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Making Sense: Reading the Production Notes of *Dark Things*

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This essay seeks to lay out the process that went into the making of Dark Things, *which I co-directed with Deepan Sivaraman based on Ari Sitas's oratorio on the Silk Road, by repurposing the production notes of the performance, which opened in Delhi on 18 April 2018 at the Ambedkar University Delhi and later played at the International Festival of Kerala in January 2019. Both the method and the form of* Dark Things, *I suggest, were a collaboration. Collaboration as a method intimates collective creation, usually by means of improvisation, where authorship is distributed between theatre-makers (actors, scenographers, musicians) and materials (objects, site, landscape). Collaboration as form intimates that the performance's explicit grammar has been shaped by a sensuous give-and-take between the practitioner and the material. In this essay, I ask, from my perspective as a theatre-maker, how handling actual objects and tools obviously leaves an imprint on the performance, scenography, dramaturgy and* mise en scène. *In writing this article, I have retained the stylistic features of production notes – their provisionality and incompleteness; their sliding timescale; their looking forward to work that is to be done and backwards at work already done, marking failures, solutions and openings.*

Production notes

The processes of play-making may generate all kinds of performance artifacts[1] – prompts, notes and diagrams, among other things – that travel with the performance, but two texts that conventionally accompany the process are production notes (books) and what is called the prompt copy (or book). The prompt copy is a record of all the decisions taken to make the staging possible; it is used to cue performance and thereafter may also be used for staging a revival. Production notes, by comparison, are fluid, messy even, being a written log of exercises, improvisations and tryouts attempted during rehearsals. They are sites of praxis – of failing and recouping, imaginings and experiences – that help develop the remit of the performance, its method and form.

The *method* and the *form* of *Dark Things*, a performance I co-directed with Deepan Sivaraman in 2018 at the Ambedkar University in New Delhi and which travelled to the International Theatre Festival in Kerala in 2019, were a collaboration. Collaboration as *method* intimates collective creation, usually by means of improvisation, where authorship is distributed between theatre-makers (actors, scenographers, musicians) and materials (objects, site, landscape). Collaboration as *form* intimates that the performance's explicit grammar has been shaped by a sensuous give-and-take between the practitioner and the material. The performance happens, or materializes,

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in the 'force field' of materials[2] – it has no prior blueprint. There is one governing convention with regard to material, though: that the objects, tools or machinery used in the performance are identical or correspond to those used in *real* life, and that these are not *made* for the stage or of stage material. 'Pretend' is, as we know, a word from the lexicon of acting in use even today, by which the actor pretends to heft a heavy case when the case is empty; pretends to drink a glass of water when the glass has no water; pretends to work a machine when the machine is constructed with substitute material such as wood, fiberglass, plastic, cardboard and so on which, when properly clad, looks like the real thing. This is usually done to facilitate neater action with no danger of accidental spills or splutters or strained backs, and to facilitate a clean and quick way of clearing stage props for a scene change. I will not annotate the history of this acting practice here, but since the 1970s task-based theatre has repudiated this protocol and sought to focus on *actual* doing where performers need to handle, manipulate, *work* and be *complicit* with real material, including industrial-scale action such as Meyerhold sought to stage in his work.

Handling actual objects and tools obviously leaves an imprint on the performance, scenography, dramaturgy and *mise en scène*. In this article, I ask how this kind of material handling affects the performers, and I enumerate questions about action and actioning as conceptualized and categorized by acting grammars. Questions of *being* onstage thus also come up, often unexpectedly, and bring with them, as corollary, questions of subjectivity and subjecthood, ensemble and group action.

I have retained the stylistic features of production notes here – their provisionality and incompleteness; their sliding timescale; their looking forward to work that is to be done and backwards at work already done, marking failures, solutions and openings. Titles and headings are also drawn from the notes and are work-words that functioned as provocations for exercises and improvisations.

Conditions of performance

Text

Ari Sitas's oratorio on the Silk Route – *Notes for an Oratorio on Small Things That Fall (Like a Screw in the Night)*[3] – made up the dramaturgical text of *Dark Things*. In the printed version of the text, Sitas says that the *Notes* emerged as

> an outrage against the daily encounter with both the ugliness and wonder of our material and tactile worlds. They are a poetic, creative and sociological take on our contemporary Silk Roads and Hazmat highways – in a world of Daisy Cutter bombs and gadgets, refugee camps and refuse … The journey reconstructs a *via dolorosa* through the excesses and forms of exploitation, discrimination and suffering.[4]

The text had been discussed over email and via readings before we went into production work. The initial readings and discussions were between Ari Sitas, Sumangala Damodaran,[5] Deepan Sivaraman[6] and myself at the Ambedkar University, Delhi. Purav Goswami[7] joined us in July 2017 as the dramaturge to work on restructuring Sitas's text into eight scenes by reconfiguring textual imagery and finding conjunctures.

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This dramaturgical text, however, was fully rematerialized collaboratively by a group composed of persons of different competencies and commitments. There were student actors who had opted for an elective course on music theatre in the winter semester of 2018 at Ambedkar University with little or no stage experience; the musicians Reza Khota and Chandran V led by Sumangala Damodaran,[8] who have years of professional and pedagogical experience and who performed live at the show; Deepan Sivaraman as scenographer; and he and I as co-directors, also with long years of theatre-making and pedagogical experience. The expectations of the theatre-making processes varied, ranging from the length of time needed for rehearsals, the duration of tea breaks and the slots allocated for improvisation; to the meaning of fun, discipline, skill, rigour, and *work*; to how much labour is needed to achieve an acceptably precise level of executing action, speech or song; to how amateur student actors are to dialogue with professional artists, with both sets of makers in fact troubling each other's working habits. The inconsistencies within the group were productive because they were unpredictable and threw up provocations in the rehearsals that required continual adjustment and dialogue.

