

Lying for truth

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This stage is a dangerous space. Less for me, than for you. I might fall flat on my face, metaphorically, even literally, and leave humiliated. It wouldn't be the first time, nor the last. Such experiences are part of being human.

No, the people most at risk here are you, because you have opened yourselves to the possibility of being deceived. That too, is part of what it is to be human. We can only protect ourselves from such risks as humiliation or deceit by policing our relationships to the point of ruin.

In coming here, in accepting the ritual conventions of sitting around this stage, you knowingly expose yourselves to the artifice of whoever occupies the space. For now, it's me, and the risk is low because I'm not a skilled performer. Or is that a lie, a little self-deprecation to lull you into a false sense of security while my words and images draw you down a path you might not be willing to take were you more aware of it?

All over London, there are spaces like this, where the normal rules of human interaction are reversed. If we met in the café and I lied to you, you'd feel affronted, justifiably angry, if you found out about it later. Deliberate deceit is an assault not just on another person but on the bonds that make families, communities and societies of individuals. In some circumstances, it is a crime. If you are found out, you can go to prison for lying, like some politicians, policemen and journalists. If you are found out.

But here, on this stage, people lie all the time. They dress up and make up. They pretend to be people they are not, to have had experiences unknown to them, to have emotions they do not have. By imitating appearance, they make people believe in substance.

They do it to manipulate others, to make them feel, think or know things that, of course, they do not. They lie to tell a truth. And they fail if they don't manipulate us well enough, if an audience leaves indifferent or bored, saying to one another 'Well, I never really believed in him, did you?'

The difference is that we know what happens on stage is not real, though it might be true. So we suspend disbelief; we permit ourselves to be manipulated. We play this game.

Theatre, like all art, is licensed deception and, because it is dangerous to open ourselves to deceit, we want it controlled. So we have this ritual space in which we accept—no, ask—to be manipulated, secure because we can see the boundaries, metaphorically and literally. It's a safe space for an important game.

Why do we do this? Why invest so much time, money, effort, energy, imagination and creativity in making and sharing art?

Because it gives us pleasure, certainly: it diverts and entertains in an existence that is by no means all sunshine and roses.

But also because art helps us understand that existence differently, better, even, than we could without its particular ways of knowing. Because it helps us with the existential questions that all human beings face at some point in their lives. Because, we hope, it helps us get closer to what is true, genuine, important, valuable—to what might be meaningful in our lives, separately or together.

Art is a way of lying for truth. And since we know to be wary of paradox—how long have we been fighting for peace now?—we are wise to treat it with great caution. Art is one space where the end really can justify the means, and history shows how catastrophic that idea can be. To say it again, art is dangerous.

Today, art is as central to human life and society as it has ever been, perhaps more, but its influence is overlooked and underestimated. We prefer to think of ourselves as rational beings whose decisions are governed by intellectual thought. The language and methods of science—vital as they are in their own field—have been conscripted to flatter our unfounded belief that we are in control of our lives.

It's nonsense, of course. Human beings struggle to be in control of their own minds, let alone anything else: the critical difference between us may only be that some of us know it and some of us don't.

Still, we are culturally committed to rationalism, to scientific method and ultimately to fictions such as intelligence dossiers and evidence-based policy. We believe that what is said by the employee of a university is true and what is said on this stage is—well, just not the same thing. We believe that words printed in a

book are true and that words composed of pixels on a screen are—well, just not the same thing.

One result of this prejudice is that we increasingly rely on rationalist methods to examine art and its effects on society. Plans, targets, key performance indicators, learning outcomes, impacts—the language and theories of other disciplines have gained an unhealthy ascendancy in how the arts are managed today.

Half-understood concepts from the natural and social sciences and from other less reputable sources, such as business management, disfigure public policy and, as we have seen in the health sector, encourage people to tell real lies.

You can't understand much about the value of a theatre performance by counting the audience or calculating what they spent in the bar. You are likely not just to waste your time, but also to miss what is important.

Ultimately you may even interfere in that delicate relationship between artist and audience and damage what was valuable in the first place.

The misapplication to art of science's ways of knowing encourages people to underestimate art's own potential for truth.

Because art is often non-rational, we think it cannot be relied on as a source of knowledge. Because it uses banned methods like deception and manipulation, we mistrust it. Because its lessons are so hard to explain—which is why we have art in the first place—we think they must be worthless.

It's a typically rationalist mistake, and a dangerous one. We need to pay attention to art because it is so powerful. If we don't, we may not realise when bad people use its power against us.

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