INTERACTIVE REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA IN POSTMODERN THEATRE: AUDIENCE AND CHARACTER INTERACTION IN BRYONY LAVERY'S *FROZEN*

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Abstract: *This study explores the interactive representation of trauma in Bryony Lavery's Frozen (2015), emphasizing the crucial role of audience and character interaction in postmodern theatre. Rather than portraying trauma as a static or detached narrative, Lavery utilizes theatrical techniques that engage the audience emotionally and cognitively, transforming them into witnesses and participants. Drawing on trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Judith Herman, the study illustrates how trauma is not only represented but transmitted through performance. The characters Nancy, Ralph, and Agnetha – each embody different aspects of trauma, inviting the audience into a shared emotional space. Through direct address, monologues, and fragmented narrative, the play destabilizes conventional storytelling and fosters catharsis. This paper analyzes how postmodern theatrical strategies blur boundaries between character and audience, enabling an immersive experience of trauma and recovery. The implications of such interactive forms are discussed, with suggestions for future research on trauma representation in contemporary performance.*

Keywords: *Postmodern theatre, trauma representation, Bryony Lavery, Frozen, catharsis.*

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Introduction

Postmodern theatre challenges traditional boundaries between performer and spectator, inviting the audience into a more active, immersive experience. This form of theatre foregrounds fragmentation, self-reflexivity, and direct audience engagement, offering a fertile ground for representing psychological and social phenomena such as trauma. Within this framework, Bryony Lavery's *Frozen* (2015) stands out as a compelling example of how theatre can serve as a medium for both representing and processing traumatic experiences.

Frozen (2015) revolves around the disappearance and murder of a young girl and the intersecting lives of her mother, the perpetrator, and a psychiatrist. Rather than dramatizing the act of violence itself, Lavery focuses on its emotional and psychological aftermath. Each character undergoes a journey of grief, guilt, and confrontation, and the audience is drawn into these experiences through carefully crafted interactive techniques. As trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman argue, trauma often resists linear narration and is instead expressed through fragmentation, repetition, and emotional disruption – all of which are central elements of *Frozen.*

This paper examines how trauma is interactively represented in Lavery's play, focusing on the role of audience-character interaction in fostering empathy and understanding. Through monologues, direct address, and the staging of memory, *Frozen* (2015) invites the audience to witness and internalize the characters' emotional realities. The play not only reflects trauma but also performs it, creating a shared space in which the audience becomes part of the healing process. This paper contributes to trauma studies in theatre by offering a model of interactive representation that fosters ethical engagement through emotional immersion.

Frozen

Frozen was first performed at the Birmingham Repertory Theater in 1998. The play, which was performed in many other theaters in England, received a Tony Award nomination for the best play on Broadway in 2004 and significantly increased the awareness of the public in America towards this issue. After the play was performed, Lavery was accused by the critics and the audience of plagiarizing the case of Lucy Partington who was missing for twenty years and found out that she was murdered. Lucy's family, like Rhona's family, did not hear about their daughter for twenty years and only found out what happened to her twenty years later. It is claimed that Lavery was inspired by this event to write *Frozen*. Marian Partington, Lucy's sister, shared in a statement that it was impossible to describe the impact her sister's loss had had on them, as if it was looking for a body at the bottom of the frozen Arctic Ocean. It is thought that Lavery named the play *Frozen*, and was inspired by this event. In

fact, it is noteworthy that the characteristics and discourses of the character of Ralph are similar to those of Frederic West, Lucy's murderer, and Robert Black, who was another serial killer (Wald, 2006, p.118). The play consists of two acts and 30 scenes. The first act consists of monologues. The main characters are Agnetha, Nancy, and Ralph, who use these monologues in order to show their frozen states to the audience. In the second act, these monologues are replaced by the dialogues between the characters in which they communicate. While pre-traumatic and post-traumatic situations are included in the play, traumatic situations or events experienced by trauma victims are not directly staged. For instance, the abuse and murder that Rhona was subjected to by Ralph, or the abuse, violence, and neglect that Ralph was subjected to as a child were reported but not directly acted on the stage. It is in line with the principle of trauma theory that traumatic experience eludes narrative memory (Wald, 2006, p.115).

In the play, a family deeply feels the impact of a traumatic situation. Their young daughter has been missing for twenty years. When she is finally searched for, it's revealed she was sexually abused and killed. Furthermore, the sexual abuser, Ralph, is also revealed to have been a victim of childhood sexual abuse himself. This situation makes the audience question the clear-cut line between victim and victimizer. It's confusing because the mother initially feels an intense desire for revenge. However, this feeling of revenge is then replaced by a sense of calm and ultimately, forgiveness. It brings the question of "Could I forgive, if it were me?" to the minds of the audience. Bryony Lavery, who is an important playwright in English Theater, includes black comedy elements from time to time; however, putting black comedy elements into a serious subject, such as sexual abuse can be considered as a controversial topic. Considering the period in which the play is written, issues such as sexual abuse and rape are among the topics that are not talked about much in the society and are mostly kept secret. In this play, Lavery aims to raise awareness in society by openly talking about sexual abuse and rape. The 1990s was a period marked by numerous cases of missing children who, upon investigation, were discovered to have been sexually abused and murdered (Aston, 2003, p. 55). So, if these are the facts of life, then everyone should talk about them and people should be aware of them. In *Frozen* (2015), alongside the theme of sexual abuse, the play conveys to the audience the psychological and sociological harm inflicted on both individuals and society, as well as the underlying causes of such acts. At the same time, whether such an act is forgivable or not is left to the empathy of the audience.