Improvisations for *Dark Things* began in the intense cold of January 2018 in Delhi, in a disused tennis court on the campus of Ambedkar University that had been turned into a parking lot, and ended in the intense heat of April, when the show opened to the public.

In Sitas's words, spoken during rehearsal, the text seeks to look at the 'underbelly' of the Silk Road.[9] Since it talks of hammers, hangmen's nooses, rafts, screws, bones, silks, pegs, ropes, tents, war sites, refugee camps and sewer lines – objects, sites and materials with the capacity to impact us and our worlds in tactile and corporeal ways – was the underbelly of the Silk Road the labour *practices* that laid the road in the first place?

Site

Labour practices of handling objects, materials and machinery mentioned in the text, in order to produce, however allegorically, the Silk Road's expanding impact over land and sea required a *site* that could accommodate such production. Staging this would also annotate the meaning of *production* by materializing in concrete terms that the object produces the actor as much as the actor produces the object.

As *Dark Things* was part of the course work in the School of Culture and Creative Expressions at Ambedkar University, the site chosen was located at the university's Kashmere Gate (north Delhi) campus. Ambedkar University shares this campus with the Indira Gandhi Delhi Technical University for Women (IGDTUW). The campus itself is dotted with pre-colonial and colonial buildings as well as standard office and classroom blocks, including barrack-style multipurpose structures constructed in large numbers by the Public Works Department (PWD) of the cities and towns of India, particularly in the 1990s. In the newer part of the Ambedkar University campus abutting the IGDTUW, Deepan Sivaraman marked a site that had distinct architectural features: a four-storey, 110-foot classroom building on one side and a barrack-like structure on the other, forming an L. The barracks had tin roofing and a terrace on which was installed a huge mobile-phone tower that served the campus.

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The buildings were separated by a metalled road that divided at a T-junction, going left towards and past the classroom block and right towards a hostel block under repair. The hostel block backed the audience seating. Within the L formed by the two buildings was the playing space, seventy feet long and sixty feet wide: a disused tennis court turned into a parking lot. So, in terms of geometric layout, the audience sat facing a 110-foot classroom building that lay along the road that divided at a T junction; the barracks were on the right (stage left) of the audience; and a construction site with chutes, pulleys, bricks and mortar was at the back of the seating gallery.

The tin-roofed barracks called up the sense of a makeshift factory or sweatshop; rows of windows lit up from time to time with white florescent lights, enhancing that effect. A ticker tape rolled some lines from Sitas's text under a window. From a distance it looked like a factory schedule, but it read, *'I saw cattle herds darken the sun, mother. I saw people walking into the brightest nothing. What kind of a night is this?'*[10]

Metalled roads normally used by vehicles backing in and out of the parking lot were used by us for small trucks that carried the 'workers' to their shifts or fixers loading dinghies for a death ride on the sea. A crane which was used to reposition goods/objects also entered via one of these roads.

Collaboration as method

Improvisation and concept words

Schematically outlined, improvisations, which have a long history in theatre-making, are collaborative in nature and often rely on group work, attempting therefore a more democratic process of play-making. They work with spontaneity, play and chance, hoping to evoke quick intuitive responses that defy set vocabularies and challenge the fallback skills of actors. They have the capacity to destabilize received wisdom about actorly tools of character building on the one hand and grand narratives on the other. They often function as a series of provocations, and may be driven, among other things, by word, image, object, sound – often actively seeking to alert the sensorium and bring it into *play*.

In *Dark Things* we sought to build improvisations around two concept words, *precarity* and *labour*, linked together by another, *material*, which occurs throughout Sitas's text. The hope was that these concept words, these abstractions, when connected rhizomatically, would find substantiation as emotions and objects, and induce both corporeal affects and effects as they were worked upon in performance. Would their local histories become manifest somehow as they were being materialized?

Precarity: a condition of uncertainty or insecurity: making home/leaving home/homelessness/migration/the foreigner/the long journey/war/dispossession. A condition that appears in several registers and with several valences in the text: the social circumstance of an uncertain future; the corporeal experience of extreme vulnerability, of bare and unsheltered life.

What object could materialize and substantiate the definition of precarity? And together with that, connect to the other concept word mentioned above, labour? The tent, it seemed to us.

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Finding action: (i) tent

FIG. 1A **Makeshift shelters. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

FIG. 1B **Settlements on the move. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

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FIG. 1C **A dinghy floating on water. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

Tents: makeshift shelters that house millions today: those displaced by wars and violence, climate disasters, hunger and unemployment, and urban rebuilds.

We began by handcrafting the tents, constructing them over several days. Bamboo splints and recycled plastic bags made up the basic shelter (Fig. 1A). Once made, it obligated a certain posture and stance: there was no option but to *crawl* in and *crouch*, as if waiting to be uprooted by a storm. When the time was up and the settlement had to be moved (Fig. 1B), the tents were flung into a heap – a pile of damaged objects that were no more than detritus. If held from the edges lengthwise and aligned, these plastic and bamboo tents adapted and became the hull of a skeletal ship or the edge of a dinghy floating on water (Fig. 1C), loaded with people waiting to land. Parenthetically, handcrafting objects was part of a process that referenced the systemic low-paid work that is a daily reality in many parts of the world, especially in the South.

