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## Performing Urban Violence:

### Protest Theatre and (Semi-)Public Space in London and Cape Town

Dominic Davies

#### Introduction: Protest Theatre and Public Space

This article offers an account of two case studies of theatrical performance from London and Cape Town, both of which raise and interrogate the inter-related concepts of protest theatre and public space. A production of Tunde Euba's play *Brothers*, by the Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theater (GLYPT) in London (2013/14), and the contemporaneous theatrical work and awareness-raising campaigns of the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) in Cape Town, both use theatrical performance to question, diagnose and protest multiple forms of violence perpetrated against marginalized urban populations, often at the hands of the state. In twenty-first-century neoliberal cities such as London and Cape Town, government and private forces collude to privatize their once public spaces, thus encroaching upon—if not entirely disappearing—venues that might be used for protesting against such forms of violence (see Garrett).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, those public spaces that do remain are, in the ongoing era of the “War on Terror,” increasingly subject to militarized policing strategies that place increased restrictions on large assemblies and free movement within cities, “particularly for members of darker-skinned groups” (Marcuse 264).

In response, this article will show, GLYPT and SWEAT cultivate *semi*-public spaces—that is, spaces that do the political and civic work of urban public spaces, but that cannot themselves strictly be considered “public” as such (see Jones et al., 645)—through their use of theatrical staging and their spatial and performative facilitation of political participation. They use a kind of “interactive theatre” to foster community solidarity between marginalized urban inhabitants, which in turn has “the potential to turn awareness into action” (Treder-Wolff, 338).

In her summative article, “Reclaiming Public Spaces,” Judit Bodnar claims that public spaces are “the clearest expression of the urban predicament” (2091). Such spaces are the site of a sometimes dangerous and even violent urbanity, but they nevertheless remain integral to the facilitation of the civic and political participation of urban citizens. Unconditional access to public spaces thus tends to be viewed as the spatial correlate of a healthy, well-functioning, democratic and politically engaged society. Moreover, as open spaces within the urban environment, they are deeply intertwined with a “right to the city” discourse. Here, the right to occupy, safely and visibly, physical spaces within the city allows citizens to lay claim to a much larger spectrum of rights promised to them by the liberal state, while such visibility also exposes the violence that states may in turn perpetrate against their civilian populations (see Amin & Thrift; Harvey; Mitchell). Public space thus serves as the platform for all kinds of protest, both formal and informal, from everyday shared activities such as eating, drinking, socializing and sleeping, to more self-consciously political gatherings such as those of the Occupy Movement in Zucotti Park and on Wall Street in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis; those in Egypt’s Tahrir Square and across the Arab world since 2011; or more recently, the Women’s Marches that have taken place in the US throughout 2017 and 2018.

It is perhaps especially these latter occupations that indicate the importance of public space first as a right in and of itself, and second as facilitating claims to numerous other rights—in the case of Tahrir, for example, quite simply the right to a meaningful vote (see Franck & Huang). It is for this reason that so many urban commentators are concerned by what Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin call the “splintering urbanism” of the neoliberal era—here, urban infrastructural developments are increasingly funded by private finance capital (with a corresponding lack of public accountability and a tendency toward short-term, profitable investments), while cities’ few remaining public spaces are themselves seen as investment opportunities (33, 97; see also Bodnar, 2091). Meanwhile, states increasingly implement what Graham calls “the new military urbanism,” in which police and other forces of urban governance treat public spaces as “battlespaces” to be

fought over, conquered, and pacified, rather than as sites that might foster a more active and engaged public realm and civil society (xv).

