Chapter Four

Mute Stages: Performing Silent Lives

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Abstract: Edward Gorey's collection, *The GashlyCrumb Tinies* from 1963 is an illustrated alphabet of untimely child death. We hear, for example, that 'A is for Amy who fell down the stairs' and 'B is for Basil assaulted by bears'. Later, 'M is for Maud who was swept out to sea' and 'N is for Neville who died of ennui'[1]: Gorey's witty and melancholy collection yokes multiple anxieties around the figure of the child including their simultaneous vulnerability and seeming immortality, their uncanny resemblance to (and distance from) 'us' in miniature, and their apparent embodiment of 'naturalness' and animality. It is these questions of childhood, alterity, and reality that form the focus of this chapter. In general I am concerned to examine how far childhood might be understood conceptually as a place apart that refuses to fully participate in adult consensus reality. More specifically, I will investigate how 'disturbed' children amplify such questions around social participation, meaning-making, and political structures of communication. In order to consider this subject, this chapter will explore the lives and cultural representations of elective mutes, June and Jennifer Gibbons, also known as *The Silent Twins*. This chapter is then, aimed to assess how childhood alterity, as figured in theatre and performance, may help us to understand the nature and limits of adult normalcy off stage. In so doing it is hoped that we will uncover some new reflections on the meaning and value of social participation and perhaps more importantly 'non-participation'. In short, I aim to revaluate the performative nature of opting out.

[1] Edward Gorey, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies or, After the Outing* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998).

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Discussing the dread reaction of the Governess to her charges' manic play in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey,* Sally Shuttleworth illuminates the longstanding 'popular need to overcome the daunting alterity of childhood by bringing it under the control of adult classifications'.[2] She continues to note, in her exploration of Victorian literary and scientific discourses of childhood, that children have oft been perceived as a 'threateningly unknowable species of humanity' and considers how far childhood has been understood as a 'natural' state of unreason.[3] In pursuing the question as to whether a child can be mad, Shuttleworth exposes adults' desire to wrest unruly alterity back into familiar form. She elucidates how far wider social discourses, such as those around race, gender, and selfhood, are refracted through the figure of the child.[4] The wilful child is also the subject of this chapter. In general I am concerned to consider how far childhood might be understood conceptually as a place apart that refuses to fully participate in adult consensus reality. More specifically, I will

[2] Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of a Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 18.
[3] Shuttleworth, p. 19
[4] Shuttleworth, p. 4.

investigate how 'disturbed' children amplify questions around social participation and political structures of communication. I wish to linger over the relationship between difference and defiance and consider how non-conformity is read, understood, and classified. In order to examine this, I will explore the lives and cultural representations of elective mutes, June and Jennifer Gibbons, also known as *The Silent Twins*.[5] This chapter, is then, aimed to assess how childhood alterity, as figured in theatre and performance, may help us to understand the nature and limits of adult normalcy off stage. In so doing it is hoped that I will uncover some new reflections on the meaning and value of social participation and perhaps more importantly non-participation. Can rethinking the value of the participation/non-participation binary broaden horizons of thought with respect to ways of being? Indeed, is the term non-participation itself unhelpful insofar as it necessarily sustains pre-established terms of participation? And to what extent can social non-participation actually be a peculiarly strident way of joining in by reimagining the terms of participation? In short, these pages aim to revaluate the nature and value of opting out.

Raise your hand if you want to speak

Tim Crouch's 2003 play *My Arm* is a tale of a young boy who puts his arm in the air and never puts it back down again. It is, as the play script describes, the 'story of an empty gesture' that becomes overburdened with meaning. In the course of the performance everyone from family to doctors to psychologists to peers to artists try to make varied sense of the obstinate action with the tools at their disposal (medicine, bullying, paint, and so on). They attempt to narrate its wilful pointlessness into legible form. Yet the play is precisely framed by its exquisite lack of referent:

> Don't think that this gesture is about belief. It isn't for a moment about belief, or conviction or integrity. I'd like to be able to tell you that this all sprung out of some sort of social

[5] This is the title of the main biography of the twins written by Marjorie Wallace based on the twins' diaries and Wallace's time with them during visits to Broadmoor. See Marjorie Wallace, *The Silent Twins*, rev'd. edn, (London: Vintage, 2008). *The Silent Twins* is also the title of an opera by Errollyn Wallen with libretto from April De Angelis as well as the title of a BBC docudrama first aired on 19th January 1986, both of which are inspired by Wallace's biography.

> protest. That I was incensed by the stories from Cambodia. Or even that it was an heroic gesture in the face of an abusing father, or separating parents, or – I think it was none of these. If anything it was formed out of the *absence* of belief. I think at some point I was struck by the realisation that I had nothing to think about. I was thought-less. I couldn't cause thought. I was not the effect of thought.[6]

Moreover, the peculiar gesture is set amidst a cluster of eccentric childhood behaviours:

> I was put in a group of similarly aged adolescents with similarly idiosyncratic manifestations. There were twins girls, Helen and Alison, who had refused to open their eyes since they were nine.
>
> *Presents photo provided from the audience.*
>
> Andy Beglin, who wouldn't open his fists.
>
> *Presents another photo.*
>
> A girl called Barbara Matthews, who had had the contents of her stomach removed regularly since the age of five because she kept eating batteries.
>
> *Presents another photo*.
>
> Myrna Kendall, who refused to was or cut her nails or clean her teeth, ever.
>
> *Photo*.
>
> There was an even fatter kid than me who had big issues with his own excrement, so we all kept our distance. And there was Kevin Proctor, who was perfectly sensible but who would never wear any clothes if he could help it.[7]