Finding action: (ii) oil drum

Found oil drums, because of their shape, like exteriorized manholes, were channelled into the improvisation on sanitary workers, or scavengers, mentioned in the text: those who manually clear the sewer lines of urban India (even though putting people to the task of manual scavenging is illegal in India – banned in 1993 and made punishable in 2013). The oil drums were carried onto the performance area and spun around (Fig. 2A). They created a thunderous rumble on the concrete and then, while decelerating, a clatter. Before the actors lowered themselves into

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FIG. 2A **Oil drums as exteriorized manholes. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

FIG. 2B **Sanitation workers clean up after work. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

the drums and disappeared from sight, jerry cans of water were handed to them while another group of actors poured an oily black liquid on their heads. Once they were lidded over, a sound piece that cited deep drains, sewers, defecation, the

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flushing of waste and excreta, hawking and spitting summoned the above and the below of urban living.

As the actors came up from the drums, they were visible till their torsos; they soaped themselves, bathed and powdered their bodies with clouds of talcum (Fig. 2B). While they were cleaning up, a performer spoke aloud, verbatim, lines from an interview with a *safaikaramchari* (sanitation worker) conducted while researching/rehearsing the performance. Bathing in such a confined, tubular space brought to mind city slums with communal bathrooms often no bigger than large sewage pipes: perilous living in haphazard structures that are found in the richest centre of the megacity or its poorest periphery, which are indispensable for holding up its ever-expanding infrastructure. Having finished their baths, the actors heaved up the drums on to their backs and exited.

Manual labour, conduit, sanitation, dignity, excreta …

Finding action: (iii) screw

Fig. 3 **A large object for a small action. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

The Chinese worker–poet Xu Lizhi assembled the most desired object of the twenty-first century, the mobile phone. He also drafted the lines 'falling unnoticed, like a screw on a factory floor'. Xu Lizhi took his own life in 2014 and left behind a body of writing, especially his verses, that have been much discussed.

The minute action of putting in and taking out screws from small objects requires the precision of a horologist, the watchmaker of yesterday. To enable us to focus on the action called for a framing device that could draw attention to *the small action*: the small

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action needed a large theatricalized object to gain visibility. Deepan Sivaraman conceptualized a light box which looked as if it was soundproofed from the world, and had a worker on a desk inside it (Fig. 3). The worker concentrated on her work as the box was pushed down a track. On top of the box was a singer with a microphone singing Sitas's version of Xu Lizhi's text. The short journey on the track elongated the work – carrying on night and day, it would seem. The worker inside moved her fingers and wrists; we could see her doing this within the box that contained her.

A screw on the factory floor: small action, visibility, invisibility, transparent soundproofed box …

Finding action: (iv) hammer

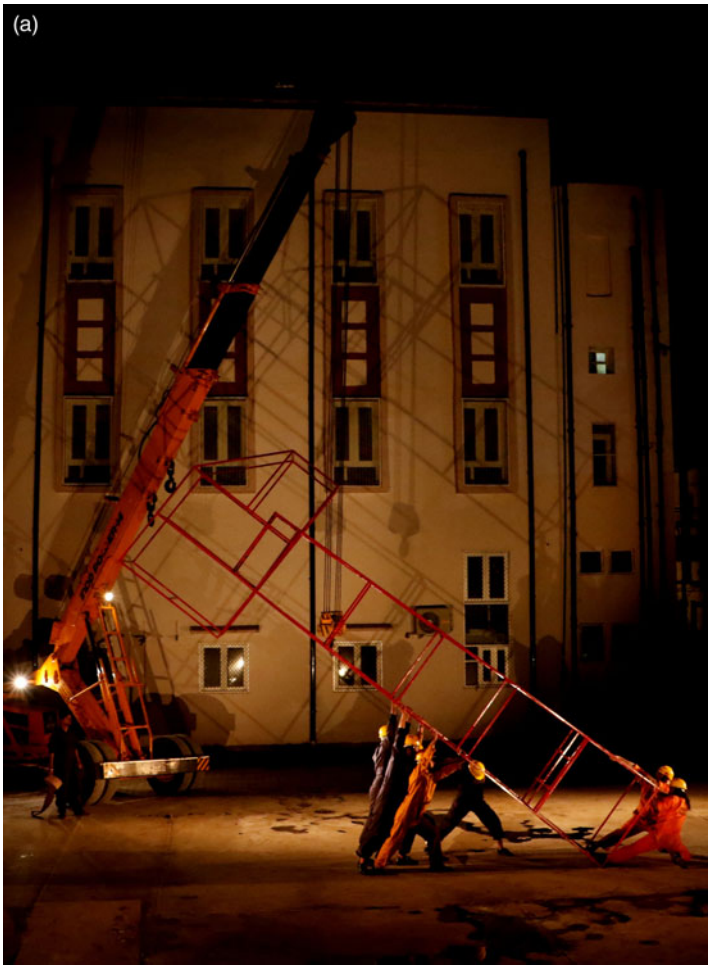

FIG. 4A, B **Hammer and crane. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

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Fig. 4A, B **Continued.**

Hammering houses, hammering factories, hammering up cities. Finding an action to handle the hammer began as it did for the tent, by crafting the object itself. The hammer has a long social history and to embody that Deepan Sivaraman decided to make it a massive, twenty-five-foot-long iron object (Fig. 4A, B). The performers worked with a welder as collective action and painted it red. The size of the hammer defined the nature of the action: ten performers needed to coordinate precisely with each other to lift it and move it, to balance it and angle it, to connect it to the arm of the crane for it to be lifted off the ground and repositioned. The performers unhooked the hammer, the crane reversed out of the performance area, and the hammer was hefted on the shoulders of the performers and carried away to the back of the buildings.

