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NEW WOMEN PERFORMANCE WRITERS; ROSE ENGLISH AND HOLLY HUGHES

Jools Gilson Ellis

ABSTRACT This paper suggests a particular framework for investigating contemporary women performance artists who write and perform written texts. It argues that these texts are an important force in contemporary feminist writing, and that they are largely ignored as such. Two texts are analysed in detail, these are; Rose English's *Walks on Water* and Holly Hughes' *World Without End*. This is guided by the play between the physical presence of the performer, and the concern within the texts to destabilise a complete sense of self/refuse the simplicity of binaries. The paper argues that these texts, and these women's performance of them, crack open the possibilities of the performative.

Performance Writing

The term 'Performance Writing' arose out of planning sessions held during the first few months of 1993, at Dartington College of Arts.¹ These planning sessions were convened to develop a proposal for a new undergraduate degree route in Performance Writing. This was validated in May of that year, and the first undergraduates began in September 1994. Much of these early planning sessions were spent trying to develop a way to theorise a new area, and this was; writing in relation to performance. We meant by this, not only the traditional way in which writing related to performance by way of the theatre script, but also writing in relation to performance by way of sculpture and installation, by way of the somatic, in dance or physical theatre, by way of the song lyric, and by way of the new sound technologies, in which synthesisers can play words/sentences, or where blowing into an electronic flute can play pre-recorded text. In using the term 'performance writing' we were referring to a writing practice that was about words and letters, rather than using the term 'writing' in any metaphorical sense. We proposed three linked areas of performative practice; in performance these words/letters might manifest themselves as (i) visual, tactile or graphic, (ii) somatic or technological, (iii) sonic or phonetic, and might be present before or emerge out of performance.

It is clear that although there is a considerable amount of writing about performance, there is little that describes or theorises about how such writing relates to performance in all its variety of forms; from sculpture/installation, to theatre script, to song lyric. The articulation of an area called 'performance writing' is the primary framework I will be drawing on in this essay. A subsidiary framework relates this structure to women who write and who also perform this writing.

Whilst women have a tradition of writing poetry and novels, writing texts for performance in the public realm has always been a thankless task for all but a very few women playwrights. It is 65 years since Virginia Woolf told us we should be thankful to Aphra Behn because she earned us the right to speak our minds,² yet it is still the case that Mrs Behn could have seen more productions of plays by women in 17th century London, than you

would be likely to find in a London less than four years before the 21st century.³ All new dramatists have difficulty getting produced; a woman dramatist is even less likely to see her play produced, and if there is no production, then publication is unlikely. If she does achieve production, the writer is rarely present during the whole rehearsal process. In production, other people control the dynamic of performance and utter her written text. What happens then, when the traditional division between the writer and the performer is removed? And does this have particular implications if this performance writer is a woman?

There are many women who could usefully, I believe, be analysed by the performance writing framework I offer here. These would include Karen Finley, Laurie Anderson, Bobby Baker, Annie Griffin, as well as the two women I will be looking at in particular here; Rose English and Holly Hughes. All these women are problematic. They do not write to publish their words on paper, but to utter them in the vividness of live performance. They do not write only to offer their words up for performance by others, but to speak their words themselves. These particular women did not train in Theatre or English Literature, but in Fine Art. Their writing and the vocalisation of that writing is a choice that does not originate from the inevitable compulsions of a discipline. This writing is not necessarily the first or 'original' thing from which the performance emerges. They do not participate fully/at all in the hierarchical structures of theatre, nor in the pressure to 'publish' of the literary world. Their published writing is adjunctive to the act of performance, and sits problematically in the canon of English/American literature, and of theatre.

Women's relationship to writing has been an important area of enquiry, during three decades of feminist cultural discourse. The implications of a Derridean analysis of subjectivity and meaning have been crucial for a gender locked culturally into a system of binary categories, where the side of the binary accorded them is always characterised by lack. As long ago as 1976, Hélène Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (Cixous, 1976), cried out for women to write as a way of subverting such patriarchal binary systems. My analysis here extends this enquiry into performance. These women place their speaking bodies at the centre of their performances, and their playful use of language, physicality, spectacle and presence, enables them to both stabilise and fracture a fully present sense of themselves as performance writers. Having their own text in their mouths in the fleeting presence of live performance folds them into completeness, at the same time as opening up the possibilities of fissure and shift. If she is fully present before us, speaking her own text, might we not confuse this with a fully present subjectivity? I argue in this paper that the strength of this physical presence, combined with a concern within these texts to destabilise such a complete sense of self, and refuse the false simplicity of binaries, constitutes their contemporaneity; '... and then he calls me 'Baby'. Now I object on two counts--I don't believe in being completely any one thing, and I don't like anyone calling me baby until they take their pants down.' Holly Hughes transcribed in Croft and Macdonald (1993, p. 9).