Contrarily, the opening to Sara Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* retells a Grimm tale of a disobedient little girl who dies but whose arm protrudes noisily and repetitively from her grave until it is struck into submission by her mother with a rod of iron: 'and then at last the child had rest beneath the

[6] Tim Crouch, *My Arm* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 14.
[7] Crouch, p. 24-5.

ground.'[8] Unlike Crouch's arm, Ahmed's is apparently so full of meaning is rattles with the energy of the undead. The arm accuses. However, what both arms essentially ask us to consider is the cultural legibility and value of alterity and resistance. The arms request our attention (even witness) but contest our attempts to control them. They are defiant and strange. And, moreover, they appear to address us, soundlessly.

My Arm, as with all of Crouch's work, concerned with the nature and limits of theatricality and representation: it explores the relationship between action and meaning. However, like Ahmed's figuring of the wilful child, this play also illuminates a number of ideas that are at the heart of this chapter; questions of reality, participation, and alterity. Firstly, it returns our attention to the precarity of reality insofar as it narrates the multiple and shifting manners in which the arm is *made to mean*. The gesture is intolerable owing to its steadfast departure from normative behaviours and common horizons of meaning. Similarly, the brothers Grimm's arm operates as a malleable and paradoxical metaphor: a dead arm that thrusts, for a time, with wild life. It defies its position and thereby unseats its audiences. In both cases, we are invited to ask: what do you mean? Secondly, both arms, in different ways, shine light on our collective intolerance of signs and gestures of, and toward, nothingness (one might even include suicidal actions here). Indeed, the ambiguous spirit of the Grimm's arm must be beaten into its proper place; neither seen, nor heard. Thirdly, both demand that we think about non-conformity as, in some ways, a performative action. This in turn invites us to reflect upon how and why one might represent a non-conformist gesture in manners that remain true to the original action. Finally, both stories pay attention to a tendency in authorities that 'manage' childhood to pathologize or condemn non-normative childhood behaviours. Disciplinary strategies in psychiatry (and related disciplines) and education prescribe what is and what is not acceptable, whether through diagnosis or regulations and punishments. This need to make sense of difference, to explain away those children who won't play along (or won't play

[8] Brothers Grimm, quoted in Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 1.

properly), has profound consequences for how we collectively conceive of acceptable selves and acceptable realities. This is not to imply homogeneity of social attitudes; rather it is to underline the normative values that are at play in structural responses to alternative experiences and ways of being. I propose, here, that the manners in which we apprehend and attend to unusual behaviours tacitly demonstrate the values ascribed to personhood and a viable (and valuable) life. This is not offered in an 'anything goes' spirit that implies we should simply ignore difference entirely, or that children do not need support; rather I am specifically questioning, in the case of the twins, the structures of listening and the limits of our collective capacity to productively hear (and read) silence. These defiant arms, then, offer us a valuable departure point for our exploration of the lives and cultural legacies of June and Jennifer Gibbons insofar as they ask us to consider the meaning, purpose, and representation of acts of non-participation and alterity. And moreover, they ask us to examine the social and structural conditions of communication. These arms, like June and Jennifer, are far from silent. Their inaudible defiance helps us to think about what happens when we press mute and opt out.

'Words seemed too much'[9]

Before turning to their on-stage representation it is important to survey the twins' biography. June Alison Gibbons and Jennifer Lorraine Gibbons were born as monozygotic twins on 11th April 1963 to Gloria and Aubrey Gibbons, who had immigrated to the UK from Barbados in 1960.[10] The girls lived around the UK during their childhood in Yorkshire and Devon, and then finally settled in Haverford West, Wales. Their father worked on RAF bases and so the family moved with his career. The family was comprised of 3 other children: Greta and David (older) and Rosie (younger). Their early infancy passed without notable difficulty or upset. By the age of 3 the sisters would play happily together but their language was restricted to a handful of unclear words and phrases. As June and Jennifer joined school their underdeveloped language skills became more audible and they were sent for

[9] June Gibbons, quoted in Wallace, *The Silent Twins*, p. 25.
[10] Interestingly, Gloria did not think that the twins were identical until they reached their twenties.

weekly speech therapy to little avail. Marjorie Wallace's biography of June and Jennifer, *The Silent Twins*, offers a detailed account of the two girls' childhood development.[11] What is apparent from the biography, which was written based on their diaries, interviews with the twins, the family, and key figures in their histories, is that their silence became steadily more entrenched and mutually reinforced. Gloria, however, remains steadfast in her sense that the 'twinnies' are just shy. The twins certainly have a mild speech impediment but they do have the physical capacity to talk. As the twins progressed through their school years they were not only subject to playground racist bullying but accused by exasperated teachers and educational support workers of 'dumb insolence'.[12] It is striking how their silence is understood by many as aggressive, even violent. Indeed, one teacher went so far as to imply supernatural malevolence:

> They were always apart from everyone else, trying to be invisible, yet they attracted attention in a way I disliked. I've had 6,000 children go through my hands in thirty years and I've encountered only four I felt were evil… The fourth was Jennifer…The bad one would not have been so bad had she not been able to draw strength from her twin, and the other one would have been normal.[13]

In practice, then, their silence is experienced as anything but passive: they are assertively present.