The two cities addressed in this article conform with especial violence to this logic of splintering and military urbanism. In London, state-led processes of gentrification and structurally racist urban policing have increasingly restricted access to the city's few remaining safe public spaces, especially for already marginalized populations (Smith, 27). Meanwhile in Cape Town, the demonization of similarly marginal urban dwellers in the mainstream media justifies the deepening privatization of public space and the introduction of other oppressive state policies. These in turn combine to make the right to the city increasingly conditional upon multiple layers of racial and economic privilege (Samara, 2). Such processes, warns Graham, function to facilitate further "the strategic economic role of cities" in the neoliberal era, while suppressing "their historic roles as centres for the mobilisation of democratic dissent" (xxi-xxii).

As urban privatization and state militarization threaten the use of public spaces as platforms for protest and dissent, theatre offers a means to both re-stage *and* perform the political and civic participatory qualities such spaces might once have facilitated. As Jenny Hughes and Simon Parry show, theatrical protest can transform streets and squares into a "spectacle of assembly" (301) and is thus especially well-placed to activate them as participatory political and public spaces. At the same time, a physical space—whether open to the public or otherwise—cannot inherently, in and of itself, give rise to a democratic urban politics. As urban scholar Ash Amin remarks, we cannot make "the assumption that the *sociology of public gathering* can be read as a *politics of the public realm*" in any simplistic or directive sense (7). Instead, as Judith Butler observes in her reflections on the protests in Tahrir Square, though such public assemblies "depended on the prior existence of pavement, street, and square, [...] it is equally true that the collective actions collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture" (71). Which is to say, there must exist architecturally within the city a physical space in which public protest might take place, and where it does not (or where it is not accessible), such space must be created, or staged.

Simultaneously, the performative, participatory actions of protestors and communities—or we might add theatrical productions and their interactive audiences—are also required to re-infuse a democratic and public engagement back into the increasingly privatized and militarized infrastructure of the neoliberal city (see Merx, 2011, 132). The examples discussed in this article set out to create such spaces in both these physical and performative senses, though with varying degrees of success. Moreover, by creating semi-public spaces within the neoliberal city, both productions also feed into and strengthen related protests in public spaces, as we shall now see.

### **GLYPT and the Dramatization of Semi-Public Space**

Tunde Euba's play *Brothers* was acted by members of Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theater (GLYPT) and directed by the organization's Artistic Director, Jeremy James, between 2013 and 2014. Though the company is based in a disused, now converted tram shed that is open to the public, GLYPT toured *Brothers* to numerous secondary schools and other semi-public community spaces to reach wider audiences. The play was delivered primarily to young people mostly from ethnic minority backgrounds in South East London, where gang violence is prevalent and where there is a growing animosity and mutual distrust between young, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)<sup>ii</sup> citizens and the Metropolitan Police Force. As state and private forces collude in the privatization of safe public spaces, the Met, an organization with its own troubled history of institutional racism, polices the city with increasingly militarized policies such as discriminatory stop and search laws, or SUS laws as they are known. As Amin observes, "privatisation, excessive policing and downright neglect" systematically erode public spaces (7), in this case resulting in an ever-deepening mistrust between the Met and the disenfranchised urban populations they police. This spatial and political instability in turn fuels gang-motivated crime and ongoing cycles of violence.

The play responds to these dynamics by offering a compelling account of the impact of different types of violence, both direct and systemic, on black British youth in London. Just thirty

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minutes long, the first scripted section of *Brothers* stages a scenario that takes place in the aftermath of a gang-related murder.<sup>iii</sup> Two male actors play a pair of second-generation Nigerian twins growing up in London, and the play revolves around an argument between the two brothers: “Ken, with his traditional ideas and values, is becoming increasingly alienated from Tai, who lives by the ethics of the street” (“Shows”). The play hinges on a plot twist gradually revealed as the performance progresses: one of the brothers, Ken, is dead, after being killed by a rival gang. His appearance on stage remains unexplained, but he implicitly functions as a projection of the surviving brother’s memory and, through that, his imagined conscientious interlocutor. While Tai, the surviving brother, wants to retaliate violently against those who killed his brother, Ken tries to persuade Tai to put an end to the cycle of gang violence that this revenge would perpetuate. The resulting interchange between the two does not reach a prescriptive or moralizing conclusion, instead treating Tai’s retaliatory instinct with as much respect as it does Ken’s willingness to forgive. This scripted section of the play concludes with Ken leaving the stage where Tai remains alone—Ken, after all, is dead, and the decision whether to recourse to violent retaliation is ultimately Tai’s.

