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> The triangle is no Gestalt. The real structures are intersubjective. They cannot be localized anywhere; the triangle has no reality anywhere; it is a systematic metaphor, systematically pursued.
>
> René Girard (1976: 2)

The Ballad of Isosceles is a performance installation for two people at a time, which is then witnessed by a larger 'shadow' audience who sit and watch from the sidelines. The piece is concerned with the voyeurism and the weird wonders of vicarious pleasure. It was created as part of a residency at Contact Theatre (Manchester) for its 2015 Sensored Festival of Performance. It has gone on to be developed through performances at the University of Salford's Digital Performance Lab and Catalyst Arts's FIX15 Biennale of Live Performance (Belfast).

Through songs delivered from a distance and text spoken up close, a single performer sets two audience members against each other in a strange, static dance of envy. These two participants, A and B, sit in chairs facing each other on an angle. Their arms are tied to their sides with loose rope, simulating confinement without actually enacting it. The performer enters into a spotlit area far away from A and B. She begins singing and speaking, and then gradually approaches their two seats. In the piece's first section, A must watch, ignored, as B receives the performer's undivided attention, while the second section of the performer's story is directed to B while A is ignored. The final section is pointedly directed to both. Meanwhile, on the outskirts of this installation, a 'shadow audience' looks on—aware, all the while, that the gaze is never for them. This 'shadow audience' sit behind A and B respectively, flanking their seats and watching them interact with and squirm under the performer's attention; it is made up of those who have chosen to experience the performance vicariously, without the direct attentions proffered to A and B. That's where you are, reader. You are very far away from the action, and you like it that way.

René Girard suggests that desire works in a triangular manner: 'jealousy and envy imply a third presence: object, subject and a third person toward whom the jealousy or envy is directed. These two "vices" are therefore triangular' (1996: 41). As A, my longing for the performer's gaze is always heightened by the fact that B wants it just as badly. According to Girard's triangular model, B's presence 'internally mediates' A's desire for the performer's attentions. Girard defines this internal mediation as that that occurs when the distance between A (the subject) and B (the co-present internal mediator) 'is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly' (38). As A, my desire for the performer's attentions is hence internally mediated by B's co-desiring presence beside me. Envy is the electric current that moves along each of this triangle's sides.

<A woman enters barefoot in a long blue dress and approaches a mic. She is spotlit, and a column of light joins her world with the chairs. There are only two of them, and there is only one of her. One of the audience members is A, and one is B.

The woman looks up into artificial smoke as k. d. lang's 'Smoke Rings' plays in the distance. The music fades, and she presses a loop pedal at her feet and sings over her own pre-recorded vocal backing track, a kind of siren song. Then she speaks into the mic, and towards A and B.>

I am Isosceles, the forgotten tenth Muse. Love child of Zeus and Marlene Dietrich. There are nine other Muses, all legitimate products of Zeus's marriage to Memory. These Muses, my half-sisters, are in charge of epic poetry, lyric poetry, love poetry, astronomy, history, comedy, tragedy, dance and sacred song.

I am the forgotten tenth Muse. I am the Muse of envy.

<u>\<She slowly walks towards A, ignoring B.\></u>

My father fucked Marlene Dietrich after seeing her sing one night. He said he felt like she was singing only to him—that no one else was there. He cheated on Memory—that's his wife—for one night in the lunar pull of my mother's moon-like face.

But Zeus was never good at keeping secrets. He kept returning to Marlene's door. Night after night, he begged to see her. But she had moved on to Yul Brynner.

Sometimes, Zeus would watch through the window as she mounted Yul's body.

<u>\<She perches on B's knee, bobbing up and down to mimic Marlene's movements, but never touching or looking at B, all the while looking directly at A.\></u>

Sometimes, Marlene would turn towards the window as she rode atop Yul, and Zeus could have sworn that she was looking straight at him. Zeus could have sworn that she liked for him to watch.