And so; let me speak to you of joy:

Rose English

Rose English first performed her text *Walks on Water* in November, 1988, in London. In her introduction to this text, published in the collection of the same name, English writes:

Walks on Water was written at a time when Clause 28 was being passed by Parliament and hurricanes which previously hardly ever happened here, seemed to be on the increase. A climate of intransigence and mediated amnesia seemed to have settled over the land. One thing that this intransigence seemed to lack was any sense of joy and it was this that I longed for. (English, 1992, p. 3).

It is English's 'sense of joy', that I would like to use as a starting point. This 'text'/performance is both joyful and sassy. It is also playful, witty and spectacular. English constructs for herself a three-act play of epic scale, using the operatic breadth, width and height of the proscenium stage (originally the Hackney Empire Theatre); and she stands unashamedly at the centre of it, grinning. English casts herself as the lead, but has a miraculously skilled 'double' to perform acrobatic feats. She has a supporting chorus of twelve men, who play Father Christmases in the first act, trees in the second, and water sprites in the third (complete with blue spangly swimming trunks). Bodies fly up to the Gods, the chorus echoes English, and dance at her beckoning.

The first words of the text are spoken by English who announces; 'In the beginning was the word' (English, 1992, p. 5). However, before anything is spoken, stage directions describe a whole stream of activity; a follow spot comes up on the lower part of the stage right curtain, and Teresa's (English's double) hands emerge from beneath the curtain and are seen to lift it. The curtain continues to rise until Teresa's whole body is revealed and she flies out with the curtain. As Teresa ascends, the stage is revealed; a painted backdrop, and wings painted in the neoclassic style, a semi-circle of gold chairs. The chorus enters two at a time from opposite wings; twelve men dressed in long white wigs/beards and red velvet togas. Rose descends from the Gods wearing an identical costume to Teresa. She dances. She pauses centre stage, and only then speaks out to the audience, 'In the beginning was the word'. But this is already a joke. From the outset the word in performance is destabilised and problematised away from the security of its central position in the dramatic canon, and as the traditional source of 'well rounded subjectivities/ characters'.

Like every traditional heroine, Rose gets lost in the woods in Act II, only this wood is neither literary nor plywood, but made up of twelve living men dressed up as trees:

A great big forest seems to have grown up suddenly!
I feel I've lost my way, I've lost my thread.
I just don't know where I am in this outdoors.
Oh the indoors
Oh the outdoors in the indoors
Oh the coming from the outdoors into the indoors to look
again at the outdoors
Oh so complex, so baffling
(English, 1992, p. 18)

This recalls much of the preoccupations of deconstruction, despite its tone of pantomime. English speaks here of the binary outdoors/indoors, at a time when binaries at all, are on shaky ground. She refers here to:

(i) the literal indoors of the theatre, and the outdoors of outside the theatre,

- (ii) the convention of having outdoor scenes on the inside of a theatre,
- (iii) the fact that the audience has precisely '(come) from the outdoors into the indoors to look again at the outdoors' and
- (iv) that this 'outside' in the 'inside' is made up of twelve men pretending to be trees.

Derrida speaks of there being no primordial or self-same present that is not already infiltrated by the trace--an opening of the 'inside' of the moment to the 'outside' of the interval (Derrida, 1978, p. 212). One imagines, Derrida saying so, dressed up as a tree, tripping as he tries to keep up with the step ball-changes of the chorus . . . English is just as concerned to destabilise the metaphysics of presence, and to explore the deferral and flux of meaning as professional theorists. English and her forest of dancing men is an accessible, witty and intelligent image, and, I would argue, that accessibility and entertainment do not preclude a serious political point.