Two young black men debating, on stage, the causes and consequences of a future act of gang violence creates a critical space in which the systemic and spatial conditions that might force these marginalized citizens into regimes of cyclical violence (and implicitly educational restrictions, unemployment, and even incarceration) can at least be acknowledged and discussed, if not actively protested. The invitation to the audience to engage with the play’s dilemma is further facilitated through the layout of the stage. In accordance with the play’s necessary mobility, as it travels to secondary schools across London, this layout is simple but effective. Students are asked to arrange their chairs in a gauntlet, so that two lines of audience members run down either side of the room facing inwards—the play is then performed in this central channel. Forcing audience members to look not only at the performance but also at other audience members on the other side of this channel breaks down the boundaries between spectator and actor, encouraging viewers to

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contemplate their peers' reactions to the unfolding plot. The stage thus replicates a public space by encouraging its often young, minority ethnic audience to participate themselves in the decision-making process—a technique similarly deployed, as we shall see, in SWEAT's theatrical work.

It is in the play's second, hour-long unscripted section, that the audience members are invited to advise Tai on a course of action, engaging in a debate as much with one another as with the actors. This informal conversation between the character, Tai, and the students themselves, is facilitated by Ken (though the actor has now dropped out of character), while Tai, who is trying to make this decision, stays in character and interacts with the audience. To comprehend the significance of this process, it is important to remember that the schools in which these performances take place are themselves in areas where knife and gun crime, often within the context of gang warfare, is a common occurrence. The hour-long discussion that follows the thirty-minute play demands a strong emotional commitment from its performers, so much so that the young people are often shocked when the actor playing Tai eventually comes out of character. Indeed, the audience's engagement with the potentially violent predicament dramatized by the play is further enabled by the fact that Tai and Ken are both played by young black actors, or community peers (see Yoshima & Tolman, 140). *Brothers* thus facilitates the construction of a politicized community that works collaboratively to think through alternative scenarios to a very real-life manifestation of urban violence. In so doing, the performance creates a semi-public space—it is, after all, not a strictly “public” one—in which audience members are invited to consider self-reflexively ways in which they might, as a group, resist and subvert the kinds of cyclical violence that are exacerbated by the lack of state investment in safe public spaces, and the growing militarization of urban governance that has discriminate effects on them as young people of color.

There is clearly a didactic element to the play, and the program's agenda is not neutral: the intention is to inform a young audience about gang violence by giving them a safe space to reflect on it, as well as offering some knowledge of the community organizations (mentioned below) that are in place to support them both before and after any such events. By offering audience members a

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chance to interact with the characters and debate the outcome of the play, GLYTP does not entirely reproduce, but might be said to invoke Augusto Boal's notion of the Forum Theatre, which challenges the division between "spectators" and "actors" (xxi). Just as Boal's theatre encourages the spectator "to invade the scene," and "to occupy his [sic] own Space and offer solutions," *Brothers* arguably encourages its young audience to invade the real-life space they inhabit (the streets) with a broader awareness of the possible choices and social scripts that are available to them.

Though it is very difficult to measure the program's impact, the artistic director Jeremy James reports that a poll taken immediately prior to, and then after, each session, suggested positive results. In very general averages, before the performance roughly 60% of students say they would respond violently (exacting revenge on their brother's killers), while only 40% claimed they would do so afterwards. Crucially, however, such "yes or no" polling does not account for the many different strategies and tangents that emerge through the participatory conversation, nor does it represent the multiple reasonings behind them. The performance does not directly condemn violence or even gang culture more broadly, but rather allows young people to consider the issues and hear their own, and each other's, perspectives on them. Though not a strictly activated "public" space *per se*, it certainly resembles one, creating "a community out of actors and spectators based on their bodily co-presence," or what Butler might call "bodies in alliance," one that facilitates a situation in which "the aesthetic and the socio-political coincide" (see Fischer-Lichte, 51).

