

Performing *The Feeling of Doing*: Intimacy, Terror, and Embarrassment

Michael Peterson

“two important aspects of torture [...] make it something other than an isolated act or acts: its repetitive extension in time and the fact that torture is not a spontaneous action; it must be planned and organized”¹

You are sitting with me at your kitchen table. A single spectator sits across from us. A moka-style coffee pot is on a low flame. You wear a large pair of headphones. You are nervous but game. I am terrified, but do my best to make you comfortable.

The room lights are off; I take out an LED stick and shine it up at you from the kitchen table, saying: “Mikhail Bakhtin said that ‘Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance.’”²

We perform a dialogue for the spectator, with you repeating the recorded prompts. At first, I ask questions and you give one-word replies. Eventually, we share quotations, such as “Objects which in themselves we view with pain . . .” / “We delight to contemplate when reproduced.”³ Unable to help ourselves, we steal glances at our spectator, and the handful of bystanders gathered around us.

Michael Peterson is a performance studies scholar, a performance artist, and a teacher. His research includes a critical study of *Straight White Male Performance Art Monologues* (Mississippi UP), a forthcoming book on performance culture in Las Vegas (Michigan UP), and work on animals, food, and objects in performance. His newest work is about performance in and about torture and other forms of cruelty. He has published articles in *Performance Research*, *TDR*, *Theatre Annual*, and numerous anthologies. He is associate professor in the Department of Theatre and Drama, and the Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies program, at the University of Wisconsin.

¹ Gordon, *Mainstreaming Torture*, 165.

² Bakhtin 7.

³ Aristotle, section 4.

The Feeling of Doing (you have finished / dark room) is an intimate theatre piece in which I guide one participant “actor” to perform with me for an audience of one spectator (a few bystanders may also be present). The piece is designed to be produced, by appointment, at participant’s kitchen tables. When *The Feeling of Doing* premiered at the “Terror and the Tour” conference at Roehampton, the piece was staged in the kitchen of an apartment just off campus. At the Performing Tangier festival, it was performed in a gallery using a small electric hot plate, but most performances are in private kitchens. The piece is part of my ongoing exploration of very small-scale performances, and of a line of performance and research work exploring the theatricality of torture and other forms of cruelty.

My opening quotation from ethicist Rachel Gordon is just one of many instances where torture and other cruel violences are described in terms that echo the way performance studies often discusses *performance* itself. *The Feeling of Doing* and this essay about it are situated at the collision of two realizations that have arisen in a line of research I’ve been slowly pursuing for several years. The first of these is the interdependence of torture and other forms of cruelty with creative performativity. Forms of violence have particular histories that include what must be acknowledged as human *creativity*. (Torture, Gordon says, must be understood as a “practice” rather than an “act”) Many cruel actions involve elements of performance. Torture is a “performance relation” and for many forms of violence performativity or theatricality functions as a “force multiplier.”⁴

But if cruel relations are frequently performative or theatrical in ways that seem to call for aesthetic critique and artistic intervention, that drive collides with an awareness of the drastic limits of representation, and especially of immersive simulation, in affecting individual spectators, let alone national policies. The critical literature on the theatrical representation of violence is full of doubts as to its efficacy, while scholars of real-world violence often appreciate politically committed works but also look for something more. For example, Darius Rejali, in his massive *Torture and Democracy*:

What enables us to reconstitute our ability to speak with each other about pain is an activity *different* from capturing pain in works of art, stories, statues, and other objects of worldly making. What it takes is something fundamentally more powerful and fragile, the ability to create a common political space.⁵

An echo of this language of political space emerges in the journal *Theater’s* special issue on violence in the post 9/11 context, introduced with a note of artistic optimism by Tom Sellar:

Theater is uniquely positioned to say something on the subject. No other art form can suggest connections between small, everyday behavior and larger forces as palpably. The physical proximity of spectators and stage counters

⁴ For my use of these concepts, see Peterson 2010, 2007.