The educational authorities sought to physically separate the twins as a strategy to demolish the perceived over-intensity of their psychological relationship. Moreover, their tongues were operated on 'despite uncertainty among medical consultants as to whether lingual mobility was an issue in their mutism.'[14] Here one can begin to witness the abrasive responses to their socially intolerable silence. We return thus to the threatening unknowability of childhood that Shuttleworth identifies. The authorities fierce reactions to June and Jennifer are marked by a clear need to make these girls 'normal' and thus bring them back within the comprehensible regime of consensus reality. Their

[11] I am drawing heavily from Wallace's work here the key source of information about their early life.
[12] Wallace, p. 16.
[13] Michael John, quoted in Wallace, p. 17.
[14] G. Thomas Couser, 'Identity, Identicality, and Life Writing: Telling (the silent) Twins Apart' in *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 69.

shared refusal to participate in verbal dialogue appears to deafen those with duties of care towards June and Jennifer and prompts a series of interventions aimed to force them back to voice. The point here, is not that no one should have intervened or made efforts to help the twins speak (their voluminous diaries testify to their profound desire to talk); rather it is to reflect, as we move through this history and latterly the cultural works about the girls, as to whether what needed to be altered was the structures of both speaking and listening. The repeated attempts to invite the girls to speak via varied technologies of social participation (medical, creative, educative and so on) failed to set up conditions that might enable such participation and instead perpetuated the terms of exclusion. Indeed, as Sara Ahmed writes in her discussion of Derrida's *On Hospitality*: 'When participation depends on an invitation, then participation becomes a condition or comes with conditions.'[15] How might we, as a society, have afforded a more expansive field of communication and participation to enable June and Jennifer to move differently and independently through (and with) silence and voice? Could we have participated differently in their mute reality rather than wrenching them back to the dominant system of speech? How might we have made participation unconditional?

The next significant development in the twins' lives was their transfer out of mainstream education aged 14 to Eastgate Centre for Special Education where they worked extensively with teacher, Cathy Arthur. The work ranged from crafts to excursions to psychological testing to secret observation of the girls playing together to therapy. Experiments with separation were also conducted with wretched results for the twins' personal wellbeing and health.[16] After school finished June and Jennifer signed on the dole and retreated more completely into the private realm of their bedroom and disappeared in to a fantasy world of dolls, creative writing, and play. Both kept diaries and together recorded plays, cookery programmes, mini-dramas and so forth. They engaged in correspondence courses including one entitled 'The Art of Conversation'. Drawing heavily on

[15] Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 53.

[16] There is a much more detailed story to be told about June and Jennifer's biography but this is beyond the scope of this chapter. See Wallace's biography for a fuller account. I also recognise here that I am tending to collapse the two individuals into one by referring to 'the twins' as though their experiences were interchangeable which of course they were not. For a good discussion of the twins separateness as well as the ethics of Wallace's biographical approach see Couser.

Americanised teen schlock they created fictive worlds of peculiar romance and melodrama. However, the rhetoric and behaviours of their fictional imaginations washed into reality as June and Jennifer became involved with a small family of (American) boys who introduced them to drugs, alcohol, arson, and sex. And despite the boys' open antipathy and physical violence towards both twins they described their encounters with romantic zeal:

> The thought of leaving you sends shudders of fear and sadness through me. Even though we are enemies, you are the boy who broke my virginity. Carl Christopher Kennedy, I sucked your penis and you entered me. I thank you for hurting me when you did. My happiness will only come when I get to touch you once more… you will stay in my heart forever.[17]

For a while, it appears, that the drugs, booze, and fire functioned as ways of loosening the stranglehold of silence that each twin had locked the other in: 'I don't crave for it [alcohol], I just use it to help me be more social'.[18] Moreover, analysing her dreams of fire Jennifer writes '*Fire:* desire for escape'.[19] After the boys left to return to North American that summer, June and Jennifer conducted a five week long, miniature spree of petty crime and eventually were caught and charged with arson. These transgressive anti-social actions were read simply as crime rather than a crooked attempt at social dialogue. Could the authorities have listened to these paradoxical acts of social participation differently? Indeed, far from being straightforward gestures of anti-social disobedience, it is perhaps valuable to conceive of these actions as precisely attempts to 'join in'. Vitally, I am not proposing a simplistic 'cry for help' narrative; rather I wish to underscore how far the meaning of the twins' behaviour is shot through with normative adult readings (criminality, pathology, insolence). Aberrant behaviour here is a protruding arm to be beaten back beneath the surface as opposed to being held and helped to stand back up. If participation is not simply an action but also demands recognition as such, if it is dialogic in this way, one wonders how far the manners

[17] June, quoted in Wallace, p. 112.
[18] June, quoted in Wallace, p. 125.
[19] Jennifer, quoted in Wallace, p. 83.

in which the twins' behaviours were read were as significant as what they did. Moreover, what is (in)audible within such social discourses (legal, medical, educational)? To put it another way, to what extent were June and Jennifer opted out?