There is, however, a necessary qualification to be made that perhaps undermines these considerations of *Brothers* as an effective piece of protest theatre. *Brothers* is not delivered in isolation but as part of a larger outreach package called CHOICES, which combines the play with a talk from members of Families United (a collective of families who have all been affected by gang crime) and, perhaps more controversially, the Specialist Firearms Command branch (SCO19) of the Metropolitan Police Service, who've funded the play as part of their broader "Operation Make Peace" program. Through this triple-pronged approach, the Met seeks to foster "more peaceful"

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relationships between state authorities and London's young BAME citizens, where there is, as mentioned, often a justified animosity and damaging mistrust.

When delivered in this way, the play might risk complicity with the institutional structures—namely, the Met's discriminatory policing strategies—that have exacerbated the gang violence against which it protests. Concerns raised by Graham about the increased militarization of urban policing, which has become particularly “aggressive and militarised [toward] public demonstrations and social mobilizations” in recent years, are relevant here (xviii). While CHOICES facilitates direct interaction between the Met's Specialist Firearms Command Branch and a civilian population, members of which they have, sometimes unjustly, shot and killed,<sup>iv</sup> the somewhat oxymoronic title of “Operation Make Peace” is suggestive of a systemic re-construing of public space as a war zone in need of pacification. As Lynette Hunter has observed, performing arts used “by liberal governments to engage their public” can on occasion “work by supporting government policy or by critiquing it, but the critique is rarely radical” (11).

*Brothers* might therefore be accused of failing to challenge the larger restructuring of urban space that has exacerbated the conditions that create and perpetuate gang violence in the first instance (endemic poverty, proximal inequality, institutional racism, and so on), even as it effectively alleviates short-term incidents of physical violence. After all, the animosity between the police and young, black citizens is itself at least in part a product of the systematic eradication of the city's safe public spaces and the Met's subsequent enforcement of a diminished right to the city through invasive stop and search policies. While attempting to cultivate a kind of “spect-actorship” in which young people are encouraged to engage in a participatory political community, the Met's funding of *Brothers* is clearly motivated by a conservative agenda that seeks to direct the play's participatory elements towards very specific political end goals—in this case, the alleviation of knife crime and gang violence—without addressing its own complicity in such processes.

Nevertheless, if GLYPT's cooperation with the Met Police certainly complicates any consideration of *Brothers* as an effective form of protest theatre, we should not condemn this

package in its entirety. Director of *Brothers*, Jeremy James, is himself well-aware of the difficulties of GLYPT's partnership with the Met. As he has explained, it was the police who approached GLYPT, and they were far from a "natural partner" for the organization:

We tend to be slightly cynical about the way the police deal with young people [...] we've got areas we know we disagree about, we've got areas that we have a very different perspective on. And after a few initial conversations about, "Can't you be a bit more obvious about this in the work you're making?" We said, "No, we can't, because that's not the way we go about things." They settled for working with us irrespective of that. ("Jeremy James and Tunde Euba - In Conversation")

James here situates the interactive, semi-public theatre space of the performance of *Brothers* as at least in part at odds with the socially directive operations of the Met's CHOICES program. *Brothers* therefore begins to move toward Boal's Forum Theatre, even if it falls short of the embodied, spatial occupation of the stage by spectators that Boal calls for in that practice (xxi).