⁵ *Torture and Democracy*, 30 emphasis added.

the distance felt in every other aspect of our highly mediated lives. And in an era when public assembly is rare and even discouraged by civic authorities, theater offers a space unlike any other.⁶

Doubts about representation and a desire for a “common political space” makes it tempting to look to art less for “meanings” in representations of cruelty, and more for *shared experiences*. This motivation is important to my project, but here, too, I am forearmed with performance studies’ skepticism about the techniques of immersive theatre, because of such critical works as Scott Magelssen’s *Sim-ming*.⁷ Maglessen is by turns deeply alarmed at the reactionary pedagogy of many simulation performances and still guardedly optimistic about the learning value of deep experiences. Such influences account in part for the way in which *The Feeling of Doing* took shape less as a simulation of violent scenarios, and more as a meta-theatrical enactment of performative failure and difficulty.

As an evolving “research” performance and as a nano-scale entertainment, *The Feeling of Doing* has been deeply rewarding for me as a performer, but also challenging and provocative of questions about acting, theatricality, and humans’ fears of one another. Not least is that part of my self-image is “nice guy,” and I find it difficult to put people in awkward situations and demand things of them. This essay documents the early version of the performance and reflects somewhat on cruelty and terror as performance themes (“meanings”), and excitement and embarrassment as performance *experiences*.

I tell you to perform a soliloquy. The spectator shines a strong torch on your face, making it hard for you to see them. I become conventionally “invisible” by pulling a black mask over my face. As instructed, you carefully look out above and past the spectator, reading lines from a “teleprompter” on a laptop which a bystander holds. In the speech, you quote the second verse of William Blake’s “A Divine Image” and then confess that:

I am so lonely sometimes
with the deep knowledge
that I am really and truly very exceptional

⁶ *Theater and Violence*, 8.

⁷ I should add that there is an equally important literature on the *craft* of immersive theatre, well represented both in theorization and in terms of artistic process by Machon, *Immersive Theatres*.



Bystander Howl Yuan holds the laptop prompter while performer James Sultana delivers a soliloquy for spectator Michael Zinganel.

The content of *The Feeling of Doing* does not form a single legible narrative or even a coherent anthology of situations. Many of the dialogues allude to various modes of cruelty, from torturous interrogation to domestic violence. At moments it appears that I am interrogating the participant, at others that we are partners or even lovers. The soliloquy and the later direct address monologue imply that the performer is both arrogant and guilty of something, yet the prompting apparatus makes insistently apparent that I am putting words in the performer's mouth. I sometimes ad-lib references to the effect we are having on the spectator, as when I prepare the performer before we begin, saying something like "the characters have vague and shifting identities, which makes the acting really easy, and the ambiguity creates a cloudy feeling of menace in the audience so that afterwards they feel like they've really experienced something. OK, good to go?" The text is peppered with quotations, some acknowledge, some not.

We perform another dialog using the headphones prompter.

(P)erformer: Feeling is better than not feeling.

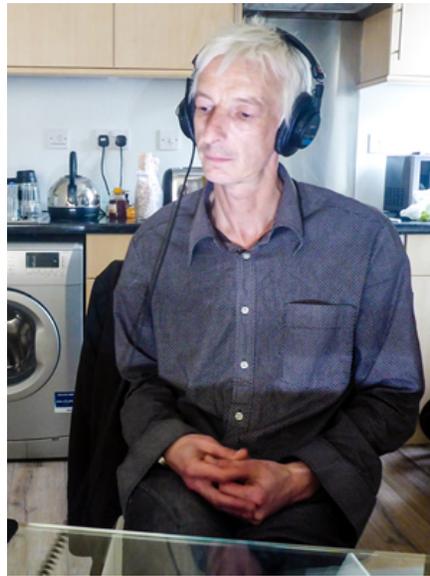
(M)ichael: Doing is feeling.