The final stage of the twins' shared story begins in Pucklechurch Remand Centre and ends at Broadmoor Hospital. On 10th November 1981 June and Jennifer, aged 18, were remanded in custody for burglary, arson and theft – they had stolen, amongst other minor items, a 'carton of Play-Doh', a 'half-eaten packet of polo mints' and a 'quantity of keys'.[20] During their stay at Pucklechurch the girls' 'non-participation' was, once again, intolerable: '[they] caused havoc, not by any overt misbehaviour but by their increasing resistance to the regime'.[21] Yet simultaneously the longing to join in raged in their writing. June's diary describes: 'watching life go by, wanting desperately to participate and not being able to, this everlasting feeling of being cut off'.[22] The Governor of the Remand Centre, however, assured the twins that their obstinacy, ultimately, would not triumph over societal norms: 'It [society] will win in the end. If you want to live in this world then you must accept its conventions.'[23] Here we encounter the moral strain that snakes through the authorities' responses to the twins' behaviour. Their silence is read as a choice. And on the one hand, it is; they can speak. On the other, however, verbal participation is entirely impossible in the world they experienced. Thus, June and Jennifer come to be suspended between adult narratives of being either simply bloody-minded or pathologically different, between being bad or mad. The twins remained here for months awaiting trial and psychiatric assessment. In the end they were only assessed by one psychiatrist who determined that they were both psychopaths who needed to be detained indefinitely at Broadmoor Hospital; a hospital of the highest level of security possible in the UK forensic psychiatric system. June and Jennifer would spend the next 12 years in Broadmoor. And, as Wallace observes, 'it was difficult to ignore the irony of locking a girl whose main offence against

[20] Wallace, p. 201, p. 137, and p. 202.
[21] Wallace, p. 151.
[22] June in Wallace, p. 156.
[23] Governor, quoted in Wallace, p. 192.

society was being mute and withdrawn into a silent cell.'[24] During this time both June and Jennifer were subject to a wide variety of treatments and latterly diagnosed as schizophrenic.[25] Despite the prosecution having used their diaries as proof to help with their conviction, their psychiatrist, Dr Le Couteur, never read a single word of their writing.[26] The nurses had said that their diaries were 'fantasies and obscenities' and so Le Couteur reasoned: 'If they want to talk to me, I'll listen. But I'm not going to waste time.'[27] There was some overall progress in their communication skills at Broadmoor but one wonders of the cost given the twins were subject to a heavy pharmacological regime and still faced significant psychological challenges when they were deemed ready to leave the hospital (quite apart from the life-long legacies of spending their entire twenties at Broadmoor). Shortly before discharge June wrote: 'I am taking thirteen tablets every day which to me is unnecessary, but to the doctors vital. They have left me here so long a part of me has died. Yes, we have both suffered.'[28] After 12 years in Broadmoor, on Tuesday 9th March 1993, the twins were transferred to a medium secure unit. Jennifer died that same day from a rare, but rarely fatal, inflammation of the heart called myocarditis.[29] June spent a further year as the Caswell Clinic and was finally released in 1994. Speaking at the time of her discharge, June was asked how she felt about everything that had happened. She replied, 'one big mess'. She concluded by saying that she was still a twin: 'I was born a twin and I will die a twin'.[30] June currently lives independently and without any psychiatric treatment in West Wales.

'Vulnerable as flowers in hell'[31]

June and Jennifer's unusual shared story has captured the imagination of many. Twins, and particularly identical twins, often arouse social and artistic curiosity. Indeed, Juliana De Nooy's study,

[24] Wallace, p. 192. The twins were, of course, not kept in solitary throughout their time at Broadmoor. I take Wallace's point here to refer to the broader regime of detention and social isolation.
[25] Wallace and others have questioned this diagnosis. See p. 262.
[26] Le Couteur was the RMO [Resident Medical Officer] for the female wing at Broadmoor.
[27] Le Couteur, quoted in Wallace, p. 252.
[28] June, quoted in Wallace, p. 263.
[29] Jennifer had, in the weeks leading up to her death, told June and Marjorie that she knew she was going to die.
[30] June, interviewed in *Inside Story: Silent Twin – Without My Shadow*, BBC1, written and produced by Olivia Lichtenstein, first broadcast 22nd September 1994.
[31] June, describing herself and Jennifer, in Wallace, p. 225.

Twins in Contemporary Literature and Culture, notes the mythological and metaphorical qualities of twin tales:

> It is not by chance that these studies of literary doubles are predominantly psychoanalytical: the topic of twins and doubles appear made to order for a psychoanalytic reading, with its easy links to the mirror stage, narcissism, the uncanny, separation anxiety, sibling rivalry, the false self, projection of the unconscious, and exteriorisation of inner conflict.[32]

She continues, and highlights how twins are also frequently put at the service of myriad notions of difference: 'any figure of the Other (another ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality) and any duality, and to explore nature/nurture debates in any field.'[33] I would suggest that one might add questions about the performativity of identity to De Nooy's list. Identical twins disturb the habitual traffic between self and other. Moreover, they appear to unsettle the notion of autonomy that lies at the heart of contemporary discourses of selfhood. The visual double exposure that twins present also serves to relocate ideas of 'nature' front and centre. It is perhaps unsurprising then that June and Jennifer's tale of pathological sameness has found repeated theatrical form. However, it is the contention of this chapter that, while multiple artists have sought to creatively communicate their story (with varied merit), none has managed to overcome the tendency to fill their silence with noise. Whether through song, voice-over, or narrative, the cultural works about the twins have tended to colour in their blanks with explanatory hues. This not only serves to replicate the dichotomy of silence/ voice that shaped their historic 'treatments' but, moreover, over-determines their story in ways that erases the complexity of the challenge that silence poses to the meaning and terms of participation and social value. At root, these works tend to re-silence the twins by tidying away their mess:

> I am immune from sanity or insanity
>
> I am an empty present box: all

[32] Juliana De Nooy, *Twins in Contemporary Literature and Culture: Look Twice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p. 2.
[33] De Nooy, p. 4.

unwrapped for someone else's disposal.

