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SPEAKING WITH THE DEAD

“I BEGAN WITH THE DESIRE TO SPEAK WITH THE DEAD.” This famous phrase, which opens Stephen Greenblatt’s *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988), aptly evokes the impulse behind much historicist and archivally-based scholarship. It also describes the impetus that drives many revivals of classic drama on the contemporary stage. In both scholarly and theatrical exploration, we seek to communicate with the departed through the traces they have left behind.

Over the course of a recent April weekend in New York City, I had the chance to play the spectator at two such acts of communion. One was a gold-plated Broadway production of *King Lear*; the other was *Say Something Bunny!*, a quintessentially off-off-Broadway show staged in a little second-floor walk-up in Chelsea. In the former, the fabled English actress Glenda Jackson took on the task of revivifying William Shakespeare’s tragic hero; in the latter, the Canadian video and installation artist Alison S. M. Kobayashi strove to evoke the spirits of a real-life family from the 1950s. It would be difficult to imagine two more radically different productions: where one mercilessly exposed the isolation at the heart of a kingdom (and a cast), the other sought tenderly to rebuild a long-lost community. Even so, they were linked by their fascination with family dynamics; by their risky, bravura theatricality; and by the complications both exposed within the effort to wage war with death through acts of imagination.

For me, the first of the two experiences was Kobayashi’s one-woman show *Say Something Bunny!* I saw it on a spring afternoon after a walk down the High Line, which was crowded with tourists and blossoming trees. Together with the other spectators, I was ushered into a small, dimly lit room and asked to sit around a large, doughnut-shaped table, as if assembling for a séance. We were then given copies of a fat typescript, which we later discovered was the full transcript of two recordings left on an obsolete wire recorder from the 1950s that had entered Kobayashi’s possession in the

early 2010s. Kobayashi—eager, playful, gently ironic—didn’t just introduce us to the recordings. She also cast each of us as one of the people whose voices they preserved, which included members of the Newburge family and their neighbours in Woodmere on Long Island. We only had to listen rather than perform, but we were encouraged to imagine ourselves as these suburban New Yorkers, most of whom (we soon realized) were long dead. As we worked our way through the recordings over the course of two and a half hours, Kobayashi identified obscure cultural references, played pop songs, and showed slides and films in order to evoke the mysterious family, their time, and their place. She also recounted the arduous journey of archival research she had undertaken—wending through census records, tax documents, college yearbooks, football scores, and shelves of porn films—in order to deduce the secrets of their lives, passions, and deaths. Some of these revelations were mundane, some were funny, and some were surprising; none were particularly shocking or extraordinary. Though it depended upon a technically intricate and precise series of lighting, sound, and video cues (all managed by one stalwart operator, Abby Lord), the show felt simple, direct, and vulnerable. Kobayashi’s artistry almost disappeared behind her enthusiasm for speaking with the dead.

The same could never be said for the artistry of those involved in Sam Gold’s staging of *King Lear*, which I saw the following afternoon as the rain poured down outside the Cort Theatre on West 48th Street. The playbills made it clear, if anyone were in doubt, that this production existed primarily to showcase a revered actress in the leading role. “Glenda Jackson! Glenda Jackson! Glenda Jackson!” one screamed. As if to emphasize Jackson’s star power, the first sight the audience encountered upon entering the Cort’s Gilded Age auditorium was a golden wall reaching from the floor of the stage to the proscenium arch. The set, when it appeared, was also golden, and the costumes were contemporary and brassy. Not for nothing did many reviewers compare the world of this *King Lear* to that of Trump Tower, which looms just ten blocks uptown from the theatre.

Just as Trump defines his golden tower, Jackson’s commanding, technically precise, and daringly unsympathetic Lear defined Gold’s production. She played Shakespeare’s king as a wizened old man who exuded sovereign contempt for most of those around him—rather as Jackson herself seemed sometimes to do for her fellow actors. The fierce energy and unsentimental rigour with which the 82-year-old actress embodied the old king’s degener-

ation from sneering tyrant to shivering wretch was astonishing, but neither her Lear nor she herself seemed to engage emotionally with any of the other members of the cast until the final scenes. Only as the play careened toward its tragic denouement did Jackson suddenly forge a powerfully raw connection with Ruth Wilson as Cordelia. Their reconciliation, Lear's subsequent plea to his daughter to come "away to prison" with him, and his final lament over her corpse were performed with a tenderness that belied the coldly clinical tone of much of the rest of the production.

These moments of vulnerability brought the unexpected affinities between Gold's glitzy *Lear* and Kobayashi's stripped-down *Bunny* sharply into focus. Both shows trained their lenses on the messy and unpredictable intricacies of family relationships. In Gold's production, Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan were played by two performers, Elizabeth Marvel and Aisling O'Sullivan, who seemed at times to be acting in different productions. Marvel was smoothly self-possessed and very American, while O'Sullivan was high-strung and extremely Irish. Marvel's assured turn was by far the more proficient of the two performances; O'Sullivan tended to lapse into weepy shouting, which had an especially cringeworthy effect toward the end of the play as the two sisters competed for the favours of Edmund (played by Pedro Pascal). Nevertheless, this mismatched Goneril and Regan shared a number of surprisingly moving moments. In response to their father's sudden explosions of choler, for example, they often silently reached for one another's hands.