P: Feeling is not doing.

M: What I do to you is out of love⁸ . . .

We finish the scene and I pour the coffee into three tiny metal cups. I produce a spoon and a packet of sugar. "This coffee is quite bitter, and unfortunately we only have enough sugar for two cups," I say. I stir the sugar into two of the cups and shuffle all three around the table like a three-card monte dealer before serving them.

⁸ This refers back to an earlier quotation, from the Maria Irene Fornes play *The Conduct of Life*.



Performer Andrew Wilford listening for his line.

The formal choices in *The Feeling of Doing* emphasize the grammar of theatrical convention and performer-spectator relations. Using prompts in multiple forms (written, live-spoken, and recorded audio), the show is designed to allow a completely unprepared co-star to move with me across ten short scenes and multiple modes of theatricality, including 4th-wall dialogue, soliloquy, direct address, and even karaoke.



Warm-up: the author with William "Bo" Sax.

The opening passage, for example (after we sign contracts with the performer and spectator), is a “warm-up” that references common theatre games. The next sequence, which comes just before the dialogue described at the beginning of this essay, is a prologue I perform myself, a version of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* chorus, “O for a Muse of fire.” The speech is peppered with references to state violence and domestic violence, but performed with a silly, exaggerated theatricality—all while I prepare the coffee and start the burner. Each segment alters the theatrical relationship in some way.

Your next speech is a direct address to the one-person audience. I coach you to hold the spectator’s hand and to make and maintain eye contact. I’m hidden by the black mask again, and for this speech I prompt you by whispering individual phrases in your ear, which you repeat to the spectator.

I have the dream every time I travel.
Every time I move through some new place,
all the people I see sort of stick to me—
And then come back to me in dreams.
Each one has a secret side.
The sweet, sweet kid in the street,
in the dream is kicking a dog, or a child, at home.



The author, masked, cueing a performer of the direct address.



Richard Gough performing the direct address, Tangier, Morocco.

The performance is difficult to execute, both for me and the volunteer performer, and each instance is very different because of the impact that different participants have. Like “blank” or “open” scripts used in some acting exercises, the dialogues are constructed with few specific references to the speakers, so that diverse performers can speak the words without apparent logical contradiction. While there is little explicit violence (or sexuality) expressed in the dialogues, the identity and personality of the participant can alter both the implied meanings of the scenes and the experience of performing them. Some of the passages are more uncomfortable for me with women collaborators (although women who’ve done the piece have so far been strong performers and strong personalities who successfully “held the stage”); on the other hand, because I’m short, performing with large men makes my “character”(s) seem more reliant on the structuring power of the script—he’s more desperately menacing/obsequious. Whatever the casting of the performer, the relationship shifts over the course of the show.

Dialogue:

M: Why did we choose this technique?

P: It is an established technique.

M: Why did I choose this technique?

P: It is an established technique.

M: Why did you choose this technique?

P: It is an established technique.

M: What tools did we use?

P: Everyone knows this technique.

M: How long were we busy with it?

P: The correct amount of time?

M: What sounds did we make?

P: The usual sounds.



Actor James Sultana in a dialogue scene.

While power or agency shifts among myself, the co-starring participant, the spectator, and even the bystanders, by the end of the piece what I think of as “ensemble feeling” has usually taken over—that we’re in this together.⁹ The bystanders are at first ignored, then I refer to them sarcastically a couple of times, then they’re enlisted to assist the performance in small ways. By the end of the approximately 40-minute performance they have been welcomed into the theatrical event. In London I opened a beer after curtain call and shared it among everyone in the room; in other performances I’ve handed out small coffee-flavored candies, apologizing for the earlier exclusion of bystanders from the coffee ritual.