At the centre of this text/performance is a revelling in theatricality; a joke about the artifice of theatre. The action of the title 'walking on water' makes its appearance in the third act. English, described by Deborah Levy as 'a glitteringly costumed show-woman, six foot of immense charisma and wit' (Levy, 1992, p. viii), attempts the impossible and tries to walk on water, saying:

Oh! (Surprised)
Well. (Trying to sell them the idea)
What do you think about that?
Not bad, eh?
It's a reinterpretation
Called 'Walking in the Water'
(English, 1992, p. 26)

Not even six foot of Rose English, however much glitter she has on her costume can walk on water; but she can re-interpret, and she can use her remarkable presence and wit to do so. On one level, her whole text is set up, and even named to bring her to this pool in Act III, and her attempt to walk on the surface of the water. Up till now, theatrical effects of the grand scale, and the faithful Teresa have provided much of the spectacle. But here, English is alone, and the promised spectacle, and all her revelling in the suspense of attempting it, bring her damply to fail. It is a triumph nonetheless, as she asserts her powers of interpretation and re-interpretation. The corporeal English may not be able to perform the impossible, but she nonetheless has agency; is at the centre of her text, speaks her words herself, and both enjoys the vastness of the spectacle, and the popping of its balloon.

The backdrop in this act (Act III) is painted with a vast waterfall. Later in the same act, English uses an old theatre technique of altering the direction of lighting to make a solid surface (in this case the painted waterfall) translucent to reveal something behind. English uses this technique to reveal a real and very huge waterfall behind the painting of the artificial waterfall. In this display of spectacle, English brings real water into an Act repeatedly preoccupied with pretending there is water, even insofar as having the all-male chorus of water-sprites 'do a dance indicating the fall of water' (Stage Direction, p. 27). The revelation of the 'real' waterfall, recalls English's commentary about the 'inside' on the

'outside'; since neither waterfalls are really 'real' waterfalls, both 'pretend' to be the outside on the inside of a theatre. English repeatedly draws attention to the audience's usually silent complicity in suspending their disbelief at such stage conventions, and because she has done this, the meaning of the waterfalls becomes more complex. We have been caught accepting that this (the painting, and the fall of real water) could represent a waterfall, and the play on their reality/artificiality once again investigates the metaphysics of presence.

At the end of this act, as her cast leave complaining that they've seen it all before in Showboat, Teresa, Rose's silent stunt-woman, has this exchange with the solitary English;

Rose: Wait!
Don't go!
Don't you go!
Where are you going?
Teresa: I don't want to be an acrobat anymore, Rose.
Rose: You don't want to be an acrobat?
Teresa: No!
Rose: What do you want to be?
Teresa: I want to be a comedian.
Rose: So do I!
(English, 1992, p. 31)

English has a literal double in this text, one that is silent, but physically miraculous; she can do tumble after tumble, somersault over a chorus of twelve men, jump through burning hoops, yet English constructs a choreography which has Teresa exiting, as Rose enters breathlessly to take the applause. The seamlessness reserved for film, of editing in stuntwomen/body models/dancers to appear like the lead actress (body model for Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, a dancer for the dance sequences in *Flashdance*) is parodied here; we know it's a joke. It is also a comment on the idea of the unified subject; this lead is never entirely one thing. The whole machinery of the traditional theatre is hauled into action, to construct and support English's presence. At the text's closure, this prominent binary of Rose and Teresa is dissolved, or becomes whole. Both women want to do the same thing; to be comedians. Refusing the simplicity of oppositional binaries can mean accord.

Holly Hughes

Holly Hughes is an American performance writer. In the following analysis, I will be referring mainly to Hughes' *World Without End* (1990), and to *Touching on That Great Divide* (Croft & Macdonald, 1993), an article published in Hybrid, which includes a transcript of a conference speech given by Hughes in 1988.