Viewed this way, *Brothers* contains potential strategies that remain under-utilized, yet that might be further developed for future and more obviously resistant forms of protest theatre. These include, especially, the aforementioned physical layout of the theatre space and the invitation to participate in, and to actively change, the scenarios dramatized within it. For example, if the participants were expanded to include the play's funders, the Met, so that the police officers themselves were involved in the interactive theatre process, they would be encouraged to acknowledge their role in the exacerbation of this particular instance of urban violence. They might even, in this case, be more productively enlisted as allies in addressing the root causes of such violence, rather than functioning as antagonists often complicit with it. Moreover, if the scheme's government funders were to witness and collaborate in the performance directly, its outcomes could be more productively adopted into policy and its intended audience allowed fuller access to civic

and political participation. In this way, *Brothers* might even move towards Boal's "Legislative Theatre" (1998), in which the constituents could explore scenarios that contribute democratically to the writing of new, perhaps more socially inclusive urban legislation.

Yet even in its current form, the play still facilitates the construction of a community within and between the young, black British spectators and their peer actors. In the performance that this author witnessed, in the aftermath of the play, spectators referred to the actors as "brothers," invoking its title but also building a sense of community solidarity between the actors and audience members. Mothers of the young people and members of the Families United organization similarly gathered together in the wake of the performance and its subsequent discussion to create, within the community-centers and schools, a new kind of semi-public space. This subsequent convivial environment—which is part funded by, yet very much critical of, the Metropolitan police force—addresses issues of urban violence not sufficiently acknowledged, if not in fact exacerbated by, the state and its representatives, creating a locale "that is outside the basic assumptions of the public sphere" and yet contains "potentialities for actual life" (Hunter, 5).

This new space then lays foundations from which alternative communities and urban publics might arise, as protest in a semi-public space bolsters activism that moves into more explicitly public venues. For example, in more recent years, Families United has evolved into a range of community-based activist groups, including the United Families and Friends Campaign (UFFC), a coalition of citizens affected by deaths in police custody (see "UFF Campaign"). This group in particular moves back into London's few remaining public spaces, conducting an annual memorial march that moves from Trafalgar Square down Whitehall to hand deliver a letter to the Prime Minister containing the stories of individuals who have suffered from police violence. In so doing, the group constructs a public urban space in which political engagement and civic participation are combined through community solidarity—they both stage and perform the city's public space to counteract its otherwise immanent urban violence. *Brothers* is one small part of this much larger network and is thus perhaps best described as a "community-based theatre" that "works to raise

awareness and empower community members” (Yoshima & Tolman, 139), traits that in turn lay crucial foundations for an effective protest against urban violence.

### **SWEAT and the Occupation of Semi-Public Space**

The non-governmental organization (NGO), Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), active in Cape Town, South Africa, similarly uses theatre as a way to reconstruct, through the creation of semi-public spaces (and sometimes the occupation of public ones) a radically more inclusive right to the city for its otherwise marginalized urban inhabitants.<sup>v</sup> Unlike GLYPT, SWEAT has no governmental ties and is vocal in its criticisms of policies towards sex work and the police treatment of sex workers. Founded in the early 1990s by a male sex worker, Shane Petzer, it was developed in 1994 into a project of AIDS Support, Education, and Training (ASET) “with the purpose of establishing a non-governmental service organisation focusing on safer sex educational work with adult sex workers” (“SWEAT—History Timeline”). SWEAT registered as an official non-profit organization in 1996, and their expertise now extends beyond safer sex education to include crisis counselling, legal advice, and skills training for sex workers on a national level. In 2003, SWEAT supported the launch of Sisonke, a national and global movement that promotes the health and human rights of sex workers, and of which it is now a subsidiary member (“NWSP: Global Network of Sex Work Projects”).