The Feeling of Doing is a “Barter Amateur Theatre” project, and each of those three terms is important to my understanding of the work. I consider it theatre, even though the piece is highly “relational” in that it is *composed* more of human interactions than of signification or spectacle (these components are not, of course, mutually exclusive). As a “project” it has an on-going re-iterative character that is removed from mainstream dramatic re-production. But it is *theatre* in-

⁹ Of course, my perceptions of the experience of participant, spectator, and by-standers is necessarily partial and subjective.

asmuch as it is about acting and pretending; it is meta-theatre as well, exploring different modes of theatrical presentation and celebrating the performance of the participant-actor.

We switch genres to “jukebox musical”; you choose a pop song from a list, we share headphones and the spectator hears only our voices as we sing along.

While my volunteer may or may not be an “amateur,” the event is in part a celebration of the playful artistry of casual make-believe. The apparatus of the piece is arranged to aid an unrehearsed actor, but the material is difficult; participants frequently mis-hear the audio prompts, or become confused despite instruction. It is also common to see even very confident performers experience a flicker of self-doubt or even stage fright. To help modulate these difficulties the piece signals “high stakes” with one set of tactics (such as my exaggerated *ad lib*s calling the moment historically important), and it signals “low stakes” with others. For example, among my favorite experiences has been the karaoke numbers, where the actor and I are alone together in our own head-phoned world, and the spectator and onlookers hear our inevitably embarrassing rendition of songs ranging from showtunes to pop.¹⁰

I describe this relation to my co-performer (and, in fact, to the spectator) as a barter arrangement. The actor gives effort and talent, and takes a mild performative risk; in exchange, as I sometimes say in the show, the spectator and I make them a star.

For example, the last component before the epilogue is an improv scene that combines elements of improvisation as an acting/rehearsal technique with improv comedy sketching. If the participant is inexperienced in improvisation, I offer a bit of coaching.

I ask the spectator and bystanders to provide us with a institutional context, a physical location, an everyday activity, and a specific word that we must include in our improv. To add excitement we perform over the faint sound of surf-rock bass guitar coming from the headphones on the table. You are much better at this than you thought you would be.

The “barter” framing of the performance is an important contrast with my other current body of performance work, which is “social practice” or “relational” performance in which I create public structures for a kind of free play and a much less structured mutuality.¹¹

¹⁰ An especially memorable moment was doing the Clash’s version of “I Fought the Law” in Roehampton with performer, and co-convenor of the Terror and the Tour event, Andrew Wilford.

¹¹ Most of these projects I make in collaboration with Laurie Beth Clark, under the group name Spatula&Barcode. We discuss those projects (documented at spatu-

By contrast, my Barter Amateur Theatre pieces are much less utopian, even mercenary. The performer and spectator contracts, while playful, emphasize that our interaction is framed by promise and consent, and the general frame is of completing a sequence of obligatory tasks—the script is treated like a to-do list which we have undertaken to fulfill. I’m not sure it’s a readable component of the event in the moment, but I like to think of the explicitness of the document-signing and my frequent invoking of the “theatrical contract” we have with the spectator as both situating the power relations we’re exploring within the context of contemporary capitalism—and as establishing a space of play partially and temporarily outside of that context. Barter is also “mutual aid.”

While the performance evolves somewhat with each iteration, it always comes to a kind of dead end, proclaiming it has accomplished aims that it manifestly has not.

I coach you on delivering the epilogue and hand you a page from the script; I turn on the room lights and instruct you that you are returning us to the real time and place of the audience.

Let me begin by dedicating tonight’s performance to _____.

The traditional role of the epilogue is to re-state and reinforce the message of the play as a whole, and that’s what I’m here to do.

First, we’ve represented how cruelty corrupts time and space and crushes the beauty of human memory into incoherence.