Trauma Theory and the Interactive Representation in the Play *Frozen*

Trauma, as conceptualized in contemporary theory, is not simply a response to a past event but a complex and often delayed experience that disrupts the psyche

and narrative coherence. Cathy Caruth (1996) describes trauma as a wound that speaks through belatedness and fragmentation, manifesting in symptoms that appear disconnected from the original cause. Judith Herman (1992) emphasizes how trauma undermines the self, identity, and social connection, often isolating the survivor within a private world of suffering. These theoretical insights are vividly embodied in *Frozen*, where Lavery avoids dramatizing the traumatic event itself and instead focuses on the fragmented emotional aftermath.

The play opens with a series of monologues, each character trapped in their own mental space, symbolically "frozen" in time. Nancy's pain as the mother of a missing child is not presented through overt dramatization but through repetition, silence, and bodily expression:

> I've lost nearly two stone.
>
> I've gone back to smoking.
>
> Cast-Iron Excuse.
>
> Even my mother has to let me.
>
> It's bad today because it's Rhona's
>
> birthday tomorrow and they say
>
> Missing Children often phone on their birthdays.
>
> Get in touch...
>
> She holds her stomach. Swallows.

This scene illustrates Caruth's idea of trauma being both unclaimed and repetitive. Nancy's physical responses (holding her stomach, swallowing) signal the body as a vessel for unspeakable pain. Through monologue, Lavery removes narrative distance, enabling the audience to directly receive Nancy's internal monologue and thus engage in what Shoshana Felman (1995) terms the "act of witnessing."

Ralph's character complicates the audience's emotional stance. As the perpetrator of the crime, he initially appears irredeemable. However, Lavery reveals Ralph's distorted memories of his childhood – a defense mechanism that Freud (1899) referred to as "screen memories." In one monologue, Ralph constructs a seemingly idyllic memory:

> Big kitchen... with an Aga... a dark green Aga...
>
> all copper pans gleaming in the light...
>
> mother does the meals... we all sit down to eat together...

Yet these memories are later exposed as false, shaped by a deeply abusive childhood. This disruption of narrative coherence reflects trauma's resistance to orderly recollection. The audience is prompted to experience what Felman

and Laub (1992) describe as "the crisis of witnessing" – a conflicted moral engagement that forces them to simultaneously condemn and empathize.

Agnetha, the American psychiatrist, functions as both observer and survivor. She is tasked with analyzing Ralph but is also dealing with her own unresolved trauma, which is revealed through emotional breakdowns during sessions with Ralph. In one key scene:

> Agnetha is with Ralph in the prison room.
>
> Tears are coursing down her cheeks, sobs interrupting her breathing.
>
> Ralph is watching her...
>
> Agnetha: Sorry.
>
> Ralph: Stop.
>
> Agnetha: Sorry… it's just…
>
> Ralph: Stop that.
>
> Agnetha: I'm sorry. His voice is upsetting me a little…

Here, the professional mask slips, and the boundaries between analyst and subject dissolve. This moment enacts Herman's claim that trauma is contagious – it destabilizes even those who attempt to study or contain it. The audience, witnessing Agnetha's vulnerability, is drawn further into the emotional core of the play, not as passive observers but as ethical participants.

Interactive Theatrical Techniques and Postmodern Structure

Bryony Lavery's *Frozen* (2015) exemplifies key aspects of postmodern theatre: fragmentation, non-linear narrative, character-audience interaction, and metatheatrical self-awareness. These devices are not merely stylistic; they are strategically employed to evoke emotional participation and simulate the fractured experience of trauma.

When examined in terms of monologues and direct address as tools of empathy, each character's direct engagement with the audience establishes an intimate one-on-one relationship. This direct address breaks the "fourth wall" and transforms the traditional spectator into a listener – what Felman (1995) calls an "ethical witness." Unlike conventional dialogue, which mediates emotion through interpersonal exchange, monologues in *Frozen* (2015) externalize internal monologue, placing the audience inside the character's psyche.

> Agnetha: I am not made of ice... But sometimes I feel as if I am... as if everything inside me is still...

