

**The Body in Contemporary Performance:  
a comparative and personal response to Nigel Jamieson's  
*Honour Bound* and Version 1.0's *Wages of Spin***

by  
**Tessa Needham**

Many contemporary performances were staged throughout Sydney in 2006. This paper concentrates on two of these that I saw in close succession: Nigel Jamieson's *Honour Bound*, which I saw at the Sydney Opera House on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, and Version 1.0's *Wages of Spin*, at Performance Space on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August. The temporal proximity of these performances is significant because it meant unavoidable comparison between the two. However, it wasn't just their timing that invited comparison. They both dealt with similar political subjects and production techniques. One, however, affected me much more emotionally and physically than the other. This paper interrogates the similarities and differences between the two works, and uses a personal response to explore how my emotional reaction influenced my reception of the pieces' subject matter. I am taking my cue for this from Susan Kozel's understanding that:

Adopting an embodied perspective to understand post-linear performance recognizes that the bedrock of live performance is the body, and more specifically, the bodies of the audience in the act of deciphering, assimilating, or enjoying the experience provided by the alchemy of bodies and technologies 'onstage' (2000: 259).

***Honour Bound:***

*An impersonal steel cage stands imposingly on the stage. Its gridlines are stark, definite and uncompromising. Six performers enter this cage and systematically dress themselves in six neatly laid-out sets of orange jumpsuits, white socks, white sneakers, and black hoods. A performer is set spinning in the air, and I am simultaneously spun into this intensely physical work. The work incessantly demands my visceral involvement. I feel my body heavily implicated and involved. My breathing quickens as the performers fly through the air, and curls in torture as they slide along the floor. They are nameless, they are characterless, they are voiceless. They could be anybody, they could be everybody. They could be me.*

*Another moment. A performer runs up the scrolling text of the Geneva Convention, only to repeatedly fall back, Sisyphus-like, to the stage. Each crash reverberates through me, and I feel the seesaw of frustration and hope. The insistent, haunting and beautiful score resonates within my body, and my emotions swell. These are bodies in stress, trembling, thrown around in despair. Bodies whose characterisations flow seamlessly, and significantly, between the interrogator and the interrogated. Floodlights sweep upwards, momentarily blinding me, implicating me as the interrogated.*



Figure 1: Image of an *Honour Bound* performer (Craven, 2006)

*The prisoners eventually become worn down, ending up stripped of clothing. Their naked, hooded and vulnerable bodies mirror those familiar images of Abu Ghraib's political prisoners, which are projected behind them. Familiar images, yes, but never have I felt such a physical, emotional involvement in them as I feel right now, with these live bodies in front of me. History collapses onto the stage and I am reeling and disorientated. I feel as though I am also stripped naked, ripped raw with emotion, empathy, horror.*<sup>1</sup>

*Honour Bound* was a dance piece staged as part of the "adventures in the dark" program at the Opera House Studio. It was directed by Nigel Jamieson and choreographed by Garry Stewart, and was based on the reported experiences of alleged Australian terrorist David Hicks in the Guantanamo Bay detainment camp in Cuba. Featuring six performers dressed in orange boiler suits, and a set comprised of a large cage, the piece used highly physical movement, including aerial work. The piece used interviews with Hick's father and stepmother, along with various documents relating to the

Guantanamo Bay facility, as its source material. As Jamieson said: 'These documents can be quite dry reading so we wanted to find a way of presenting these principles in a living way' (Phillips, 2006). Video projections and voice-overs outlined these materials somewhat literally, however the performers themselves were mute. Suspended on wires, they were flung around the cage in a representation of the experience of an inmate.

### ***Wages of Spin:***



Figure 2: Image of *Wages of Spin* opening scene (from Iaccarino, 2006)

*Danger is imminent. A hooded performer, being directed to walk along a plank of wood, is stepping through a minefield of upturned nails. A bland voice tells him "foot up, left, left... toe down, shuffle forward... shuffle forward... heel down," and the tension in the room is palpable. The performer is often just standing on one foot, slightly wobbling. What happens if he loses his balance, if he has to put his foot down quickly? A camera, wheeled along just inches from the performer's feet, projects a large image of them onto the screen at the back of the stage. I am forced to watch this horror up close, this slow-motion car crash that seems to have no end. I find my breath stuck, as my fixed stare moves between the screen and the performer. Simultaneously, another performer begins to question the first about the semantics of interrogation. I feel myself willing him not to step on a nail, willing the talking*

*performer to stop distracting him. I have walked right into this, right into the middle. The middle of danger and immediacy. The middle of a body in distress.*

*Another moment. A camera is pointed at the audience, and our images projected onto a giant screen. A performer addresses the projected audience, rather than the live audience. I feel a bodily disjointedness, watching myself being watched. Performers run on the spot while delivering lines, and their growing exhaustion feeds my own. In this race, the truth never catches up to the spin.*