Good job, team! [High five with Michael]

Both theatre and cruel violence frequently happen “in dark rooms”, for unknown or uncertain observers. This observation, coupled with the feeling that if I wanted to critique some forms of anti-cruelty performance I had better try to make some myself, led me to develop the *Dark Room: a performance and conversation about torture*. Like its sequel, *The Feeling of Doing*, the earlier *Dark Room* was designed to be “portable”; I wanted to be able to work with a couple of volunteers who would prepare minimally to help me stage a meditation on torture and then facilitate a discussion that might affect perceptions of torture’s efficacy at the most local level. I structured the piece as a series of images and dialogues that we could perform with scripts in hand, requiring nothing I couldn’t carry myself (a few props and flashlights) and an ordinary room that could be made fully dark. During the year I was developing the project I conducted a series of

laandbarcode.net) as setting up different kinds of “gift economies.” It’s true that we programmatically *ask* something of our participants in every performance, but these are not bargains or negotiated exchanges. Rather, we work to construct ecologies of generosity, in which we gift experiences, food, and souvenirs to participants and encourage them to give back to the piece and to each other.

“listening rehearsals” around the world, interviewing human rights activists and scholars, artists, and torture survivors.



Performing the epilogue

Dark Room premiered in a workshop version in 2009 in Zagreb, Croatia, at the Performance Studies international conference. I had the extraordinary luck to get to work with amazing Croatian actors Selma Banic and Vilim Matula, and to show the work to a supportive audience of performance experts from around the world. It was an exhausting but thoroughly satisfying creative experience. With this audience, the “conversation” part of the performance naturally turned from a discussion of cruelty to a working session on the performance itself.

After the premiere of *Dark Room*, my thinking about torture began to shift in significant ways. While I remained convinced of the historic significance of the use of torture by the United States under the “Global War on Terror”, I came more and more to see the importance of many other kinds of cruelty. It seemed even that the spectacular impact of these crimes, so thoroughly hidden from view, had the collateral effect of obscuring more wholesale violences of war, policing, and even intimate relations. It’s an important distinction in international law that not all cruelty amounts to torture, but it seems to me that opposition to torture without an analysis of the context of cruelty is insufficient. More pertinently, I came to believe that an aesthetic investigation of torture—especially a

fascination with the “thought experiments”¹² that seemed to dominate the so-called “torture debate”—needed to explore the inter-connectedness of various cruelties and the social structures which foster them. I was re-learning a lesson taught by Fornes in *The Conduct of Life*, where cruelty permeates both the personal and professional actions of the torturer/patriarch.



A force-feeding image from *Dark Room*

My analysis of what cruelty is and what it means was changing even as the policies and events that had started me thinking about the problem were seeming bound up with other issues, especially systematic cruelty toward immigrants and asylum-seekers around the world, and police violence toward the disenfranchised in the US. The activist aspirations of the *Dark Room* project seemed more and more futile, exhausting, and poorly aimed, while the connection of theatricality and performativity to more and more forms of cruelty still drove me toward exploring them in performance. There was something personally compelling (even if perhaps ethically or politically *useless*) about working with the body to explore that.

¹² I’m referring here to the ubiquity in the media discourse on torture during the George W. Bush administration of discussions framed around so-called “ticking time bomb” scenarios. This fantasy of being “forced” to torture was elaborately played out in the television series *24*.

The input from those in the audience at Zagreb, among others, also helped push me in this direction. I was struck in particular by Jill Dolan’s observation that I was leaving the very spectators I wanted to engage with out of the active, performative learning I was engaged in during the first half of the piece! With *The Feeling of Doing*, I think I’ve found creative approaches to bringing a few others into that framework — although interestingly, now I’m exploring including a more explicit space for discussion (the “post-show”) to allow for, among other things, live analysis of how gender, age, and physical difference factor in our experience of staging the scenes.

So *The Feeling of Doing* has a broader focus in a still more intimate encounter, a chance to work directly with individuals in thinking through — even in just *experiencing* — these modes of theatricality tied to human relations. It’s also been a chance to try new approaches to the broader problem of representing violence theatrically.