This line is not spoken to another character, but to the audience. It is a quiet confession, performed in vulnerability, inviting silent reception. As Duggan (2020) notes, postmodern theatre often uses "emotional fragmentation and

repetition" to reflect the fractured identity of trauma survivors. Lavery's use of monologue mirrors that fragmentation while drawing the audience into the emotional labor of understanding.

From the perspective of fragmented structure and temporal disruption, the play is divided into 30 scenes across two acts, with Act I dominated by isolated monologues and Act II introducing interactions between characters. This structure reflects trauma's disruption of time and sequence. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma "does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned." By displacing narrative continuity, Lavery positions the audience within this disorienting temporal logic. Scene transitions often occur without clear progression, allowing flashbacks and present moments to bleed into one another. For example, Nancy's recurring birthday scenes blur past and present. Ralph's memory sequences blend fantasy with reality. These narrative choices elicit from the audience the same confusion and lack of closure experienced by the characters.

In terms of staging and spatial symbolism, the set design is sparse and often abstract, emphasizing isolation. Characters are frequently lit alone on stage, reinforcing their emotional solitude and the symbolic "freezing" of their trauma. Shared space rarely occurs until Act II, where dialogue emerges and the potential for transformation begins. Audience positioning – physically and emotionally – is integral to this structure. By denying visual dramatization of the abuse (no flashback scenes of violence are enacted), Lavery resists voyeurism and instead emphasizes the ethical imagination of the viewer. The audience is not shown the trauma – they are made to feel its absence, its echo, its imprint.

Finally, when considering the effects of the interactive representation of trauma, the interactive structure of *Frozen* significantly alters the audience's role, transforming them from passive spectators into emotionally engaged participants. As Smet (2024) emphasizes, the ephemeral nature of live performance intensifies emotional responses, particularly when dealing with themes such as trauma and psychological pain. Through direct address, the audience becomes a silent confidant. When Nancy reveals her inner torment or Ralph delivers his idealized but deceptive memories, the audience is forced into an ethical and emotional reckoning. They cannot distance themselves – they are implicated in the process of listening, judging, and feeling.

This proximity enables what Teasdale et al. (2021) refer to as "psychological mirroring." The audience identifies with the characters, not necessarily in terms of shared experience, but through the emotional logic of pain, grief, and confusion. Empathy becomes an active process; the viewer is emotionally worked by the performance. In particular, the scene where Agnetha breaks down while listening to a child abuse recording, and Ralph silently watches, collapses traditional boundaries between actor, character, and audience. The

silence becomes more powerful than language, pulling the audience into an uncomfortable but revealing emotional space.

Catharsis and Emotional Resolution

Originally rooted in Aristotelian tragedy, catharsis refers to the purging of pity and fear through dramatic performance. In the context of trauma theatre, catharsis is both emotional release and a potential site of transformation. Lavery reconfigures this classical idea by embedding moments of catharsis in character-audience exchanges.

Khomami (2022) conceptualizes catharsis as a therapeutic loop – where cognition and emotion attempt to reconcile traumatic tension. In *Frozen* (2015), cathartic moments emerge not through resolution but through raw emotional visibility. Nancy's acceptance of her daughter's death, Agnetha's trembling confession, and even Ralph's sudden awareness of his fractured psyche – all these moments serve as catalysts for audience introspection.

> Nancy: I thought I would kill him.
>
> Then I thought: No. That would be too easy for him.
>
> Then I thought: Maybe I could forgive him.
>
> And now... I just feel cold.

This is not forgiveness in the traditional sense – it is emotional exhaustion, detachment, and clarity. It is a moment of release, both for Nancy and the audience. The play ends not with closure but with emotional resonance.

Lavery's emphasis on indirect representation – allowing trauma to speak through silence, fragmentation, and audience reflection – aligns with contemporary trauma theory. It honors the complexity of psychological pain without simplifying it. Instead, the theatre space becomes a site of shared witnessing and potential healing.

Conclusion

Bryony Lavery's *Frozen* (2015) is a masterclass in representing trauma through postmodern theatrical techniques. By abandoning linear narrative and embracing direct audience interaction, Lavery creates a performance space where trauma is not only observed but experienced. Drawing on trauma theory – particularly the works of Caruth, Herman, and Felman – the play enacts rather than explains psychological rupture. Each character embodies a distinct aspect of trauma: Nancy's grief, Ralph's distorted memory, Agnetha's empathetic breakdown. These narratives intersect not just with each other but with the audience's perception, creating a layered experience of emotional resonance.

Interactive theatrical strategies – monologues, spatial isolation, and fragmented narrative – blur the lines between performance and testimony. The audience becomes not only witness but participant, engaging in catharsis and emotional reflection. This study demonstrates that *Frozen* (2015) does not merely depict trauma – it performs its transmission. It offers a model for how contemporary theatre can ethically engage with suffering, fostering empathy without exploitation. Future research might compare *Frozen* with other trauma-based plays across cultural contexts or explore the impact of emerging technologies (e.g., virtual theatre) on trauma representation and audience involvement.

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