Holly Hughes is outspoken, funny and affirms a sexuality which is vulgar, joyful, and raunchy. She has written plays and performance texts, and characterises herself as 'a lesbian scientist, politically incorrect, a former anorexic, heterosexual and Jesus freak . . . a "painter in remission"' (Croft & Macdonald, 1993, p. 7). Rarely accepted by any political/sexual grouping wholeheartedly (feminisms/lesbianisms/the NEA⁴), it is the rejection of factionalised politics at all, which is Hughes' most consistent theme. *World Without End* is a performance monologue, first performed in New York in 1989, which

celebrates her mother's sexuality. Whereas English's *Walks on Water* is a performance about performativity, *World Without End* is a performance 'about' autobiographical fiction. Despite these contrasts, Hughes is as concerned as English to de-stabilise a unitary, fully present subjectivity. This personal narrative investigates the nature of narrativity itself. The text of *World Without End* indicates that there should be only an armchair, a table, and two vases of flowers on the stage. Unlike the spectacular *Walks on Water*, *World Without End* relies much more on the singular performative presence of the central performer. In such a comparatively empty space, the objects within it take on a particular resonance. Quite early in the text, Hughes tosses the flowers in one of the vases upstage, and takes a long slow drink; this is something she repeats several times throughout the performance. Hughes' action here aggressively deconstructs a traditional icon of femininity; the vase of flowers, and places herself, and not the flowers, at the site of ingestion. I would argue that, in a text frequently concerned with shifting subjectivities, the drinking of this water, from this receptacle, fleetingly asserts a unified subject. This 'swallowing' functions to ground the body in flux into silent and full (if fleeting), presence; the water both fills up a lack, and asserts that such a lack was never there. She cannot speak her text and drink at the same time. Rose English cannot walk on water, because she has too much 'presence', or not enough, or both. Hughes assures another version of her 'presence' by drinking instead of speaking. She has no singular and complete subjectivity, and yet when she drinks and does not utter her text, Hughes performs completeness.

Early in *World Without End* Hughes describes sitting in a Denny's Restaurant with her mother on one of her father's 'Golf nights';

My mother straightens her bifocals she fold up her menu:
"I want to ask you a question young lady. Do you like
boys
or girls
or both."
She giggles nervously. But I guess that's the only way anyone giggles.
I lean forward, my nipples grazing the shrimp in a basket:
'Both,' I said. 'I like both'.
'Well no wonder you can't hold down a full-time job,' my
mother says.
(Hughes, 1990, p. 13)

'Both' and 'a full time job' seem curiously antithetical here, and Hughes' use of such antithesis refers to a powerful cultural desire for binaries of sexuality. 'Liking both' is disruptive, and leads to disorder in the social body. Hughes' monosyllabic 'both' dissolves the binary, and refuses to be cited/sited in either of the oppositional camps of the heterosexual/homosexual dyad. In *Touching On That Great Divide* Hughes elaborates on this question of 'both';

But don't call me bisexual . . . --the fact is it's the stupidest word I ever heard, it
doesn't pay the rent and don't be calling me polymorphously perverse either unless
it's perverse to believe that the very existence of oral sex proves beyond the shadow
of a doubt that there is a God. (Croft & Macdonald, 1993, p. 8)

In comparing these two extracts, what is clear is that 'both' does not equate with 'bisexual'. While refusing the closed completeness of any sexual position, Hughes refers to the enjoyment of sex itself as a defining paradigm of sexuality.⁵ Back in the Denny's restaurant, the waitress overhears the conversation between Hughes and her mother, and . . . swoops down, apologising, cocktail sauce in one hand, tartare sauce in the other: 'Oh, forgive me, I should have asked! You can have both! Here you go, help yourself! (Hughes, 1990, p. 13)

In *World Without End* Hughes helps herself to both, and rejects the very idea of 'bothness'. Another version of this critique of factionalisation, is Hughes' blurring of the autobiography/fiction binary. Hughes moves between what could refer to 'real' events; the meal at Denny's, her dying mother being taken to the hospital, and elaborate metaphors describing a woman who has a sexuality so abundant, that it ripens tomatoes;

There is no word in French, or in any other language for the kind of woman my mother was, no word for a woman and a mother at the same time, no word for a woman who had that kind of power over tomatoes. (Ibid, p. 22)

As this scenario unfolds, we do not recognise this woman, as the same 'Holly's mother' who leaned across a table in Denny's and said 'Well, no wonder you can't hold down a full-time job'. (Ibid, p. 13) Such a failure of recognition arises from a desire for psychological realism, and continuity, but Hughes refuses this. She constructs a text which is partly an elegy to her mother, partly an investigation into her own position in the narrative of her mother's death, and a celebration of sexuality as a site of hope. There are no fully-rounded and 'complete' characters in this story; least of all the protagonist. In the same episode, Hughes goes on to describe the following exchange with her naked mother;