SWEAT is especially committed to lobbying for the de-criminalization of sex work, a radical position within the contemporary South African political landscape. They deploy a range of strategies to further their goals, including since 2008 the “use of creative arts—drama, dance and arts [that function] as a bridge and transitional space that enables further engagement” (“SWEAT - History Timeline”). Located, like GLYPT, in a disused train shed that has since been converted into a large, open community-space in the center of Cape Town, SWEAT offer a theatre experience to all visitors, be they politicians, researchers or newly arrived sex workers. Though they do not actively solicit audiences by taking their performance to other semi-public spaces around the city,

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they are well-known in Cape Town as an active support group open to receiving audiences from a range of backgrounds and without charge.

If, as for *Brothers*, SWEAT's theatrical production does not realize the embodied spect-actorship of Boal's Forum Theatre, it still uses an interactive theatre experience to stage and then perform the participatory qualities of a fully engaged urban public space. The sex workers begin the performance seated among the audience, who are positioned in a line across the center of the converted train shed. Different sex workers then come forward from the audience and take it in turns to participate in various short scenes and sketches. Some of these sketches involve just one performer, whilst others have three or four characters, though some sex workers always remain embedded in the audience. As soon as the performers begin a scene, they put on comical red noses and thereafter remain forbidden from speaking. They must therefore mime, or literally *act out*, their predicament. By contrast, the sex workers remaining in the audience shout out to the performer, trying to deduce the scene's circumstances through a series of "yes" and "no" questions. With a combination of gestures, nods, and shakes of the head, the details of each scene slowly emerge.

These scenarios dramatize a range of difficulties faced by sex workers. For example, they include one sex worker who has found out he is now HIV positive; another who has been arrested for practicing sex work and thus lost out on a much-needed night's business; and another who is forced to give sexual favors to a corrupt police officer to avoid arrest. That these scenarios are all acted out in silence serves to highlight the voicelessness of these marginalized urban citizens—because sex work is illegal, they are unable to appeal to the state mechanisms from which a victim of crime might normally solicit assistance—and to refocus attention on the embodied gesture that is so central to more explicitly "public" forms of urban protest (see Hughes & Parry, 305-306). Certain scenes in SWEAT's performance focus particularly on how such violence is exacerbated by a corrupt and aggressive urban governance, as much of the sex workers' suffering is shown to take place at the hands of the police.

The production details these interactions to create solidarity between sex workers and other audience members, including visitors from other NGOs and even on occasion government officials, who are invited by SWEAT as part of their wider lobbying initiative. Through this, the performance seeks to reclaim more effectively the right to safe urban membership for an otherwise marginalized urban citizenry—one product of which is, inevitably, also to challenge the conditions of racial, sexual, and economic privilege that currently regulate access to Cape Town’s few remaining public spaces. Many of these, including the well-known V&A Waterfront, are in fact “pseudo-public spaces”—private or commercialized venues masquerading as public parks and squares, yet monitored by private security teams hired to remove unwanted loiterers, especially sex workers and other marginalized populations such as the homeless.

SWEAT’s production counters these dynamics particularly through its spatial layout, which is designed to facilitate an interactive performance and, like *Brothers*, bears the qualities of participatory public spaces. These participatory elements are dramatized in the relationship between the isolated sex worker miming alone on stage and the other sex workers located in the audience. Once the mimed predicament has, despite the actor’s symbolic voicelessness, been successfully communicated, the sex workers in the audience proceed to shout out advice. These include expressions of sympathy and outrage—vocal protests against the perpetrator of violence (customer, police officer, pimp)—as well the shouting out of ways to resist or avoid the violence of the performed scenario. When no obvious solution is forthcoming, the sex workers in the audience reassure the performer that they can find refuge at SWEAT, thereby doubly foregrounding the community-center in which the performance takes place as a safe, yet participatory semi-public space. The performed solidarity between sex workers thus functions to counter the symbolic voicelessness of the red-nosed sex worker through the creation of a semi-public space of bodies in alliance—or what Susan Leigh Foster, in her account of the way in which physical bodily proximity can instill “the potential to feel connected as a community of bodies partaking in a common effort,” has described as a “choreography of protest” (410).