I am thrown away egg-shell,

With no life inside me, for I am

not touchable, but a slave to nothingness.

I feel nothing, I have nothing, for I am

transparent to life; I am a silver

streamer on a balloon; a balloon

which will fly away without any

oxygen insider. I feel nothing,

for I am nothing, but I can

see the world from up here.[34]

To date there have been a number of art works created about the twins. There are two TV works: *The Silent Twins* (1986) a docudrama directed by Jon Amiel based on Wallace's biography, and a BBC documentary directed by Olivia Lichtenstein entitled *Silent Twin: Without My Shadow* (1994). The band *Manic Street Preachers* released a song on their 1999 album *This Is My Truth Tell Me Yours* called 'Tsunami'. Luke Haines also named a track 'Discomania' (inspired by Jennifer's novel) on his 2001 album, *The Oliver Twist Manifesto*. Two operas have been composed about June and Jennifer: a French rock opera *Jumelles* (1992); and a British opera *The Silent Twins* (2007).[35] Finally, a number of plays have been written including Seth Bockley and Devon De Mayo's *The Twins Would Like to Say* (2010), and Linda Brogan and Polly Teale's *Speechless* (2010).[36] It is this latter play that will form the focus of the discussion. Brogan and Teale's play offers a sympathetic and faithful account of a period in June and Jennifer's life and attempts to communicate the stultifying racial

[34] June, from one of her 'September Poems' in Wallace, p. 251.
[35] The latter featured a libretto written by April De Angelis and was first performed at The Almeida.
[36] There are other unpublished plays that appear to be inspired by the twins tales such as Vanessa Walter's *Double Take* . The twins are also represented in a number of other works including a self-published collection of ghoulish photography that renders the twins freaks: Al W. Blue II, *Book of Strange Medical Oddities and Post Mortem Photography* (Create Space Publishing, 2014).

pressures exerted upon these two young women. It offers creative responses to the challenge of staging mute lives through movement and voice-over. However, there are a number of problems that remain unsolved at the play's close with respect to the very act of telling this tale, and moreover, telling it theatrically. The remainder of this chapter will turn then to discuss the following questions: firstly, what happens when you press a story of silence into a text-led form?; secondly, how far do the theatrical strategies Brogan and Teale use to ventriloquize the twins' history replicate the failures of listening that marked the twins' lives?; thirdly, how can a form such as theatre, which amplifies dynamics of social participation in its very structure, accommodate the complexity of June and Jennifer's steadfast refusal to join in? Or, to put it another way, what pressure does the social form of theatre exert upon their apparently anti-social story? Finally, how are we the audience invited to participate in their story as spectators? How does my creative participation in their story as an audience member amplify or mute their tale? In short, what and how does silence mean in *Speechless?*

Shadow play

Speechless premiered at the Traverse Theatre during the 2010 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Inspired by Wallace's biography the play was written by Linda Brogan and Polly Teale with the theatre company, Shared Experience.[37] The piece explores the period in June and Jennifer's life from Eastgate Centre to their arrival in Broadmoor. The play was very well received critically and won a Fringe First Award. Lyn Gardner found that 'The power of *Speechless* is that it gives these young women a voice'.[38] Michael Coveney described it as 'a story of stunning and stark oddness… brilliant, bleak, but redemptive.'[39] Gina Allum, echoing Gardner, noted that a real strength of the production lies in the clarity of the twins' voices: 'The play skirts the issue of the twins' private idiom, their dialect of two, and we understand them perfectly (when they are alone) as articulate girls, with writerly

[37] Interestingly, in 2005 Teale wrote, *Brontë*, about the Brontë sisters; another piece about sisters writing their passionate literature in stark isolation.
[38] Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*, 8th August 2010.
[39] Michael Coveney, *Independent*, 23rd August 2010.

aspirations.'[40] What the reviewers value is that the play affords generosity towards June and Jennifer and attempts to make their silence sing. The empathetic approach of the dramatists to the girls' story allows us to better understand their heretofore private world. Rather than exoticising their history through spectacular gestures of unknowability and enfreakment, the play (for many) made their oddity somewhat more legible and quotidian. This is a significant decision if one reflects on Petra Kuppers observation that 'mad' bodies on stage are all too often frantically Other thereby leaving an audience to 'read for symptoms of inner states'.[41] Indeed, if stage madness is all too often Day-Glo bright in its portraits of alternative mental experiences, the decision to cast a warm light around June and Jennifer's ordinariness is a marked political choice. *Speechless* appears to disrupt the diagnostic gaze in this way. In this portrait of the twins, if one peels back the outward veil of silence, an audience hears familiar strains of sisterly strife, top of the pops, crinkle-cut chips, and teen romance set amid a fraught social context of racial inequality. There is much value and political purpose in the playwrights' decisions to 'give voice' to June and Jennifer in order that their tale be heard. However, in the pursuit of conferring ordinary dignity and personhood upon the twins, the play relies on a causal dramaturgical structure and overwrought narrative of racial and gender politics that actually serves to paper over their silence (to say nothing of the vexed issue of normalisation and 'passing'). I am not suggesting here that I know the *real* reason June and Jennifer stopped speaking and that the play has simply 'got it wrong'; rather, I am drawing attention the fact that the very gesture of giving voice may, paradoxically, silence. Moreover, I am asking if the pursuit of 'why' they do not talk is necessarily twinned with a reification of fixed modes of communication and a tacit need to make them talk. Indeed, perhaps, nested within the desire to crack the enigma of their silence lies a need to sustain the silence/voice binary, instead of expanding our structures and manners of listening properly to others. I am also not here romanticising their silence as a counter-cultural gesture of deliberate non-conformity that ought to be celebrated – the twins, according to their writings, generally loathed their mute state. And certainly, their story is race-marked, gender-

