
Performance Review

A Review of *Hear Me Looking at You*, written and performed by **Dara Culhane**, with direction and dramaturgy by Noah Drew. Presented as part of the 2014 CASCA Conference in the Joseph G. Greene Theatre at York University, Toronto, ON. May 2, 2014.

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At the beginning of the solo performance piece, *Hear Me Looking at You*, writer and performer Dara Culhane recounts for the audience the experience of visiting her father, for the last time, in a nursing home for Alzheimer's patients in Dublin, Ireland, in 1992. During a rare moment of lucidity, her father caught her attention while she stood at his bedside and cautioned her: "Don't forgive me." These words, Dara tells us, have haunted her long after he passed away. In *Hear Me Looking at You*, Culhane sets out to deal with and unravel the effects of her father's words by re-examining her memories of her past, her parents' tumultuous marriage and her relationship with her father. This performance might sound at first like a personal indulgence, but it is both broader and subtler than that. By sifting through these memories, Culhane covers a great deal of personal and political territory, all the while painting a portrait of a deeply complex man, questioning an ultimately unknowable past and ruminating on the possibilities and limitations of forgiveness.

Importantly, *Hear Me Looking at You* was devised precisely to facilitate and encourage the author's re-sifting and reconstituting of memories; this performance is a form of imaginative ethnography. Culhane's piece follows the tenets of ethnographic praxis articulated by the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography (CIE), of which Culhane is a founding member, an online gathering space for emergent ethnographic practices, experimental research methodologies and creative and artistic works of expression. The CIE was formed as an answer to Maple Razsa's call for an affirmative anthropology in the face of neoliberal expansion: "an ethnographic contribution to the reimagining of politics, the affirmation of other social and political arrangements, even the affirmation of the *possibility* of alternative arrangements" (2012:35). Its founders are a network of pan-Canadian researchers with shared interests and with a connection to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University: Culhane, Denielle Elliott, Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston and Cristina Moretti. In the

CIE, these researchers have formed an online space that celebrates imagination and creativity as key factors in both research and practice, which moves toward an affirmative anthropology by following a "commitment to open-ended inquiry that can embrace risks, challenges to orthodoxy, and unintended outcomes" (Centre 2014). By focusing on the processes, machinations and mediations involved in knowledge production, rather than research results, the CIE works toward the project of what Razsa calls "anthropology at its best: the exploration of ways of being human that are at odds with what appears natural and inevitable from the vantage point of the present" (2012:35). Importantly, performance becomes a frame for thinking about, studying and manifesting an imaginative ethnography. According to the CIE, a performance's focus on "storytelling and the social and political lives of stories, as central communicative action engaged in by embodied and sentient beings," renders it an appropriate tool to build connections between arts and ethnography (Centre 2014). Its website and online digital space, at time of writing, remain (perhaps appropriately) a work in progress.

Examining this performance as a piece of imaginative ethnography, I view *Hear Me Looking at You* as an exemplar of performance as a critically reflexive process of memory-work and storytelling. In an artist talkback, Culhane noted that this performance came about while she was doing archival work on a different subject—her grandmother—while in Ireland. During the course of her research, her father's words, history and letters kept nagging at her. *Hear Me Looking at You* became an unexpected detour from her primary research but also a way to come to terms with events that had a profound effect on the course of her life. In this way, this project operates as a form of what Michael Taussig calls back-looping—the casting of "a backwards glance"—a means of negotiating through representation those moments that "beg for commentary if not judgment" (Taussig 2011:51). Culhane's work here is akin to that of the late solo-performer Spalding Gray, whose own autobiographical monologues aimed to find meaning in life experiences through the performance of expressing them as stories (Schechner 2002). Other scholars have also noted that the autobiographical performances vis-à-vis storytelling can lead to critical self-reflexivity as they allow for reflexive thought about those memories, making connections and bridging gaps between separate stories, representations, performers and audiences (Denzin 2003; Gallagher 2011). For Gray, the act of storytelling surrounding memory is a form of re-remembering, of making present that past event. "All memory is a creative

act ... If you have a memory, you're re-creating the original event" (Schechner 2002:165). The past—memory—is (re)activated and (re)performed through the interpretations, recollections and remembering involved in storytelling. *Hear Me Looking at You* is a testament to taking that detour, of casting the backwards glance and of celebrating the imaginative and open-ended nature of research through storytelling, memory-work and alternative imaginings.

Culhane's *Hear Me Looking at You* emerges from this focus on performance, research and storytelling. The performance's first act allows Culhane to recount stories of her unconventional childhood as the product of a tumultuous marriage between her Jewish, activist mother and her Irish father, Gerry, a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. It follows the Culhane family as they move from Canada to California, but spends most of the time dealing with the aftermath and conflicts involved when Gerry drags his family to Ireland. Gerry, Culhane makes clear, has a deep and problematic connection to Ireland. Her grandmother, Gerry's mother, was a Catholic, Irish nationalist belonging to a family fiercely devoted to the creation of an independent Irish republic. Their house was a hub for like-minded citizens before the Easter Rising of 1916 put an end to such a political possibility. At some point, Culhane's grandmother became the subject of a public scandal (she had a relationship with a Protestant) that resulted in her leaving Ireland and living "in exile" in Montreal. Into this environment, Gerry is born and he inherits his mother's Irish republican zeal. It is his dream to return, with family—Culhane, her mother and her sister—in tow to his motherland, and he moves them there in the early 1950s.

