretending to be a kitchen that is, in turn, pretending to be another kitchen in another country. The physical context of performance and the inevitably immersive, intimate relationship S.H.E.D constructs produce a hospitable environment within which alienation from place can be explored: more gently, less starkly, than the book's provocation to the reader allows.

[27] Berger & Mohr, *A Seventh Man*. 182.
[28] *Ibid*.

Conclusion

FB: This phrase ‘radical hospitality’ was first applied to Berger’s work by novelist Ben Lerner, cited previously. Lerner wrote what was titled a ‘Postscript’ for *The New Yorker*, published four days after Berger’s death. Lerner observed of his friend:

> In the course of our time together, he said many remarkable things, but more memorable than his eloquence was the kind of space his listening made for us, his visitors. A radical hospitality.[29]

If ‘hospitality’ connotes a generous, welcoming reception of one’s visitors, whether friends or strangers, it suggests a positive and provocative analogy for theatre-makers in the invitation their work extends to an audience. The further conception of a *radical* hospitality could be understood in at least two ways: as a gesture of openness and acceptance both far-reaching and profound; and as a committed social action that advocates and promotes participation and dialogue. Applied to performance, building an ‘aesthetics of radical hospitality’ might therefore imply that theatre events could be driven as much by the value of meeting and spending time in company as what people do, say or witness when brought together. Pursuit of this aesthetics invites construction of situations in which - while roles and relationships are not identical, since some are ‘hosts’ and others ‘guests’ - those formerly unknown to one another are led to feel, albeit temporarily, as companions in a shared endeavour.

MP: *A Seventh Man* sought to share what Lerner coined as Berger’s ‘aesthetic of radical hospitality'.[30] Video documentation revealed how audience members held onto their suitcases for comfort, for reassurance, sitting next to strangers. As we removed the suitcases during the show more space was activated for them to listen and a sense of community grew. One audience member wrote: ‘A sense of everything happening in one space builds community… the intimacy and sense of being part of a collective is an essential part of the experience’.[31] At other times, ‘an

[29] Lerner, ‘Postscript’.
[30] Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time*. 14.
[31] Audience feedback, Performance of *A Seventh Man*, Nottingham (6 March 2020).

aesthetic of radical hospitality' resides in sharing photos, bread, stories, eye contact, moments of stillness and active silence. Pauses become 'interruptive shocks' in the narrative. Now, during the global pandemic, I realise that when Berger wrote about the life of the migrant worker, '[i]t is unprecedented. And yet it is already normal', he inadvertently described life in lockdown as we write this.[32] The 'unprecedented' is the 'new normal' and social distancing measures make future iterations difficult to stage.

FB: A 'radically hospitable' theatre must be committed to entertainment, in the fullest interpretation of this word: by 'hosting', conveying to audiences that they are not just welcomed but wanted; by providing 'occupation', promising to engage, absorb and give pleasure; lastly, by 'pausing speculatively', allowing time to try out ideas or images, to turn and weigh these in the mind. This multiplicity of meaning hints that entertainment which goes hand in hand with hospitality is concerned not simply with what is put out, but with the conditions under which this is experienced. To return to Lerner's reflection on Berger: the latter's work is found remarkable above all in its ability to stimulate and sustain the attention of the reader-listener. Lerner values the quality of 'active silence' Berger's writing generates, not least through deliberate sparsity of text and space on the page that has not been filled in by the author.[33] As Pinchbeck suggests, the lockdown currently in place has opened extraordinary space for listening.

FB/MP: The Berger-Mohr collage of words and images is marked by discontinuities and caesurae: the juxtaposition of unlike languages resists overall coherence, necessitates gaps, inserts contemplative space around content whose fragmentary character is thereby exposed. The performance of *A Seventh Man* seeks to entertain its audiences analogously to the book's readers, prompting participation – at a thinking, emotional and physical level – and *needing* this for the event to 'make sense'. In the end, hospitality is already a radical concept, since it is about how we treat people and hope to be treated ourselves. As Berger wrote about the work of Theatre de Complicite, 'Maybe the essential contraband today is hope'.[34]

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[32] Berger & Mohr, *A Seventh Man*. 56.
[33] Lerner, 'Postscript'.
[34] Berger in Simon McBurney and Mark Wheatley, *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol* (based on a story by John Berger), Methuen Modern Plays: London, 1995, i.