On OTHERING: a performer/audience dilemma

The OTHER: a common word loaded with meaning, but simply referring to an outsider, a foreigner, someone on the margins.

I am that othered person, born and raised somewhere and living somewhere else. The act of othering, and being other, is a major theme in my work and I have always been concerned with how to make the audience comprehend what it means and what it feels like.

In my 2010 collaboration with Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited – *lions will roar, swans will fly, angels will wrestle heaven, rains will break: gukurahundi* – I used a scrim, hung downstage for 50 minutes of a 60 minute work, to separate the performers’ world from the audience’s world. The imaginary fourth wall became a real physical wall, symbolic of all the walls we build: DMZ, the Berlin Wall, the train tracks that famously separate many in the US along racial lines. The scrim accentuated the distance already created by the proscenium stage and indicated prohibition, an exclusion that leads to miscommunication and misunderstanding. The five musicians who accompanied this work understood this gulf quickly, and immediately demanded that they be placed close to the audience and center stage. Their placement created a second barrier for me as the only space left to dance was behind or to the side of them, denying the perceived right of the audience to receive entertainment without barriers and instead awakening them to the alienated experience of the other.

In *Miriam*, the audience is drawn close to the performers in physical space, but is held at a distance through the play of light and dark. Darkness was my central concern—how can I work with this notion of darkness symbolizing incomprehension? Recognizing that it could not be presented in complete black for 60 minutes, I created a work built around partial visibility and obfuscation, a determined play with the eyes’ ability to dilate and see when light grows less or is taken away. Light too, is othering here. A single flash light in total darkness frustrates; bare bulbs, swinging lamps and police lights aimed into audience faces implicate. By playing with the ability to see or not see, I am trying to complicate the question of power while engaging, and challenging, theater traditions in the West.

“*Miriam* is only dark if you are deaf.”
“I closed my eyes and heard the piece.”
“I was never comfortable. I never relaxed into the piece.”

These are some of the comments that I have received about *Miriam*. Taking away the “right” of the audience to comfortably comprehend is my attempt at bringing the audience towards what it feels like to be OTHER. I am asking the audience to bring other faculties to their experience of theater. As an outsider to this country I have thrived because of my ability to use all of my senses and intuitions. Now I ask that the audience use their eyes, ears, skin, bones, hearts, head, nose, etc. I ask that they bring their museum, gallery, concert, church, club, sports watching and participating experience to fully engage with this work.

Everything must be brought to bear to experience *Miriam*.

- Nora Chipaumire