Manual labour, toil, scale, weight …

Collaboration as form

Reciprocity: Tactual, Tactility, Tacitness

Material (derived from or composed of matter): tent/oil drum/screw/hammer/truck/crane/bones/silk/hazmat suits/rope-making/hangman's noose/metal threads/body parts/rafts/dinghies/site/trade/manufacture/devastation/rebuild/raze/redeploy.

Assemblages, says Jane Bennett, are not 'governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group'[11]. If we understand assemblage to mean an *arrangement* where no one part governs the rest, then in *Dark Things* there is

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mention of building infrastructure at the scale of altering shorelines and mountainscapes for ports and roads at one end of the spectrum, and of cottage industries like the fabrication of the hangman's rope at the other; of collecting usable detritus from war fields – bones, steel wire, hazmat suits, to trading body parts for a place in refugee boats. In that sense no one body protocol can serve as the method for handling such a range of objects. Hefting, lifting, throwing, pushing, pulling, shifting gears, hitching, winching, tinkering with an electronic chip like a horologist – all these actions needed to be executed in the performance, and one governing choreographic grammar for the ensemble cast was not possible as no one material drove the story of the Silk Road. It was the material that made things happen: tighten the muscles, creak the bone and test the eyesight. Action instigated a story of object and material just as object instigated a story of action.

Dramaturgy

Purav Goswami's dramaturgy, developed over half a year, had to take into account the gigantic and the minute, the organic and the inorganic, the human and the non-human. He sought to create an arrangement that dwelt on a single plane. Drawing various dramaturgical elements onto the same plane does away with a certain hierarchy, yet, while no one materiality governs or supersedes another, the *particular* materiality of the fragment is differentiated and visible. Moreover, since these fragments are not connected in a *causal* manner with each other, their placement does not produce escalating or de-escalating structures of storytelling. It also does away with the imagery of background and foreground, figure and context. In terms of form, this created unexpected jolts and perplexities.

Ari Sitas, signalling towards the underbelly of today's Silk Roads, says that in the twenty-first century sufferings are 'unpredictably threaded'; they are independent eruptions and have no centre.[12] I evoke a snapshot of P. B. Richardson's geopolitical models here, where he suggests that the scale and complexity of the Belt and Road initiative can be understood better by laying out several formations with different lines of force.[13] For me, this snapshot helps to emphasize the dramaturgical energies that Purav Goswami attempted to draw from Sitas's text – its aspectual energies, as it were. Sitas himself describes the form, or the formation, of the text as crystal-like.[14] Richardson suggests that the varying scales of, and within, the Belt and Road initiative displace any overarching image of the initiative itself.[15] He then points to the polymorphous spatial discourse which emphasizes the push and pull of material forces in 'perpetual power struggles',[16] with territory as a *field* constantly *redrawn* by 'the production, circulation and accumulation of value, as well as by the relations of power accompanying the global reproduction of capitalism'.[17] He describes the 'unpredictable dynamism and energy from relational tensions between its scales, contexts, component parts, relationships to other assemblages, and competing types of knowledge' as an *arrangement* that is a counterimage to any composite view of the Belt and Road initiative.[18] Finally, he turns the compass to suggest that it would be troubling to imagine the Belt and Road initiative as an invocation of the ancient Silk Road, where connectivities were seen as restorative of dialogue and interchange. For Richardson the Belt and Road initiative is an

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amalgamation, a set of organizations which exist *concurrently*.[19] Figuratively, topography, empire, trade agreements, infrastructure, labour and capital appear in ever-widening frames to give a sense of the expanded, the vastly spread-out entanglements of the initiative. Purav Goswami's dramaturgy places the images and the textual fragments in ways that give a sense of the multifold geopolitical, almost planetary, imaginations of the Silk Road today: from labour practices to geological formations – hunting and gathering in war zones, handcrafting ropes and mobile phones, selling a kidney for a better job, as also altering mountain ranges and changing the course of rivers to lay tracks and build ports.

But however wide-ranging and disparate the materials and objects Purav Goswami puts on a single plane, they are not an *ad hoc* or accidental throwing together of serial heterogeneity. Nor are they the very opposite: 'pre-cut' pieces of a jigsaw puzzle subsumed within a larger picture. They are, in the dramaturgical plan, arranged to align, abut, adjoin, to make a pattern – as are stones in a wall.[20] They are a configuration where the parts are so arranged that they are both autonomous and self-standing, and connected to each other; the autonomy does not cast them into a formless disorder, nor does their connectivity fasten them to each other.

Arrangement

The joining methods of these fragments are many: sometimes sharp and jagged edges are made, sometimes porous borderlines, sometimes an approximate correspondence. Sound, transformational object, processions, drawing, alignments, are some of the means by which the arrangement was (materially) joined.

Drawing and alignment

Fig. 5a **Alignment. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

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FIG. 5B **A gurney bearing a skeleton. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

A line drawn with water on the concrete floor delineates the stern of a ship, in which refugees and trafficked humans are setting off on a precarious journey by boat. The water drawing will evaporate even as fixers haggle over which body part is worth what destination for a refugee (Fig. 5A).