Holly if something's bothering you, and you want to know the answer to it, just remember the answer is inside you.' And with that she reached inside herself and then took her hand out and oh! I could see how wet she was! And that smell! Let me tell you about that smell! (Ibid, p. 20)

Hughes, in italicised commentary on the spoken text, is concerned that this is spoken in the tone 'of an initiate witnessing a sacred ritual, a mystery revealed i.e. she does not wish it to be interpreted as an incestuous event. But, Hughes is on dangerous ground here, this is more than a ritual of mother/daughter revelation; it is forbidden ritual. The vagina is where we came from, and to see your mother's: indeed witness her reaching inside herself, is both to assert the primary binary of mother and child, and to assault the taboos around witnessing such an action. In such an assault, Hughes places her gazing self before her mother; this is not a scenario about division or separation, but about recognition. The smell of her mother's wetness lingers for Hughes, and despite her stage directions, this both undoes the traditional stereotype of vaginas smelling bad, and suggests her own sexual arousal. More importantly, Hughes provides her mother with an abundant sexuality, and dramatises it as a source of hope for her daughter. In refusing the autobiography/fiction binary, Hughes is able to flirt with the audience about whether this story is the description of a real or a metaphorical event. We want to know; did her mother really do that?

On one level this spoken/written imagery recalls Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975-77) in which Schneeman, naked, extracted a paper scroll from her vagina, and read the text she had written on it. Despite substantial discourse investigating L'Ecriture Feminin, and notions of 'Writing from the Body', this performance, which does the unthinkable, and quite literally pulls the written text from inside the female body, has received almost no serious critical analysis.⁶ Is the theoretical body simply less threatening, than the literal body? In the extract given here, Hughes does not perform her imagery literally, she places this description within the written/spoken text. As Hughes' mother reveals her wet hand to her daughter, the 'wetness' is offered as 'the answer'; a kind of transcendental signified. Hughes flirts with (w)holeness in this text; she gulps down water, and has a mother who is wet inside--who knows where 'the answer' is.

Towards the end of *World Without End* Hughes' tone changes and becomes confrontational; Croft/Macdonald refer to this as a characteristic of Hughes' work; 'If anything defines her work it is the fine line she treads between provoking antagonism and pleasure at the same time' (Croft & Macdonald, 1993, p. 7). Being physically present in front of her audience, Hughes can direct this straight at them:

Let me ask you a question. Take all the time you want. Here's something that's been bothering me lately. Why is it, if men don't hate women, like they claim they don't, why do they ask such stupid questions, like 'Where are all the great women artists?' Is that a question for me? You know where they are they're out in the kitchen, for chrissakes, making you a fucking cup of coffee, okay? (Hughes, 1990, p. 25)

In performance Hughes is present before us, speaking a text that she herself has written, that is sometimes autobiographical, and sometimes not. The traditional opposition between speech and writing is here undone; this is neither spontaneous speech, nor an actor performing a playtext; neither autobiography nor fiction. In this extract, Hughes takes advantage of a tradition of the metaphysics of presence. It is to her political advantage for her voice to be heard as a metaphor of truth, and she reinforces this by addressing the audience directly, mimicking the dynamics of a spontaneous conversation, despite the fact that she is the only one permitted to speak.

This text/performance is witty, poignant, and fiercely unromantic. Its alignment of sexuality and optimism is original and sometimes funny. It persistently interrogates the closure of binary oppositions, and refuses, as Hughes does, to be positioned within such a structure, to opt for received notions of what it means to be a woman, a lesbian, a daughter, a feminist.