*By the end of the performance, I am somewhat numb from an overwhelming amount of facts, figures and evidence. Although these facts are shocking, I have become somewhat desensitised to them, and need the bodily connection to bring them home.<sup>2</sup>*

*Wages of Spin* was a theatrical performance staged initially in 2005, and re-staged this year, at the Performance Space in Redfern. It was devised by Version 1.0, a Sydney-based performance group. The piece was a 'performative enquiry into the [2003] Iraq war,' and used a wide range of source materials to highlight the lies, spin and half-truths told by politicians when going to war. It interrogated Australia's engagement with the war, and contrasted the war with other cultural events and personalities. Video also featured heavily in this piece, as it was staged to look like the taping of a television show. It included a stationary bank of monitors, some portable monitors and a large projection screen. Three performers became a wide variety of famous and not-so-famous people, in a verbatim-style piece.

This paper looks at why these two performances, which had similar themes and stylistic elements, had such different impacts on me. I felt much more connected, bodily and emotionally, to *Honour Bound*, and it seems that the reason for the different reception was in the use of the body. Bodies were treated differently in each performance. In *Honour Bound*, the body was in a central position as the location of pain and torture. Not only did we see bodies writhing and flying around the space, but also much of the projected and spoken text was about the implication of the body in human rights. There were moments in *Wages of Spin* in which the body was implicated as a location for emotion, however the performance was overwhelmingly cerebral, concentrating largely on facts and figures, as well as verbal storytelling. For me, the more visceral storytelling mode of *Honour Bound* was far more effective in the piece's resonance, and therefore its impact was more profound. Peta Tait notes that:

An emotional aesthetic in theatre is contingent ... not just on acting the emotions of a performing 'body-text,' but also on its reception by the spectator's bodily knowledges, and both are contingent on cultural difference and previous exposure to variable social performances of emotions (2002: 154).

Cultural difference and prior experience is therefore integral to this study, as I am certain that my life experiences and education have set me up in a certain way to receive this material. This difference is precisely the reason I am adopting a personal approach for this study, to make transparent the cultural bias and disposition that I have brought to each performance.

Others have commented on the physicality of these specific pieces. Nigel Jamieson spoke at length on his decision to foreground the physicality of *Honour Bound*, saying that they were 'exploring the experiences of human beings pushed to the very limits of human endurance and in a sense asking our performers to find a way of making a parallel journey themselves' (Sydney Opera House, 2006). He also said that the first image he had for the performance was visualising Hicks as a 'human figure spinning and turning in a void' (Marks, 2006), and that the primary objective for the production was to make their discoveries about Guantanamo 'more visceral than what it is when reported in the media' (Phillips, 2006). Terry Hicks, talking about his willingness to collaborate on the project, noted that artists 'can get the message out in a very physical way' (Sydney Opera House, 2006), bringing to mind his own physical protest over his son's detainment, where he locked himself in a wire cage on a New York street. Many reviewers also commented on the use of the body, in particular remarking on the shocking and exhilarating 'extreme physical language' (Litson, 2006) of the work.<sup>3</sup> Even Senator Andrew Bartlett, in his online weblog (2006), commented that *Honour Bound* 'humanises rather than politicises the situation.' Many reviewers also mentioned the image of the performer running up the text of the Geneva Convention, one saying that the moment is 'one of the most impressive marriages of visuals and human movement you're likely to see' (Anonymous, 2006).<sup>4</sup>

The physical is not discussed to nearly the same extent in reviews of *Wages of Spin*. Instead, commentators tended to focus more on the research base of the work, as well as the prevalence of the spoken word. Version 1.0 (2006) state that the piece has a 'meticulously researched script,' and that one of the work's strengths is its 'clever re-contextualisation of official public documents, television interviews and even raves from columnists and bloggers.' Many classified it as 'research based political theatre' (Fisher, 2006), and talked about words and images dominating the performance (Bartlett, 2006; "eeyore," 2006). The use of technology was also mentioned, sometimes when it related to affect. For instance, one reviewer comments on 'a heightened sense of the physical anguish of torture through intrusive camera angles' (Woodhead, 2006), and another said: 'the production assaults the unsuspecting audience with aural and visual imagery' ("eeyore," 2006). Almost every reviewer mentioned the beginning of the performance as a standout moment, for instance saying that it utilises 'a sort of abstract physicalisation' (Murphy, 2006), and that 'Hill's tortuous hair-splitting is accompanied by an equally disturbing visual analogue' (Woodhead, 2006).