Such uncomfortable sibling intimacies also played out in *Say Something Bunny!* The surviving recordings of the Newburge family preserved a good deal of low-level skirmishing between David Newburge, the teenaged owner and wielder of the wire recorder, and his younger brother Larry, who was desperate to be allowed to operate the coveted technology but constantly spurned by his older sibling. In one revealing snatch of dialogue, we heard David inform Larry that if he wanted to be useful, he could put a finger on a faulty part of the machine while his brother tried to fix it. The pubescent Larry's frustration seemed to ooze down the wire. Even so, Kobayashi posited that it was likely Larry who had preserved the machine and its recordings after David's death, as if clasping his brother's hand across time. Here, as in *King Lear*, it was clear that there was no absolute distinction between love and anger, affection and competition, within the family bond.

In their effort to plumb these human complexities, both productions

embraced their own bravura theatricality. In *Say Something Bunny!*, Kobayashi donned a range of daringly silly costumes and wigs to embody the members of the Newburge family and their friends. While impersonating the eponymous Bunny, the twenty-something daughter of the Newburgs' neighbours, for example, she played cheerfully with the stereotypes of 1950s femininity by wearing a bobbed wig and a "sweater girl" pullover. Because Bunny spends much of her brief appearance on the wire recording refusing to talk ("What do you want me to say?" she asks), Kobayashi had little evidence of the young woman's personality. Nevertheless, she told us, she liked to imagine Bunny as a university student immersed in philosophy and exuding ostentatious contempt for her parents' suburban milieu, which she signalled by clutching a cigarette in one hand and a copy of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) in the other. Kobayashi thus overtly acknowledged her inability to revive the "real" Bunny, while also drawing upon her voice to evoke the struggles of a whole generation of educated young woman in rebellion against their parents' values.

Ruth Wilson displayed a similarly fearless sense of theatricality, especially when she doffed the gown of Cordelia and donned the suit and suspenders of Lear's Fool. It was never quite clear whether Wilson's Fool was a completely separate character from her Cordelia or simply a dreamlike version of Lear's truth-telling daughter, but the actress, who played the princess with great restraint, clearly regarded her second role as her opportunity to let loose. Her Fool was an obstreperous Music Hall performer—a Beckettian tramp with a bowler hat and cockney vowels, whose vicious jests against his masters often touched uncomfortable nerves. Wilson ranted, sang, and impersonated public figures, laying her own art on the line alongside the Fool's as she showcased one facet of her theatrical technique after another. Near the end of the production's first half, this gambit took an especially fascinating turn when, left alone onstage, Wilson's Fool delivered a "prophecy" directly to the audience. As she spoke of the "realm of Albion / Com[ing] to great confusion," she drew up her trouser legs to expose socks emblazoned with the stars and stripes of the American flag. She nodded significantly at the Trump-era audience, who laughed and groaned as they had done at all of the play's most overt references to kingdoms in disarray. Next, however, Wilson delivered the speech's final line, "This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time," in a tone of bitter honesty. Removing her wig and gazing out at the audience, she seemed also to strip away the protective ar-

mour of her roles and to share a moment of quiet despair with us. The Fool's prophecy of confusion was indeed a prophecy for our times, and Wilson's brief abjuration of her own flamboyance bespoke a tacit acknowledgment that sometimes the simplest means expose the darkest truths.

Such moments of simplicity were few and far between in Gold's *Lear*, which was crowded with lavish costume changes, loud sound effects, and even a new Philip Glass string quartet. Many reviewers dismissed it as a show of sound and fury that signified little apart from Jackson's star turn. In many ways, their critiques were just; the production failed to cohere, its myriad ideas adding up to less than the sum of their parts. Even so, amongst those ideas were many that—like Wilson's moment of truth—spoke effectively to the sense of despair, chaos, and loss at the heart of Shakespeare's play. In a show that defied dominant theatrical approaches to ability as well as to gender, one of the smartest touches was the relationship between the Duke of Cornwall (played by Deaf actor Russell Harvard) and the aide (played by Michael Arden) who translated many of his lines from ASL into spoken text. When the scene of Gloucester's blinding arrived, this aide also took on the role of the servant who refused to do Cornwall's bidding and was killed for his defiance. Having destroyed his detractor, however, Cornwall realized that he had lost his closest ally. As he died of his wounds, he was left voiceless. So, too, was Wilson's Cordelia, who, after being hanged a little too literally onstage, crumpled into Lear's arms like a silent doll. In the end, Gold's brash *Lear* was at its best when it admitted that the voices of the dead disappear into thin air and that no amount of theatrical glitz and glamour can counteract the truth of Lear's lament: "Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never."

Say Something Bunny! also closed with an admission of its own limitations. After coming to the end of her journey through the Newburge family's wire recordings, Kobayashi offered her audience an epilogue. She told how Larry Newburge, the only surviving member of the family, had learned of the show's existence and had come to see it. Moved by Kobayashi's fascination with his family and astonished by the rightness of many of her conclusions about them, he nevertheless pointed out numerous spots where her imagined version of their lives had departed from the truth. Smiling, Kobayashi recounted all of her errors. Neither the recordings nor her research, she seemed ruefully to confess, could allow us to hear everything the dead had to say. Still, as she showed slides of the family photographs Larry had

shared with her (including a picture of the real Bunny, who was far less glamorous than Kobayashi's De Beauvoir-reading bombshell), I found myself suddenly in tears. I was thinking of my own dead—and realizing that somehow Kobayashi had managed to bring their voices, as well as the New-burges', into my ears. If she finally failed to speak with the dead, she failed a great deal better than most artists ever do.