In another fragment, a table with a typewriter and an illuminated lamp aligns with a gurney bearing a plastic skeleton laid on a bed of soil (Fig. 5B). Bone collector, excavator, archaeologist, gravedigger? Alignment invokes pacts or treaties, as also connections made bylines – of substances on the same path in an oblique relation to one another.

Procession and parade

A *procession*, a group action of a collection of people or animals or vehicles moving forward in more or less regular formation; an extended succession of persons or things – a *parade*. In the case of *Dark Things*, a parade or procession of refugees, about twenty in number, passes along the performance space (Fig. 6). They carry quotidian objects as well as fantastical ones. Jerry cans, cooking stoves, sacks of grain, clothing, documents; but also, laden on their backs, are impossible burdens, an old bookshelf, a finely laid dining table, a wall-sized family photograph – materials for survival. A miniature forest in a glass box pushed by two workers moves at right angles to the procession. Transversal connections? Memory? Travelling landscape? Home?

The performance ends with another 'parade'. (I put the word in quotes here because I am not certain it describes the last section precisely.) A line of performers enters, neither urgently nor idly, and rests against the wall facing the spectators. The

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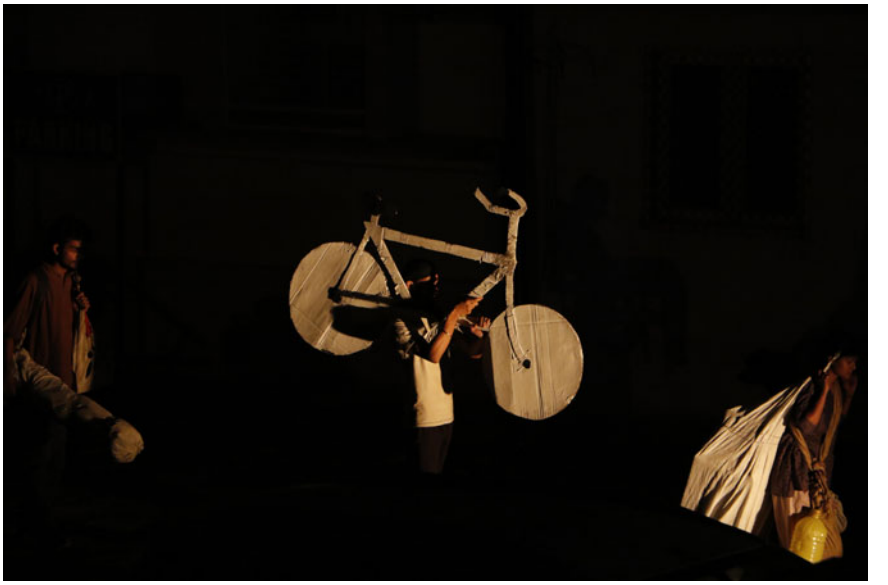

FIG. 6 **Refugee parade. Photograph by Ramkumar Kannadasan. Reproduced here with permission of the photographer.**

performers' eyes level with those of the spectators. There is no aggression, challenge, reproach or abjection in the gaze. It is neutral. Is it, perhaps, a tea break or an intermission – and in a while will the performance continue? Or have we come to the end of today's work? While this is an ending of some sort, I suggest that it is not a closure; it is instead a form of dispersal, a redistribution of energies. The siren could sound again. And it probably will.

Sightlines

Blurring

This last section involves a change in perspective. Whereas until now I have presented the process from the viewpoint of the directors, the scenographer, the dramaturge and musicians, this section is about the actors' slant on action and actioning, about the affective experience of handling objects, material and architecture, and also about the experience of an individual actor's 'act' in relation to 'group work'. This angle of vision also elucidates, in some senses, the way certain acting vocabularies become current, indeed become the generally accepted way of *expressing* actorly concerns, even when the rehearsal process and the actor's experiential vocabulary are not aligned, or are in some cases even in contradiction.

From the production notes I pull together some of the questions the actors asked. In terms of acting methodology, are we *physicalizing* the depiction mentioned in the text? Are we building a character, *characterizing* the worker? Can a *character* be built when

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you heft a drum or carry a load on your back? In that case, is characterization an appropriate word at all?

There is imagery both of the 'self' and of role here, and both are culturally specific ideological formations, open to modification. That the individual is formed from within and that this interior is the site from where the actor may draw up her character has been part of the actor's toolkit from the early twentieth century. Indeed, what constitutes a role and how this might be composed, what grammar is used in the composition, is very much part of the conversation in any rehearsal process – and so it was through the making of *Dark Things*. It is a conversation that requires the actor to be aware of the toolkit she might choose with which to compose her 'character', her 'role', but it is equally a conversation about how the actor sees herself, her self-representation as an individual 'in performance', as it were. In the case of *Dark Things*, notions of self and role were complicated when actions overlapped or were identical, even when the roles themselves were different. Actors ricocheted from one character to another – an individual, a stage hand, member of a chorus, a worker, part of a workforce or a collective – with each actor performing a set of actions that had to do with different practices and the roles these signalled, but the actions were nonetheless, in all these different circumstances, often replications, doubles, exactly the same. When the actions were the same, were the characters different? How, then, to categorize action as staged in *Dark Things*?

Sound

The factory siren, often described as the sound of industrial modernity, recurs throughout the play, functioning sometimes as a bridge, sometimes a circuit, a connector, a channel, indicating transit, break or gathering. It is the cue that makes the actors move and transform into a workforce (that jumps off mini trucks), change direction and become stage hands (to haul objects offstage), change direction and become a chorus (holding placards and letters of the alphabet). The siren also brings to mind the timekeeping apparatus of today's labour camps, where a soundless press of the fingertip clocks in a worker instead of the loud sociality of the siren summoning an assembly.