[40] Gina Allum, *New Statesman*, 18th August 2010.
[41] Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 134.

marked, and importantly, class-marked (an often overlooked aspect of their biography). However, what I am concerned to examine further is how far *Speechless* restages established modes of listening and seeks to make *them* understandable to *us* as opposed to asking us to re-tune our ears. Indeed, as Dee Heddon argues elsewhere in this book, it is urgent that we radically expand the notion and practices of listening carefully to others.

You are Jennifer. You are me.[42]

Muteness poses a particular theatrical conundrum. How does a playwright tell a silent story on stage? Or more specifically, how does one tell this silent story on stage without re-cocooning June and Jennifer in muffled, strange fog? This is a conundrum that is further complicated by the representation of childhood. There is a doubled act of ventriloquism at play here insofar as adult bodies are giving voice to silent children. One partial answer to these issues of representation appears to emerge through the archive. As Wallace writes 'What I discovered was that June and Jennifer, physically rigid, did all their dancing in words.'[43] Couser similarly argues that the twins used their writing as a means of splitting from the tyranny of sameness that dogged their day-to-day lives. If the twins were persistently treated as a single unit, 'the diaries exert the will of autonomy and individuation in furious, prolific manners. They write their separateness.'[44] Given that the twins captured their lives in prose it appears logical that the diaries ought to animate the stage. They appear to offer a transparent means of articulating private lives. *Speechless* makes extensive use of verbatim voice-over from June and Jennifer's diaries, frequently acting as scene-ends:

> **JUNE** *I blame the daffodils. Who wants to hear summery sounds? Not me. I hate summer. The same old outings, happy people going on long-planned holidays. Children sucking ice cream, pregnant women wearing blousey dresses. Why can't it be winter the whole year round? Do we really need summer?*

[42] Linda Brogan and Polly Teale, 'Jelly Babies', *Speechless* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), p. 26.
[43] Wallace, p. 279.
[44] Couser, p. 81.

Lights change.[45]

The voice-overs serve a double function here of both authentication and explanation. One can perceive here the promise of authenticity that Janelle Reinelt identified in relation to documentary theatre practices more generally.[46] The framing of the play as a true story renders any 'real' words burly in their authority, but also the diary entries location at the conclusion of scene positions them to retroactively comment on what has passed in a quasi-omniscient manner. However, the argument that the dramatists are simply 'telling it like it was' immediately flounders if one accepts that in fact there is a double (if not triple) intervention here.[47] As Cathy Caruth intimates, any incursion into the archive necessitates mediation: 'The encounter with the archive is thus an act of interpretation that appears like a return, but it is also an event that partially represses, as it passes on, the inscriptions it encounters; that passes on not only an impression but also, somewhat differently, its repression.'[48] Brogan and Teale are not only delving into the archive, they are also engaged in an act of representation that is scored with decisions and omissions, that is scored with repression. Thus, while the diary entries appear to offer a theatrical strategy to unzip the 'real' tale for an audience, one ought to caution against the consequences of positioning us as spectators, in this manner. The opening line of the play assures unparalleled access to truth: *First of all, let's get things straight: nobody knows us really. All these things you say about us are wrong*.[49] One may want to read this moment as voice-over as precisely framing the instability of the narrator, but the voice-over format amplifies its authority as emanating from within the authentic origin of the tale. The question here is how far the strategy of voice-over privileges an audience to *understand* June and Jennifer's story (in contradistinction to most people in their lives) without ever challenging us to think differently about voice, silence, listening, or how we respond to difference. Indeed, we are never invited to experience

[45] June, quoted in Brogan and Teale, 'September 1977. Eastgate', p. 17. Italics original.
[46] See Janelle Reinelt, 'The Promise of Documentary' in Alyson Forsythe and Chris Megson (eds), *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 6-23.
[47] I say triple here as Brogan and Teale are reliant on an already-mediated intervention insofar as they rely so heavily on Wallace's biography. I too, therefore, must acknowledge that this chapter is similarly culpable of the mechanisms of impression and repressions that Caruth signals.
[48] Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 78.
[49] June, quoted in Brogan and Teale, p. 3. Emphasis original.

the fullness of their silence because it is always retranslated back to us in our own tongue. June and Jennifer's life history was marked by an enduring and systemic failure of listening. *Speechless*, I suggest, through its use of voice over and allowing us inside the belly of their muteness prevents a more nuanced encounter with radical non-participation. As an audience member I am permitted to perceive other's failures of understanding while being reassured that, to a degree, *I* understand via listening to the truth-telling diary. However, the play poses no challenge whatsoever to me with respect to how I might listen and participate in alternative ways of being and communicating. In this way the piece inevitably replicates consensus reality and established horizons of dialogue and experience. Alterity in *Speechless* is explained to me and for me; rather than examining the structures and conditions of inclusion and exclusion and asking if they are humane. In this way the play sustains the very terms of social participation that excluded June and Jennifer in the first place.