In the opening pages of this paper, I quoted Virginia Woolf referring to Aphra Behn in *A Room of One's Own*. In many ways Behn and Woolf serve as vivid examples of a literary and performative history of female over/under sexualisation. Woolf, in calling for us to acknowledge Behn as the fore-mother of professional women writers, perhaps also asks us to acknowledge Behn's sexuality, and sense of play. English and Hughes are inheritors of these women, even in the contrasts of their writing. But these women go with their written words, and utter them before us. They avoid the practical problems of getting their texts produced by someone else, by doing it themselves, and it is through this that they achieve publication. Once published, the written performance text is open to other people

producing the work, with the same copyright protection and royalty laws that protect more conventional performance texts. Hughes shows a particular openness about such reproduction of her texts, indeed, she has even on occasion encouraged 'cut and paste' according to need. Her only explicit stipulation [in *Well of Horniness* (Hughes, 1988) and *Lady Dick* (Hughes, 1991)] is to retain the all-female cast. Hughes' willingness to have her texts altered by subsequent producers, shows a remarkable lack of preciousness towards these written versions of her performances. English's texts are often very demanding in terms of practical requirements, and this may well prove a major discouragement in reproducing her work. She is much less 'chatty' in her stage directions than Hughes, in fact they are often funny in their understatement, calling for waterfalls and complex flying procedures. This may well be a different version of the shared concern with Hughes for the performance in the first instance, and the written text only subsequently.

I am writing this in February of 1996. My contemporaneity, poised as it is for all of us, forever on the threshold of the present, is far distant from you who read this now. Since writing the early drafts of this paper, I have seen both of these performance writers one in interview and one in performance; Holly Hughes in conversation at the ICA⁷, and Rose English in *Tantamount Esperance* at the Royal Court.⁸ Both women move on, and as I fix them in these words, so they go on without them, and change. Hughes, diminutive and fiery before me, in the upstairs room at the ICA, laughs as I mention Derrida in relation to her work, when his writing is 'so ugly'. English, unrecognisable in drag as a Victorian gentleman Tantamount Esperance, once again surrounds herself and her text with spectacle; figures walk on air, silver ribbons erupt out of mouths, spinning bodies appear and disappear. I would argue that these women, for whom the performance of their writing is the focus of their creative work, write some of the most contemporary of contemporary feminist literatures, because they take the terrible risk of preferring their texts in their bodies than on the page. However playful and radical the written text might be, it is always reified in the act of printing. Rose English and Holly Hughes are witty and intelligent performers of their writing, and full, if smirking, participators in contemporary cultural discourse.

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¹ The following people were regularly part of this planning team; Ric Allsopp, Melinda Drowley, Jools Gilson-Ellis, John Hall, Donna-Lee Iffla and Simon Thorne.

² 'All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, . . . for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds' (Woolf, 1929, p. 63).

³ Between 1660 and 1720 over 60 plays by women were produced in London. This is more than were produced in London over the same amount of years between 1920 and 1980 (Cotton, 1980, pp. 16-21, as cited by Case, 1988, pp. 38-39). In October 1991, a survey of the autumn seasons of 48 regional theatres, revealed that out of 228 productions, ten were of plays written by women. In London's West End (including the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford), three out of sixty-one productions were by women. This survey was completed by Annie Castledine and published in her introduction to *Plays by Women: Nine*. (Castledine, 1991, pp. ix x).

⁴ NEA National Endowment for the Arts; US equivalent of the Arts Council who rescinded Hughes' grant in the election year of 1990, causing a political scandal.

⁵ The article 'From Lady Dick to Lady Like' by Kate Davy (Davy, 1993), is important in relation to this. Davy's main argument is that *World Without End* is less 'lesbian' than Hughes' earlier work. I have reservations about Davy's point here. I read Hughes' heterosexual sex in *World* as the playing out of her connection to her mother, which evokes sexuality as a source of hope. The man who pursues and is rejected by Hughes in *World* finally has sex with her because he cries when he learns of her mother's death. This act feminises him. Hughes is as active in this sex as her partner; she decides it will happen, and it is her mouth and her text which describe this act as 'porking'. *World* is less overtly lesbian than Hughes' earlier and subsequent work, but I do not agree that this makes it less lesbian. It makes it more Queer, since it dares to dramatise straight sex as jubilant, for a woman who identifies as lesbian.

⁶ For brief references to Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* see Case (1988, pp. 57 58) and Juno & Vale (1991, pp. 72-73).

⁷ Holly Hughes In conversation at the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London) 5 April 1994.

⁸ Rose English in *Tantamount Esperance* at the Royal Court, as part of the Barclays New Stages festival, 28 May 1994.