An element that is of interest to me here is the differing modes of political criticism offered by the two performances. *Honour Bound* offered criticism of David Hicks' detention through a physical representation of his situation. Jamieson deliberately did not want to openly criticise the Howard government,

for instance, because he felt that a more powerful statement was to show in a very physical way the experience of being imprisoned and tortured. In contrast, *Wages of Spin* employed a more overt mode of critique, using a combination of recreated speeches and interviews, and personal storytelling of the human effects. Of course, this is a performative style choice, however it is also indicative of the degree of literal representation of political issues.

Both performances used projected images to some extent. *Honour Bound* projected filmed interviews with David Hicks' father and stepmother, as well as text from political documents, pictures of David, a tour through the family home, and other abstract patterns. *Wages of Spin*'s main projection showed close-ups of certain parts of the action, the television-style display of performed interviews, previously taped *vox pop* footage, and other war-related images and videos. On this level, the performances were quite similar, as they showed a variety of material relating to the subject matter. The interaction between the projected images and the performers' bodies differed, though. In *Honour Bound*, the performers and projection were often intertwined: performers' bodies running across, crashing into, and mirroring the projected images. In *Wages of Spin*, the projection was addressed more directly, almost as another character in the performance. Sometimes a performer would talk to the projection, or it became a mock-up current affairs program, superimposed with spinning logo, or the over-sized projected image of feet stepping over nails. It could be said, that *Honour Bound*'s integration of the projection was more organic, and often more ambiguous than that of *Wages of Spin*.

The costuming and positioning of bodies in the performances is also noteworthy. In *Honour Bound*, the performers were costumed as prisoners, in the orange boiler suits now synonymous with the Guantanamo Bay facility. Version 1.0, however, chose to costume the *Wages of Spin* performers in military camouflage. This difference in costumes is significant. In *Honour Bound*, the prisoner costumes signified victims, and therefore encouraged a sympathetic reading from the audience. In contrast, the military uniforms of the *Wages of Spin* performers signified the perpetrators of violence, and therefore seemed to encourage an adverse perception. Interestingly, though, these costumes were not indicative of the characterisations for the entire length of the performances. While at some times, *the Honour Bound* performers were prisoners, they had a plasticity that meant they could also become guards, or other characters. Likewise, the performers in *Wages of Spin* were not always cast as military, or even political, characters. While these characters were present, there were also many others, including celebrities and victims.

The costumed bodies in both performances, no matter which role they were playing, threw themselves in and out of danger. In *Honour Bound*, it seemed that the danger was more tangible, more immediate and certainly more affecting. The bodies were often in agony, incredibly vulnerable or terrifying. The positioning of bodies in *Wages of Spin* was slightly different, as spoken dialogue was also used to convey the story. Much of the time, the body was positioned as a speaking one, often standing or sitting in one place. The focus of the provocation of anger in the piece therefore seemed to be literal, as the

content relied on text to carry its message. However, there were moments of bodily danger in which my own body was also affected. Especially clear in my memory are the moments of running on the spot, together but isolated, and the initial interrogation scene. However, even in these moments, words were still important, as they seemed to add another dimension of danger and bafflement. For me, the moments when the performing bodies were in immediate danger were the most interesting, affective and emotional. In these moments, I empathised. I *became* them. I could feel the tension in my own body, holding my breath, curling my toes, stiffening my neck. Sometimes they moved me to tears, and sometimes to anger. Both of these emotions, I believe, are somewhat social, and conducive to transformation.

All of these differences may seem quite trivial, and could largely be put down to aesthetic performative choices, but they were integral to my reception and affective transformation as an audience member. Far more of *Honour Bound* has lingered in my body memory than *Wages of Spin*, and as a result I feel more transformed by the experience of *Honour Bound*. The high degree of stress and emotion that was embodied by the performers had an immense impact on me. Sometimes I can still feel the memory of that particular performance in my body, resonating with its social context. Not only did my body feel physically transformed while experiencing the performance, for instance holding my breath and stiffening my body, but also this affective transformation resulted in the transformation of my attitudes towards the issues of the piece. For me, this transformation is true of *Honour Bound* far more so in general than *Wages of Spin*. As one reviewer said about *Honour Bound*, 'it's the way [it is] executed that will resonate most' (Anonymous, 2006). My experience of those emotions in relation to the piece's content has clarified Peta Tait's (2002) notion of the 'immense social power' of emotions in the theatre, and relates to notions of the social body, and 'body politic.' The power I felt as my body experienced the piece was immense, and directly related to my reception of the issues of the performance. This bodily affect was integral to my engagement with *Honour Bound*, and therefore had a far greater impact on its potential to transform my attitudes about the David Hicks and Guantanamo Bay issue. Therefore, looking towards the use of the body in contemporary performance is valuable in understanding transformation through such performance.

... I am reeling and disorientated... stripped naked, ripped raw with emotion, empathy, horror...<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Much of this text was originally published as a review, see Needham (2006a).

<sup>2</sup> Much of this text was originally published as a review, see Needham (2006b).