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As for *Brothers*, the community and activist networks in which SWEAT is connected should be considered so as to fully realize the resistant potential of this piece of protest theatre. Moreover, it further reveals how the creation of this semi-public space feeds into forms of protest that take place in the city's more explicitly public ones. As noted briefly above, where GLYPT was in part funded by and works with the Met, an organization whose urban policing is in part responsible for the urban violence that *Brothers* protests, SWEAT has no such complications. Rather, the NGO is a subsidiary member of Sisonke, a collaborative movement that was formed—and is now led—by sex workers themselves. It attempts to create safer working conditions for sex workers and to better realize their right to basic social services, healthcare and even bank accounts. They are especially committed to lobbying for the de-criminalization of sex work, a legal battle viewed as a crucial way to alleviate the most significant problems faced by sex workers. But they also protest through a range of cultural, theatrical, political and legislative activities, multiple kinds of everyday urban violence, including domestic violence in South Africa. While visitors from other NGOs and even on occasion government officials are invited by SWEAT, as part of their wider lobbying initiative, to see the above described theatre piece, the organization has worked collaboratively with the better-funded umbrella organization, Sisonke, to develop its theatrical strategies and bring them to a wider public audience.

Rather than touring community centers and other semi-public spaces, in its collaborative work with Sisonke SWEAT therefore sets out to occupy and protest in the city's few remaining public ones. This is particularly achieved through the use of “flash mobbing”.<sup>vi</sup> For example, in a “Flash Mob Against Violence” held on June 25, 2011 in Cape Town's bustling central train station, a group of people apparently looking at the departure board suddenly grab one another before freezing in various scenes of physical violence (“Flash Mob Against Violence”).<sup>vii</sup> In a few seconds, unsuspecting passersby walking through the station's central public space find themselves confronted with various scenes of routine urban violence. The freeze-framed actors portray all kinds of violent confrontations, such as muggings that take place down alleyways, assaults on sex

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workers in brothels, and acts of domestic violence that remain hidden behind the closed doors of private homes: by remaining frozen, as one documentary video of the event claims, the Flash Mob “stops violence in its tracks—literally!” (“Freeze Frame”).

By moving this performative protest from the semi-public space of SWEAT’s community train shed to the fully public space of Cape Town’s train station, a different set of objectives are realized. Clearly, such a performance does not cultivate quite so directly a sense of community between the sex workers themselves, nor does it create a safe space for the actual discussion of urban violence and possible methods to resist it, be they everyday strategies or legislative possibilities. But the emergence of a tableau of multiple bodies, locked in instances of violence, out of an apparently mundane and previously unremarkable public space commands the attention of unwitting passersby. In so doing, it encourages a wider public to engage with Sisonke’s work—to quite literally participate in political life and to contribute in this way to the construction of a safer urban environment. Sisonke here transforms a space of everyday “public gathering”—to check departure times on the train station timetable—into a politicized “public realm,” to return to Amin’s terminologies (7). Meanwhile, the video recording of the flash mob and its circulation on YouTube provides, in and of itself, a theatrical lobbying tool that can be replayed to citizens and politicians alike.

### **Conclusion: Protest Theatre as Urban Social Formations**

Both GLYPT and SWEAT raise and interrogate the inter-related concepts of protest theatre and public space through the staging and performance of a semi-public one. In response to the increasingly privatized and militarized urban environments of the neoliberal city, which discriminates against and inflicts violence upon marginalized urban populations, they construct a semi-public space in which alternative modes of urban living can be negotiated and discussed by those marginalized populations themselves. Moreover, the political and civic activity that takes

place in these semi-public spaces in turn feeds into and strengthens other modes of protest in more obviously public spaces.