The second scene of the play is a violent but profoundly moving scene of movement. We witness the twins stalk, tussle, embrace, and suffocate one another in silence. The scene is described as having 'the quality of a nightmare although it is in fact happening'.[50] The desperate choreography allows one to perceive the intensity and complexity of the struggle without recourse to narrative. This scene is immediately followed by one in which we hear a psychiatrist ask a series of unhelpful and reductive questions in ways that are redolent of the psychiatric dialogue in Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. Instead of Kane's 'Did it relieve the tension?' we hear Brogan and Teale's 'Why did you stop talking to us?'[51] Both Kane and Brogan and Teale offer a useful critique of the marked limits of psychiatric assessment. In both plays what is claimed as dialogue is in fact a monologic set of questions aimed to produce a set of responses that can be measured according to pre-existing norms and assumptions. The psychiatric encounter in *Speechless* also serves a simply expository function. However, the play's dramaturgy complicates the clarity of the interrogation that is

[50] Brogan and Teale, '1982. Broadmoor', p. 4.
[51] Sarah Kane, '4.48 Psychosis' in *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 216, Brogan and Teale, p. 6.

mounted regarding the inadequacy of our collective response to non-conformity. The psychiatrist's question – 'Why did you stop talking to us?' – is immediately followed with:

> *The sound of children's voice shouting at a deafening pitch.*
> JUNE *and* JENNIFER *stand facing one another, with one arm cradled above their heads, like wounded birds trying to protect themselves…*
> *Amidst the shouting are racist tauints and references to the* TWINS' *strange speech. They are told to 'Go back to the jungle' and 'learn to speak English'. We hear the words 'wog', 'sambo', 'nignog'.*[52]

There is a causal structure at play here that is reductive. The dramaturgical logic is that racism was a root cause of their mutism. There can be no doubt that the racist bullying that the twins experienced had a very significant impact on their shared decision to remain silent. However, to render it *the* determining factor once again explains away the complexity of the story and bypasses the fundamental challenge to social meaning-making that is posed by their silence.

The framing of their mute lives as a consequence of racial inequality is not only embedded in the dramaturgy, but also in the somewhat heavy-handed contextual framing of the piece as set against the Brixton riots and Lady Di's wedding, and the preface by Yasmin Alibhai Brown:

> For a minority disillusionment [with the hopes of Windrush immigration] led to anger which was either internalised – leading to mental chaos – or externalised, acted out in crimes and acts of destruction. In the Gibbons family, you witness the range from denial to destruction. The father, mother and children incarnate different reactions, as characters do on stage in the great tragedies… Theirs, arguably, is a potted black history of those times... Their

[52] Brogan and Teale, 'July 1977. Playground', p. 7.

> personal tragedy flashes blinding light on the political and social landscape of the time and of post-war immigration.[53]

Alibhai Brown is careful to note that this is a dual tale of private grief and public politics and suggests that one needs 'bifocal vision' to understand the twins' story.[54] Alibhai Brown's framing of the twins as paradigmatic or emblematic in ways also underscores De Nooy's earlier concern regarding the tendency to culturally read twins as metaphor. However, the point is not to diminish the unquestionably vital role of racism for this tale of desperate social isolation; rather I am suggesting that by placing this so front and centre, alongside the explanatory mechanisms noted above, one casts the twins in a neat, digestible form without agency or nuance. The logic of both the play and its framing, argues *this is why* in some unhelpful manners.

One sees this explanatory structure echoed again at the play's conclusion. The twin's arson is dramaturgically framed as a direct consequence of Kennedy's influence: his burning of their diaries forms a visual precursor of their final act of fire: '*They toss them* [Barbie's outfits] *onto the pyre as* JUNE *throws vodka onto the flames*.'[55] Again there is some truth to this but once again it positions the twins as passive victims in their own all too easily explainable tale. Furthermore, by changing the location of the twins actual arson to their secondary school, Brogan and Teale amplify the causal narrative through a motif of (erroneous) revenge: 'We've burned down Sir Thomas Picton Secondary Modern'.[56] The dramaturgy and extra-theatrical framing thus serve to subtitle the twins' silence with a clear message: racist and sexual violence caused their mutism and crimes. And perhaps it did. Or perhaps it was just their shyness, or schizophrenia, or psychopathy, or Jennifer's supernatural forces. However, focussing on why they 'did it' absolves us of the question of why we as a society could not hold their experiences more safely or humanely. We become, in this way, the mother from Grimm's tale hammering an arm we cannot or will not grasp until it is back out of sight.

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[53] Yasmin Alibhai Brown, 'Welcome Home', preface to *Speechless*, p. np.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Brogan and Teale, 'Binoculars', p. 61.
[56] Ibid. The twins did set fire to a number of schools, colleges, and civic buildings. However, as far as I am aware they did not set fire to their own secondary school.