<sup>3</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed in Higgins (2006), Malloch (2006) and Debelle (2006), among others.

<sup>4</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed in Phillips (2006) and McCallum.

<sup>5</sup> From Needham (2006a).



---

## References

- "Eeyore" (2006) Putting A Spin On Spin. M/C Reviews. <http://reviews.media-culture.org.au/article.php?sid=1586>
- Anonymous (2006) Honour Bound (Review). Three D World. <http://www.threedworld.com.au/content/view/1695/57>
- Bartlett, Andrew (2006) The Bartlett Diaries. [www.andrewbartlett.com/blog](http://www.andrewbartlett.com/blog)
- Craven, Adam (2006) Honour Bound. Sydney Morning Herald. <http://www.threedworld.com.au/content/view/1695/57>
- Debelle, Penelope (2006) Isolation That Knows No Bounds. The Age. [www.theage.com.au/news/arts/isolation-that-knows-no-bounds/2006/09/11/1157826873707.html](http://www.theage.com.au/news/arts/isolation-that-knows-no-bounds/2006/09/11/1157826873707.html)
- Fisher, Josephine (2006) The Wages Of Spin (Review). Melbourne Stage Online. [www.melbournestage.com.au/ms1/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=330&Itemid=](http://www.melbournestage.com.au/ms1/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=330&Itemid=)
- Higgins, Jo (2006) Honour Bound (Review). The Program. [www.theprogram.net.au/reviewsSub.asp?id=3942&state=1](http://www.theprogram.net.au/reviewsSub.asp?id=3942&state=1)
- Iaccarino, Clare (2006) The Wages Of Spin (Preview). Sydney Morning Herald. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts-reviews/the-wages-of-spin/2006/08/07/1154802788996.html>
- Kozel, Susan (2000) 'Introduction To Part Eight: Post-Linearity And Gendered Performance Practice.' In Goodman, L. & De Gay, J. (Eds.) Routledge Reader In Politics And Performance. London, Routledge.
- Litson, Jo. (2006) Where All The World Is A Cage. The Australian. [www.theaustralian.news.com.au/wireless/story/0,8262,8-19933373,00.html](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/wireless/story/0,8262,8-19933373,00.html)
- Malloch, Lachlan (2006) The Humanising Of David Hicks. Green Left Weekly. [www.greenleft.org.au/back/2006/679/679p26b.htm](http://www.greenleft.org.au/back/2006/679/679p26b.htm)
- Marks, Kathy (2006) Sydney Confronts 'Barbarism' Of Guantanamo. The Independent. <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/australasia/article1214510.ece>
- McCallum, John (2006). Hicks's jail tale triggers passionate response. The Australian. <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20037479-5001562,00.html>
- Murphy, Jess (2006) The Wages Of Spin (Review). Vibewire. [www.vibewire.net/3/sstrangio/life/theatre\\_reviews/2006/sep/10/6786/melbourne\\_wages\\_of\\_spin](http://www.vibewire.net/3/sstrangio/life/theatre_reviews/2006/sep/10/6786/melbourne_wages_of_spin)
- Needham, Tessa (2006a) Honour Bound (Review). Sydney Stage Online. <http://www.sydneystage.com.au/content/view/213/>
- Needham, Tessa (2006b) Wages Of Spin (Review). Sydney Stage Online. <http://www.sydneystage.com.au/content/view/226/36/>
- Phillips, Richard (2006) Honour Bound Director Nigel Jamieson Speaks With WSWS. World Socialist Web Site. [www.wsws.org/articles/2006/aug2006/njam-123.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/aug2006/njam-123.shtml)
- Sydney Opera House (2006) Honour Bound Programme Notes.



---

Tait, Peta (2002) *Performing Emotions: Gender, Bodies, Spaces*, in *Chekhov's Drama And Stanislavski's Theatre*, Aldershot ; Burlington Vt., Ashgate.

Version 1.0 (2006) *The Wages Of Spin* (Description).

<http://www.versiononepointzero.com/performances/2006.asp#spin>

Woodhead, Cameron (2006) *The Wages Of Spin* (Review). *The Age*.

[www.theage.com.au/news/arts-reviews/the-wages-of-spin/2006/09/04/1157222042118.html](http://www.theage.com.au/news/arts-reviews/the-wages-of-spin/2006/09/04/1157222042118.html)

## **Tessa Needham**

Tessa Needham completed Bachelor of Arts (Theatre Theory and Practice) and Bachelor of Performance, Theory and Practice (Honours) degrees at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. While undertaking these courses she participated in various student productions, including *Awaiting Gravity*, a one-woman show she wrote, directed and performed in 2003. Tessa is currently researching for a Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Western Sydney, exploring the phenomenon of projection as an approach to discuss the transformative potential of provocative performance. A major part of her thesis is the performance project *Bodily*, a solo work she produced in 2006.