Styles of action

To do

Alice Rayner's ruminations on the gravediggers' lines are a provocation to think about styles of action onstage.[21] Action can be applied to anything that moves,[22] but each of these words – to *act/do/perform* from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act V, scene i) – indicates, it would seem, material differences, at least in the pedagogy of acting. Action is a noun, verb and adverb, says Rayner,[23] and its grammatical meanings are analogous to its conceptual, temporal and qualitative features.[24] I will look at two here – to do and to act – and attempt to grade the action-making processes of *Dark Things*.

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Within the methodologies of acting, roughly speaking, to *do* brings to mind what might be called business or incidental action. Incidental: being minor or subordinate; happening as a consequence, as if by chance. Shifting a spoon, flattening a crease, clearing one's throat might be called incidental action, and it signals concealed thoughts that dwell beneath the crust of the spoken word – thoughts that are evidenced through these small actions, and which are now famously designated subtext. What the character may decide to do, as is indicated by the small actions described above, is often in reference to and determined by *another's* speech, the effects and affects of which are manifested in these actions.[25] The actor *finds* something to do and this doing, this action, is based on the *probable* behaviour of a character in a given circumstance. The text does not enforce it;[26] it is left to the actor to find it depending on the angle from which she sees what is happening on the stage. She analyses the words she hears, and analogous to these, marking the effect they have on her, she decides the nature of the action. And here lies the crucial difference that I seek to emphasize between layers of doing and of action. This 'doing', *which is probable action in a given circumstance*, is in a sense materially different from action that affords the possibility of what Williams calls 'movement, intervention, change, as opposed to watching, reacting, and waiting'.[27]

Since a character's state of mind is always open to interpretation, probable behaviour in a given situation can itself have wide variation. The performer in the transparent box executes not just a small gesture, but a *minute* one, an action that is almost invisible to the spectators. This action, however, is not probable behaviour in a given situation; it is not possible to substitute this particular flick of the wrist with another flick of the wrist in the hope that it aligns better with a character's emotional state.[28] Dropping a screw in a mobile phone, tightening the hand to shift a gearstick, twisting the torso to lift the oil drum to the shoulder, none of these can have a wide variation, because they are actions required to be done with a particular arc of energy. In narrative terms, this arc might be designated as a beginning, middle and end; and in terms of acting pedagogy, it might be called an intention, the execution of that intention and thereafter a return to the original position. For any action to be clearly legible it needs to be complete in itself, have a beginning and an end. The duration of the action performed, on the other hand, can be endless. It might need to be done every day, for a whole work shift, even for months, but each time its arc of energy is precise because it is necessary in its precise material circumstance. (In another context, Hannah Arendt describes labour as something never-ending, and work as something that usually has an ending such as in an artefact.[29])

To act

Meyerhold sought to align the theatrical, the industrial and the psychological in his work and in his pedagogical practice.[30] His method of actor training, biomechanics, taught the actor the value of 'collective integrated non-individualistic stage action' that emphasized synchronicity, rhythm, tempo, skill and poise to achieve gestural economy.[31] Meyerhold urged actors to do only what was required for the task, however complex that task was – neither more nor less. For this 'ergonomic efficiency'[32] he cited Frederick Winslow

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Taylor's investigations into labour and motion studies that were done to maximize productivity at work.[33]

'Every movement', says Meyerhold, 'is a hieroglyph with its own peculiar meaning. The theatre should employ only those movements which are immediately decipherable; everything else is superfluous'.[34]

To labour

I bring up another set of questions now, framed by the word 'labour' as performed in different registers in *Dark Things*.

The actors asked, 'When we perform an action, is it *in lieu* of the worker, is it an *approximation*, or is it *equivalent* to a similar action outside the theatrical world?'

If the character is built by way of action, what of the chemical body processes that such work induces, such as sweating, tiring and being thirsty? To whom do these chemical changes belong – the actor or the character?

What kind of work is acting? How do we separate acting work, which in the case of *Dark Things* is manual labour, from manual labour itself? Do we need to make this separation at all?

Labour has been annotated in theatre practice along several planes and on several registers: as material and immaterial labour, and, on another plane, as visible and invisible labour. I roughly parse these ideas now.

Material labour – ranging from constructing the materials for and of performance to working and operationalizing them – is about objects, artefacts and machinery, among other things. And immaterial labour, which does not necessarily produce a product at the end, is understood as affective and cognitive work. The actor's work might be understood as cognitive work, and therefore outside the sphere of commodity production, as it were. Erin Hurley calls the actor's labour 'feeling labour',[35] which *produces*, *brings forth*, *manufactures*, a current of *emotions* and *sensations*, a to-and-fro of responses that flows through the spectators and actors. By way of these responses are also produced contestations, unforeseen alliances, affinities and identifications, surprising dis-identifications and separations. Via these responses, says Hurley, societies come to 'understand themselves, their values, and their social world'.[36] Accordingly, she describes feeling labour as 'social work'.[37]

Actors labour to produce, among other affects and effects, characters. Some characters are made up in such a way that they absorb the labour of the actor – the actor's labour disappears, as it were, in the fictive world the character inhabits. For instance, the old and well-worn narrative that an actor must labour for months to appear spontaneous is as amusing as it is vexingly accurate about the disappearance of an actor's hard work in the character she has drawn up.