We might even consider whether it is the *semi*-public qualities of these spaces that make them especially effective platforms for protesting against, and thus alleviating, urban violence. As Melike Peterson has observed, while public spaces such as parks and squares have long been considered as “crucial sites for the negation of urban diversity,” shared, semi-public spaces might in fact better “encourage social interaction” and “let us observe in more detail how people might come to terms with difference” (1069). Nevertheless, based on the examples discussed in this article, I would maintain that it is the use of these semi-public spaces to bolster interventions into more fully public ones that reconfigures these performances as especially effective forms of protest theatre. Crucially, it is through such occupations of semi-public spaces that otherwise marginalized urban inhabitants enter into the public sphere through networks of community solidarity.

It is with these qualities in mind that we might productively think of these examples of protest theatre as “urban social formations,” as Maria Daskalaki and Oli Mould define them (1-2). Rather than asking audiences to consider issues of police racism, gang violence, and discrimination against sex workers through the prism of large-scale events such as riots and revolutionary protests, they instead focus their audience’s attention on more mundane, everyday forms of violence, revealing how these are exacerbated by the privatization and militarization of urban governance in the neoliberal city. By providing a critical space in which to deliberate such predicaments, both GLYPT and SWEAT launch a theatrical protest that works to re-expand an otherwise diminishing right to the city for the marginalized urban populations they represent and who participate in their performance.

### **Author Bio**

Dominic Davies is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the English Faculty at the University of Oxford. He is the author of several journal articles and book chapters, and his first monograph

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<sup>i</sup> Perhaps the most pernicious privatization strategy of recent years is the largely unmonitored expansion of "privately owned public spaces," or "pseudo-public spaces"—spaces such as squares, parks and so on, that appear public, but that are in fact owned by real estate developers and their private backers, and that are thus subject to private rules then enforced by hired security companies. Such companies often move on the homeless and other marginalized urban populations, and are under no legal obligation to permit protest or other political activities in these spaces (see Guardian Cities).

<sup>ii</sup> BAME is widely used in the UK as an acronym to refer to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Populations. Relative to the rest of London, the Wards of Woolwich Riverside and Woolwich Common are home to "High" and "Above Average" instances of violent crime respectively. See the Metropolitan Police's interactive crime map, "Metropolitan Police Crime Mapping: Lewisham, Blackheath."

<sup>iii</sup> A number of scenes from this first, scripted section of the play can be viewed on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=brothers+tunde+euba+GLYPT](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=brothers+tunde+euba+GLYPT).

<sup>iv</sup> The highly contentious death of Mark Duggan, which sparked the 2011 England Riots and has been the subject of an ongoing legal case since, is perhaps the most famous case. It was only in March 2015 that the armed officers who shot Duggan were finally cleared by the Independent Police Complaints Commission, which nevertheless maintained that "a lack of audio or video material made it impossible to know with certainty exactly what happened" (see Davies). Another, perhaps more clear-cut case, was the shooting of a young Brazilian man, Jean Charles de Menezes, at Stockwell tube station in 2005, after he was mistakenly identified as a terrorist by the Met. They afterwards "expressed 'regret' over his death" (see "Man shot in terror hunt was innocent young Brazilian"; and for journalistic representations of this incident, see Price).

<sup>v</sup> If public space always has to be struggled for, as Don Mitchell reminds us (18), where London does at least have a history of urban public space, South African cities have never been designed, spatially, with a "public" in mind. As Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavic write, historically the "segregated urban environments of apartheid disallowed or severely curtailed interaction in public space", and "now, as streets, parks, offices and entertainment areas retreat behind walls and security booms, public interaction is set to survive mainly as a marketable concept" (n.pag.).

<sup>vi</sup> Flash-mobbing involves the sudden and unpredictable occupation of an urban space by apparently normal citizens going about their day-to-day business, and is a subcultural practice categorized by Daskalaki and Mould as an "urban social formation" (2).

<sup>vii</sup> The video of this Flash Mob can be viewed here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vswqxNvjWcY&feature=youtube\\_gdata](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vswqxNvjWcY&feature=youtube_gdata)