You finish the epilogue:

Second, we’ve spoken tonight for all victims of cruelty—not just the victims of loved ones, or of cruel strangers, as in Blake’s line: “Cruelty has a human heart,” but also the victims of systematic, structural cruelty. And we’re happy that those victims feel better because of being represented here today.

Third, we’ve made you see that it’s wrong to be mean to other people and wrong to support mean people. And we’re very glad that you’ll never be mean ever again, individually OR systemically.

Finally, I just want to say how great it’s been working with Michael as writer, director, and co-star. In just the short time I’ve been on tour with him he’s impressed me as a remarkable actor and a great humanitarian. And he’s never been less than kind to me, except during the performance, of course, which was rather unpleasant I think we can all agree.

After the curtain call, we will have time for a very brief discussion with the cast. You’ve been a great audience, thank you and good night!

The original *Dark Room* didn’t make sense without depictions of cruelty, but I had certainly worked to avoid realism or structuring the project around evoking physical empathy. I’m suspicious of the impulse to show an audience “how it feels” (whatever *it is*). My recent experience with the compelling and beautifully-realized participatory site-specific project *Fugit* by the Barcelona company Kamchàtka re-inforced this. In the piece, participants are essentially “simming” refugees (again, see Magelssen), and while it’s a powerful experience, the limits of simulation and semi-realism mean that this experience is essentially a-contextual.

I couldn't help but recognize that some of the most interesting moments in the first *Dark Room* piece arguably "exploited" the very theatricality of violence with which I was concerned. In evolving *The Feeling of Doing* out of *Dark Room*, I retreated somewhat from explicit politics, topicality, and argument, and burrowed into aesthetics, ethics, and experience. This was a shift from *signifying* (signifying the "secrets" or "truths" of torture, "decoding" political rhetoric, etc.) to *experiencing* (or re-experiencing: trauma, obsession, etc.).

This could seem an overly serious analysis given that the performance is structurally comic. Or, rather, the meta-theatrical narrative of two performers trying to work together in an absurd situation with an awkward performance apparatus is inherently comic. And comedy is perhaps not the intuitive first choice for a mode of addressing human cruelty. On the other hand, the human capacity for laughter is often celebrated as a defiance of mortality and human frailty. More specifically, comedy can draw pleasure from bodily weakness and deflate the pretensions of power. I certainly don't want to make light of others' anguish, but I do have a strong impulse to respond sarcastically to the pretensions of power. I only just this year was able to see the sardonic and powerful performance *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, and while I would not presume to compare *The Feeling of Doing* with that work on grounds of artistic success or impact, I did recognize in it some of my own desire to expose and mock something about the corrupt uses of violence.

I hope that *The Feeling of Doing* leaves some of those involved with a sense of making performance, if not *against* human cruelty, at least in spite of it. We share an anguish over things in the world, and address that by working together for a short time. Even if I am skeptical of the impact of a work like *Fugit*, I found myself admiring and understanding the impulse to shape that experience; on their website, the company describes the piece as "a suggestive and evocative flight, yet not as a way of escaping but as a means of struggling" (Kamchàtka). And while it's somewhat embarrassing to admit, that kind of struggle can be rewarding, even fun. Of course, we often forget that people are being tortured, etc., while we are busy enjoying ourselves.

That last observation is facile and nonetheless true. Thinking on such things makes almost all of daily life "embarrassing" in this sense. Contrasted with some of the things humans are constantly doing to each other, ordinary things like singing, joking, or enjoying a coffee can seem wildly inappropriate. One measurement of my own privilege is how many kinds of cruelty have no impact on my life, and little likelihood of doing so; perhaps the piece is in part about processing that awareness, and parsing how performative cruelty parses some of the differences among us. Performance isn't "enough" to repair the world; it may be that it isn't even anything. But I have to be doing *The Feeling of Doing*.



The performer and the author hold the candle used for lighting the last dialogue.

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