Some characters are composed in a manner that makes the labour of the actor visible. This is achieved by making evident the 'cut' between actor and character. Thus the actor and the character may stand in contradiction, even, where the actor builds her character as a demonstration, visible to the spectators, staged in public. What she builds is a *gest*: *gestic* acting points to the social components of the individual gesture; it seeks to show that the very act of constructing and interpreting character is a public project with a public history beyond any playtext.[38]

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Dark Things sought to make visible many configurations of labour. Apart from the actors' affective work, it brought offstage labour (shifting props and working machinery in order to operationalize the story from *behind the scenes*) onstage so that it was in plain view, visible.[39] On another plane, it sought to tactually operationalize machinery that was part of the story – such as the crane or the mini truck – and these required job-specific skills apart from the labour of playing a role from the performers; actors worked as actors *in* role and *along* the role, and perspired on the job, as it were.

Even while I have been stressing the *gest* as being the grid on which characters were composed in *Dark Things* and how this pulls away from coalescing actor and character, the problem of identicalness between the nature of action within the play and outside it vexed the actors. How, then, to read their own action? How to place their own phenomenological/corporeal experience of *doing* and *transforming* materials onstage? If her experience was not channelling into character and was yet experienced or felt by the actor, then was the actor being driven into some sort of limbo, a place for lost and neglected things? Or, to cite William Worthen's striking formulation: did the task executed onstage 'withdraw the privilege of subjectivity' from the performer?[40]

Perplexities

What puzzled me most was the discrepancy between the conditions of performance of *Dark Things* and the questions about subjectivity and character that arose in dialogue with the performers.

Even as the play attempted to position industrial action and psychology in different alignments through its telling, questions about how to shape the interior and where to embed motivation came up repeatedly. In discussion the actors appeared to grasp the idea that the social gesture was as much a means of modelling character as the notion of motivation, that such a gesture did not show a disposition that *created* a situation (the meaning of which needed to inferred) but was instead an exposition *about* a situation.[41]

To my mind, even when the lines of force between self and role – and the manner in which these are determined by the histories and grammars of acting and 'body ideologies[42] – are sharply in the sightline of one set of makers, it is very possible that another, altogether different, line of sight is experienced and articulated by the actors. An intricate set of conjunctures produces an actor's experience and her interpretation of it. Among these conjunctures is the instructional popularity of certain pedagogical practices as they enter global teaching curriculums and the travel and transfer time of these exchanges, which is now ever more decreased by digital connectivity. Thus the Stanislavsky toolkit enters popular consciousness both to explain and to interpret an actor's perceptions. This toolkit, even as it is reassessed, revalued and critiqued, is more often than not the fallback vocabulary of most performers. It is one of the most readily available means to convey the phenomenological difficulties of the very act of performing: the phenomenon of being onstage, of doing various types of work, of labouring and of thirsting, tiring and sweating, while being watched.

In *Dark Things*, classic actorly questions – Who Why What When – continued to perplex the actors through rehearsals, and, as we found during the process, these needed

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to be addressed, if only fleetingly or even fuzzily, in order that the performer summon up the courage to step into the performance space to 'act'. In conversation, we often shifted gears and moved from one ideological and performative grammar to another, to offer our thoughts on the actorly dilemmas of 'doing' oneself onstage.[43] But these questions remained *in situ*, as it were, in the performance space and in the production notes, contradictory, discrepant and misaligned.

These questions found no answers as indeed the production notes have no conclusions. The questions continued, therefore, to trouble the process and instigated discomfort, bringing to the fore yet again the matter of subjectiveness, representation and self-representation in the actor's work:[44] of how action and actioning and 'body ideology' troubled us as a group,[45] and how, even when the action in performance is immediately decipherable and often collective, the relationship between self, action and the world is ambiguous for the performer on 'stage'.

Tangents

By way of a conclusion, I offer a sidetrack by talking about intersections, tangents and overlaps: intersections that might cross-hatch, tangents that might touch another line but once, and overlaps that might coincide wholly or partially in the time and space of the making process of *Dark Things*.

The three words apply to the way the actors, performers and musicians were catalysed by the specifics of the site while they played their various 'roles'. How the disused car park with its concrete floor, the tin-roofed buildings recalling another time, the roughly tarred potholed road, the construction debris and the mosquitoes *intersected*, cross-hatched and proceeded to instigate the action carried out by the actors. Further, how the choreography of the big and small actions, attuned to the particular task at hand, such as lifting a drum, driving a truck, or dropping a screw, performed by individuals and also collectively, brought up, at a *tangent*, the question of 'characterization' and the puzzles associated with it, such as motivation and subtext. These puzzles appeared because the actions *overlapped*, identical in the *doing* but indicating different characters functioning in different contexts.

The three words also underscore that nothing in the process is about answers or solutions. Reflecting on the logic of composition, and *how* it came to be *in* the performance, is, in fact, a sort of offering to invite interpretation and counterinterpretation, puzzlement, and of attempting to actuate sensuous connections. Although the act of construing and equilibrating the lines of force between humans and non-human actors will be different every time, in different contexts, the methodology of making – and that is why I write this up here – will in all likelihood remain the same.[46]

NOTES

1 Dietrich Steinbeck cited by Erika Fischer-Lichte in M. Arjomand and R. Mosse, eds., *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, trans. M. Arjomand (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 71–98, here p. 79.

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2 Tim Ingold, 'Making Culture and Weaving the World', in Paul Graves-Brown, ed., *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 57–9, here p. 59.