The problem, however, is that Gerry's idea of Ireland and its social realities do not match. Culhane adeptly demonstrates this contradiction: she adopts her father's voice and relates the stories and notions Gerry had told her family about the Emerald Isle; she juxtaposes this with her own memories of her family's struggles to settle and to make ends meet once there. Her mother has to return to Canada for lengthy periods to make enough money for the family to survive. With no set place to live, Dara and her sister are sent to boarding schools. Gerry's sense of an Irish *home* remains but an imaginary figuration. As time goes by, the differences between the Ireland experienced and felt by Culhane's increasingly dispersed family and the Ireland conjured up in the dreams and stories of her father become irreconcilable. With the burden of income increasingly falling on Culhane's mother, her parents' marriage comes to seem like a troubling mismatch between drastically different personalities and ideals. Culhane's parents divorce in 1960, and Culhane, at age ten, returns to Montreal with her mother, leaving her father behind in Ireland.

However, the narrative of *Hear Me Looking at You* is less about the mother-father relationship than it is about a father-daughter dynamic, a point that is clarified in the second act. Culhane depicts Gerry at the end of the first act as too proud to give up on his Irish dream, to the detriment of his family; it is because of this stubbornness that he remains largely absent from Culhane's childhood. The second act then deals with the questions posed by the first: how does one forgive someone who places his own ideals and dreams above what is best for his family? How do you reconcile the fact that your own father has chosen to be absent from your life but wishes to remain present? How do you come to terms with your father's

dream—one that has never changed? What did his words, "Don't forgive me," mean? The second act takes place in 2010, when Culhane rereads a trove of letters her father had sent to her between 1960 and 1990, as a tactic to deal with and answer these questions. Indeed, we learn that although he was physically absent while she was growing up, Culhane's father nevertheless remained present in her life through the letters he sent her. This absent presence is made manifest and felt in the performance as Culhane reads from the letters themselves and then scatters them across the stage floor so that Gerry Culhane's words haunt the stage as well. This is an effective tactic, because the material form of the letters, which she kept, makes visible her father's continued need for a relationship and offers a testament to the connection between father and daughter. In fact, Gerry's letters amend and augment our ideas and perceptions of her father, while also reinforcing his stubborn, proud character. It is clear that a deep love for Dara and the need for a father-daughter relationship undergird the intention of these letters. However, we are also unsure, as I imagine Dara remains, of how much of his descriptions of life back in Ireland are truthful or are continued imaginings.

The second act culminates in Culhane recounting the time that she brought her own family to Ireland to visit her father. During this trip, her father proposes to her that she move her family back to his property, that she return to her Irish *home*. During this scene, Dara seemed emotionally affected discussing her realization that her father's dream was both impossible and incompatible with her own social circumstances. It is important to note here that Culhane is not a professional performer; she is not taking on the role of aggrieved daughter and *performing* for us. Instead she is *sharing* with us deeply personal revelations, a fact that makes this autobiographical performance all the more intimate in nature. Indeed, the staging, despite the theatre's black-box architecture, reinforced this performance's intimate atmosphere. The modest set indicates a living room. Two tables with chairs are placed parallel to each other stage left and stage right; on one desk sits a file holder and on the other sits a couple of glasses and a bottle of alcohol. Centre stage lies a rug and behind that a third chair. Rather than mimetically standing in for locations mentioned in the performance, the set instead demarcates the living room as a private space in which familial stories are told and where family politics are enacted. A large screen overhead operates as a scrapbook of sorts, showing Culhane family photos as well as scanned copies of Gerry's letters to his daughter. This admixture—the screen and the set's other elements—compliments the performance's mixing of memories, stories and letters. This is perhaps best illustrated through the aforementioned letters themselves, which began the performance in a box but by the end lay scattered across the stage floor, a messy staging that recalls the complexity of Gerry's nature but also points to the unravelling of memory that this performance both reflects on and enacts.

Culhane's father is perhaps as much a paradox to her, albeit a more familiar one, as he is to the audience. Toward the end of the show, Culhane talks to the audience about the Irish Gaelic word *Uabhar*, used in one of her father's letters to her. *Uabhar*, she tells us, has some 25 different meanings, including pride, arrogance, vainglorious pride, wounded pride, spiritedness ... not to mention loneliness. The letters from Gerry Culhane communicate the multiple meanings of *Uabhar* and,

in this word, we see a connection between Culhane and her father. What emerges from this performance is a recognition, on both our part and on Dara's, that Gerry Culhane is a complex and complicated man, himself haunted by an idea of Ireland instilled in him at an early age, while he lived "in exile." Like *Uabhar's* many meanings, this performance closes perhaps not with forgiveness or complete understanding but with an unfinished reconciliation. *Hear Me Looking at You* is both the process and the product of how Culhane explores her past, through stories and letters, to work toward not forgiveness but perhaps to an indeterminate understanding of her father.

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