The final explanatory note that the play strikes is around the question of trauma – a familiar figure in mute stories. As Sara R. Horowitz writes in relation to holocaust fiction: 'In survivor writing the trope of muteness functions as an index of trauma, which both compels and disables testimony.'[57] The bullying, the socio-political landscape, and Kennedy's raping of the twins are understood through a prism of trauma that translates their silences into a register of unsayability.[58] For example, the celebratory hoots of Gloria Gibbons at Lady Di's wedding dress pearls is carefully juxtaposed with the bleak sexual violence of Kennedy's abuse of the twins in order to underscore the tragic and unwitnessed affliction of June and Jennifer's situation. Again, the twins, like the Grimm's arm, tacitly call out to be witnessed but their voices are buried alive:

> GLORIA Here she come! Here she come! Out onto the balcony of Buckingham Palace! Oh my goodness.
>
> …
>
> *While* GLORIA *speaks,* KENNEDY *climbs on top of* JENNIFER *and shags her.*
>
> JUNE *watches, paralysed with rage and jealousy.*
>
> KENNEDY *cums and climbs off.*
>
> *The* TWINS fight.[59]

However, here again the play abolishes silence. Horowitz discusses how far mutism invites us to think about what has been omitted and censored. *Speechless* fills the silence with causal noise and narrative. The secret verbiage is made to disclose their story amidst a landscape of violent social dispossession. However, June and Jennifer were not only not heard because they did not speak; they were not heard because we did not find a way to listen or to sit kindly with their silence. In her discussion of Ariel Dorfmann's *Death and the Maiden* and with respect to listening to pain, Caruth

[57] Sara R Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (New York: SUNY, 1997), P. 30.
[58] While some may argue that the twins consent to Kennedy's sexual demands, I would contend that the twins are coerced into sex in ways that complicate notions of consent.
[59] Brogan and Teale, 'Binoculars', p. 58.

argues that '*in the performance of the very act of listening*' we pass on 'the evidence of an event that can no longer be reduced to the simple referent of any language.'[60] Caruth, here, underscores both how far listening exceeds language and is not a singular action or experience. It is the contention of this chapter then that the collapsing of their silence into voice and narrative explanation in *Speechless* fails to engage with the fundamental challenge that silence poses to language. Silence brings into question language's very capacity for meaning-making. Silence marks a radical rejection of established codes of social value and understanding insofar as it troubles the fundaments of our sense-making capacities. Indeed, it brings into doubt – marked by death as it is –the essential value of acts of social participation. June and Jennifer's radical non-participation, therefore, corrodes the stability and values of the strategies and structures of ordinary communication and normalcy. Non-participation is intolerable in part because it exposes the absurdity of joining in. Non-participation, like suicide, can be felt as an affront because it tacitly asks: what on earth are we doing? And why on earth are we doing it? Again this is not to 'read' the twins' gesture of silence as a deliberate act of political resistance or suicidal ideation; rather it is simply to attempt to redirect the traffic from examining why they did not speak and towards why we could not listen. In short, I propose that making the silent twins speak *Speechless* risks further deadening our capacity to empathetically embrace non-normative experience.

What are you trying to say?

In one of the early scenes of the play one hears the following exchange:

GLORIA See them there.

Standing amongst all the other children in the class. Eleven, twelve, thirteen, them always the only coloured children in the picture.

[…]

Me look at the photographs.

[60] Caruth, p. 71. Emphasis original.

Each year it getting worse.

Them favour ghost while the other children thrive.

HEADMISTRESS I'm sorry, Mrs Gibbons, but I'm not sure what you're trying to say.[61]

The play here, and elsewhere, is keenly alive to the numerous involuntary acts of non-participation that shape the girls' lives. The twins do not simply opt out; they are opted out. Their multiple social exclusions on the grounds of race, gender, silence, age, class, and to a certain extent twin-hood, are made luminous in the play. Moreover, from our privileged theatrical vantage point an audience is able to lean into the muteness and thereby hear its melancholic refrains of ordinary voices lost in extraordinary silence. *Speechless* also captures the claustrophobia of their quick-sand intimacy through its inventive staging that confines the actors in closeted spaces that collapse into one another. However, the compression and adaptation of Wallace's biography creates a set of theatrical impressions that repressions that I suggest are detrimental to the telling of this tale. It is the central argument of this chapter that *Speechless*, in its desire to give voice and understand the silence, re-mutes June and Jennifer. Its causal dramaturgy, deployment of voice-over, positioning of its audience, and deliberate foregrounding of pertinent social politics cumulatively fill in all the blanks and thereby explain away the void. In so doing the play places no demands on its audience to examine how far the manners in which they are being asked to listen might replicate the strategies of listening and communication that led to June and Jennifer tumbling through twelve years in Broadmoor. In these ways *Speechless* reaffirms the values of normative social participation and forgets to consider the radical value and meaning of opting out.

The purpose of these pages is to not to exonerate June and Jennifer; nor is it to glorify or romanticise their silence. I am concerned instead, to examine representations of their lives in order to ask how we as a society listen, and thereby consider what structures and conditions audibility. The chapter argues that their silence challenges us to examine to embedded values and hierarchies

[61] Brogan and Teale, 'The Headteacher's Office', p. 9.

of participation. Indeed, rather than understanding them as simply not participating, I propose that we need to re-evaluate the political terms of social participation. June and Jennifer's profound vocal non-participation was, in many ways, a personal catastrophe for each of them. However, rather than burrowing further into the dominant individualised psychological examination of *why* they did not talk to most people, the challenge is to think about *how* we might create expanded models of communication that can embrace alterity. The catastrophic consequences sprang forth not only because they were silent but because they were silenced. Theatre' capacity to curve one's perceptions around hard edges marks its political capacity. To translate silence back into voice and difference into sameness thus re-establishes a constraining grid-system of orthodox thinking. In this way audiences fail to look round corners or hear the noise in silence. By sustaining the dominant structures of listening and understanding *Speechless* missed an opportunity to allow an audience to participate in a reimagining of perceptual and political realities. Indeed, by leaving an audience bonded to an ordinary contract of listening we mute the possibility of alternative dialogues. This chapter suggests that it is only by hearing 'non-participation' on its own terms that can we begin to interrogate the political conditions and values of opting in.

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