3 An emeritus professor at the University of Cape Town, Ari Sitas is a poet, playwright and theatre-maker from South Africa. From being a founder of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company in South Africa in the 1970s to organizing the Workers' Theatre movement in the 1980s, his involvement with theatre has been substantial. He is one of South Africa's best-known poets, also particularly known for his collaborations with musicians.

4 Ari Sitas with Kristy Stone, Greg Dor and Reza Khota, *Notes for an Oratorio on Small Things That Fall (Like a Screw in the Night)* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2020), back cover.

5 Professor Sumangala Damodaran, formerly at Ambedkar University Delhi, is a practising musician and composer and has been doing teaching and research in popular-music studies for about two decades. Trained in both of the Indian classical music traditions, her performance and research have been around music in and from social movements in India, also involving collaborative work with musicians and researchers from South Africa, Tanzania, Ethiopia and China.

6 Scenographer, director, and theatre-maker, associate professor at Ambedkar University Delhi. Deepan Sivaraman is one of the leading theatre-makers of India, and his works have travelled widely in India and internationally.

7 Currently pursuing his PhD from the Centre for Theatre, Dance & Performance Studies (CTDPS), University of Cape Town.

8 Reza Khota is a practising musician and composer working in South Africa. Chandran V (1956–2022) was a musician and composer who worked in both theatre and film.

9 Ari Sitas's word, mentioned in a conversation during rehearsal, Delhi 2018.

10 Sitas et al., *Notes for an Oratorio*, p. 5.

11 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 49.

12 Sitas et al., *Notes for an Oratorio*, p. 1.

13 Paul B. Richardson, 'Geopolitical Encounters and Entanglements along the Belt and Road Initiative', *Geography Compass*, 15, 8 (2021), article e12583.

14 Sitas et al., *Notes for an Oratorio*, p. 1.

15 Tim Winter indicates that today the Belt and Road initiative needs to be understood as an enterprise much beyond the travel of languages, religions and commodities over long distances. He sees the Belt and Road initiative as the most 'ambitious foreign policy' ever imagined by any country. He sees its 'geocultural and geostrategic' conceptualization as a 'world-ordering force'. Tim Winter, *The Silk Road: Connecting Histories and Futures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 5, 135.

16 Richardson, 'Geopolitical Encounters and Entanglements', 2021, citing Klinke and ÓTuathail.

17 Ibid., citing Colás & Pozo.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Tim Ingold, *Imagining for Real: Essays on Creation, Attention and Correspondence* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 259–60.

21 Alice Rayner, *To Act, to Do, to Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

22 Ibid., p. 2.

23 Ibid, p. 7.

24 Ibid.

25 Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 119–24.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., pp. 152–3

28 Ibid., pp. 119–24.

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29 Hanna Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 80–6, 91.
30 Jonathan Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold* (New York and London: Routledge 2003), pp. 67–8, 72; Alice Rayner, 'Rude Mechanicals and the Specters of Marx', *Theatre Journal*, 54, 4 (2002), pp. 535–54.
31 Gabrielle Cody and Rebecca Schneider, *Re: Direction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 61, citing Worall.
32 Paul Allain and Jen Harvie, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 67.
33 Ibid.
34 Edward Braun and Jonathan Pitches, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), p. 24.
35 Erin Hurley, *Theatre and Feeling* (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 142–57, citing Lazzarato.
36 Hurley, *Theatre and Feeling*, p. 10.
37 Ibid.
38 William B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 149–50.
39 What is visible labour and, by contrast, what is invisible labour are most demonstrable as the *visibility* of the actor *onstage* and the *invisibility* of the stage crew who work *offstage*. Invisible work itself has two registers – that which happens before the show in order to prepare the workplace, and that which happens along with it, sideways or parallel, while the show happens. To elaborate a little: the performance space is measured and marked to be technically equipped for the staging by setting up lamps, rigging the lights, putting up simple microphones and complex sound systems, curtains and wings, pulleys and weights, wiring and taping, laying out the objects and props, making green rooms (and in times past the prompter's box). These arrangements are then tested by stage managers, lighting designers, sound designers and other backstage workers. Once done, the technicians disappear offstage: into the wings, the control rooms and the substages, depending on the nature and architecture of the performance site chosen, and pilot the show from these various locations. The stage manager and her assistants, the lighting person, the sound operator, the curtain puller, the electrician and the dresser work along with the show – a companion performance, as it were – while the carpenter, the props maker, the costumier, the make-up person and the tiffin maker usually finish their work before the performance. But all the 'invisibles' together work out an arrangement, rather like that of an orchestra, to keep the performance going. See Elizabeth A. Osborne and Christine Woodworth, eds., *Working in the Wings: New Perspectives on Theatre History and Labor* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015); Theron Schmidt, 'Troublesome Professionals: On the Speculative Reality of Theatrical Labour', *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 18, 2 (2013), pp. 15–26.
40 Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, pp. 149–50.
41 Williams, *Drama in Performance*, p. 150.
42 Simon Shepherd, *Theatre Body and Pleasure* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 36.
43 Calvin Taylor, 'Performing for Affect? Immaterial Labour and Performer Training', *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 5, 2 (2014), pp. 181–96, citing John Matthews, *Training for Performance: A Meta-disciplinary Account* (London: Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), p. 227.
44 William B. Worthen, *The Idea of the Actor* (Princeton and Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 6; Matthews, *Training for Performance*.
45 Shepherd, *Theatre Body and Pleasure*.
46 Maaike Bleeker, *Doing Dramaturgy: Thinking through Practice* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2023).

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