The one-to-one performance can be viewed as a testing ground for the mechanics of proximity, and equating such proximity with a caring form of intimacy seems only natural (indeed, many one-to-one pieces—most notoriously those of the late Adrian Howells—draw upon and reproduce forms of care). However, what if we were to resist this conflation and explore instead the agonistic potential of small-audience work?[{note}]1 Recent pieces such as Ontroerend Goed's <u>Internal</u> (2009) and <u>Audience</u> (2011) and Rosana Cade's <u>My Big Sister Taught Me This Lap Dance</u> (2012) have begun to welcome the one-to-one's insidious dynamics—voyeurism, betrayal and duplicity—into the theatrical frame. The controversies surrounding <u>Internal</u> in particular, during which confidences delivered on a one-to-one level are

subsequently broadcast to a wider audience, indeed unmask these assumptions of intimacy as full of potential betrayals. Adam Alston underscores the importance of these dynamics in which 'the personality of participating audiences may end up on display in one-on-one theatre as a consequence of… participatory tendencies, a feature that may well inject a feeling of unease within the participatory dynamic' (2012: 108). Alston even questions 'the extent to which intimacy can be seen to operate in one-on-one theatre' at all (108).

The Ballad of Isosceles seeks to bring the one-to-one's expected tenderness and its contrapuntal violence together inside a single theatrical event. By placing two competing one-to-one performer–audience dynamics alongside each other, it attempts to reframe intimacy as existing across a spectrum of troublesome relations. Dominic Johnson also suggests an alternative vision for intimacy:

> Rather than imagine intimacy as simply an untroubled situation of pleasant interpersonal relations—two people coming together in a politically neutral way—I look to performance to see if intimacy might reveal itself as a more volatile, complicated and meaningful category of experience… At one limit, intimacy is a solitary crisis where I am left wanting by the fleeing of another person. At the other far limit, the presence of another person crowds me, and I am overwhelmed by her or his proximity. (Johnson 2012: 89)

The Ballad of Isosceles traverses and complicates the binary spectrum set out by Johnson, moving quickly between distance and proximity, solitude and the very theatrical claustrophobia of co-spectatorship. The proximity of the performer to another desiring and watching body (B) may overwhelm A, while the omnipresence of a 'shadow' audience makes any action by A and B— within the one-to-one performance encounter or witness to it—doubly visible.

<The performer returns to her mic post, far away, and activates the loop pedal. She sings 'Falling in Love Again' to A, ignoring B.>

<She pauses, resets, turns off the loop pedal. She slowly walks towards B this time, ignoring A.>

One night, Zeus and Memory went out for a slap-up meal. **<joking>** Trying to rekindle their romance. Getting 'the spark' back, they said. Afterwards, while walking the back streets, they heard music drifting from inside a club. A woman's winsome voice. Zeus knew, but it was too late—Memory just wanted to dance, and so she pulled him through the door.

Onstage, a pregnant Marlene stood basking in the spotlight. She was barefoot, in a negligee, and she belted out tune after tune, accompanied by a trained monkey in a top hat on a tinny piano. When Zeus walked though the door, hushing his wife **<indicating A as Memory>** from humming along, Marlene spotted them, and began singing directly to Memory. Memory went from humming and swaying, to standing still, transfixed, like a bird stunned by the first bullet.

The last song of Marlene's set was a mournful one, directed to Memory's **<casting B as Memory now>** ears only, about love and its inevitable plurality. At the end, Marlene blew a kiss to Memory, ignoring Zeus, and walked offstage.

Memory turned towards Zeus and spit in his face. The spittle left a tender scar on Zeus's cheek. And that was the first recorded moment of regret in humankind—regret, when memory spits in the face of power.

<She returns upstage 'Falling in Love Again', again, this time to B, ignoring A.>

Think of the particular beauty that light has only when it is refracted, reader, and think of the quick stab of jealousy that arrives when someone with whom you're deep in conversation flicks their eyes away from you at someone else across the room. Think of the particular yearning for something that can never be solely yours.

<u><The performer travels downstage one last time, and finally shares her attention between A and B.></u>

Isosceles, forever torn between two points. Forever doomed to wander this vast world, refracting the hearts of those in my path.

<She returns to her mic and stares up into the artificial smoke as it billows around her. 'Smoke Rings' fades up as the light fades down.>

Notes
1 Here, I use Chantal Mouffe's (2013: 92–3) concept of 'agonistics', wherein artistic practices 'make visible' tensions otherwise obscured and obliterated by hegemonic forms of representation.

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