Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11
Patriotic Dissent

Edited by Jenny Spencer
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Katy Ryan

On 5 November 2003, a medic attached an IV to a dead man’s arm and wheeled the body on a gurney out of Abu Ghraib. This staged medical emergency, directed by the CIA, was intended to prevent prisoners from seeing a corpse and rioting. Suspected of involvement in the bombing of a Red Cross station in Baghdad that killed twelve people, Manadel al-Jamadi had been apprehended by Navy SEALs the previous morning, moved through two military bases where he was beaten, kicked, assaulted with rifle muzzles and, according to court testimony, stripped, doused with cold water, thrown in a Humvee, and taken to Abu Ghraib. He arrived naked from the waist down with a sandbag over his head. Jamadi was suspended from a barred window, his arms shackled and twisted behind his back, and questioned by Mark Swanner, a CIA interrogator. A former Abu Ghraib prisoner described what he and others heard that morning: “We listened to his soul crack.”1 Within an hour, Jamadi was dead.2

Jamadi, a “ghost detainee,” was referred to in U.S. documents as a person associated with an Other Government Agency (OGA), an acronym “commonly used to protect the identity of the CIA.”3 While in custody, Jamadi was not assigned an identification number. Sergeant Hydrue Joyner, who worked the day shift at Abu Ghraib in 2003, recalled his confusion about this process:

When I first got there and they first told me about O.G.A., I’m like, “Wait a minute, you don’t add these people to the actual count? Like if I have 50 detainees, but I have these five O.G.A.’s, I don’t really have 55 detainees, I only have 50?” They say, “Yes.” I said, “Well, what about the five souls that are in those cells?” “They’re not there.” “Well yes they are, because I can see them.” “Yeah, you can see them, but they’re not there.”4

This practice of ghosting renders prisoners invisible to family members, the Red Cross, and the protections of due process and the Geneva Conventions. Major General Antonio Taguba reported that at least once at Abu Ghraib the 320th Military Police Battalion “held a handful of ‘ghost
detainees' (6–8) for OGAs that they moved around within the facility to hide them from a visiting International Committee of the Red Cross." You can see them, but they're not there.

Amid anger and confusion about what to do with Jamadi's corpse, the CIA ordered his body packed in ice and left in a shower overnight. Soldiers were told he died of a heart attack. In one of the hundreds of Abu Ghraib photographs documenting torture, Specialist Sabrina Harman appears, grinning and flashing a thumbs up next to Jamadi's body. Harman also took pictures of his face and body and later insisted, "This guy did not die of a heart attack. Look at all these other existing injuries that they tried to cover up." Military and civilian pathologists declared Jamadi's death a homicide, citing asphyxia as the cause. He had five broken ribs, which would have made breathing, especially in a position that constricts the lungs, excruciating. According to the chief forensic pathologist of the New York Police Department, Dr. Michael Baden, the hood made everything worse: "By putting that goddam hood on, they can't see if he's conscious." Or suffocating to death.

The law, observes Alice Rayner, "does not necessarily teach us how to live with ghosts," a statement that takes on new relevance in the unintended context of illegal detention. Rayner's "necessarily" allows that the law can do the cultural work of attending to the ongoing forces of history, and international human rights treaties can be understood as preliminary responses to the demands of the dead. But legal mechanisms too often attempt to contain ghosts (memory, grief, complexity)—to categorize and "explain away the losses." The pedagogy of haunting that we need, Rayner argues, is the province of theatre, a practice that "uniquely insists on the reality of ghosts." The stage, long preoccupied with secrets, provides one way to make visible what is strategically hidden from public view. In Hamlet's final call to "take up the bodies," Herbert Blau hears a world of difference between "take up" and "remove," "having to do with the responsibility of a political order." The bodies of those who have died in U.S. custody may have been removed, but they have not been taken up.

On 26 April 2007, the Living Theatre inaugurated its newest theatrical space in lower Manhattan with a revival of Kenneth H. Brown's play The Brig. Set in a U.S. military prison in Japan in 1957, the play documents, at excruciating volume and pace, a regimen of arbitrary rules, corporal punishment, and violently controlled movement. On the orders of three guards and a warden, prisoners endure strip searches, push-ups, verbal abuse, and punches to the stomach. First staged by the Living Theatre in 1963, The Brig won an Obie Award for Best Drama. The production prompted calls for Congressional investigations into military prisons and landed twenty-five people in jail, including the theatre's founders, Judith Malina and Julian Beck. The IRS shut down the Living Theatre at its 14th Street location for, ostensibly, unpaid taxes, but the company managed a final, famed performance of The Brig, inviting audience members to enter the
theatre through an open window or nearby tenement roof. After the performance, police arrested the cast, the crew, and a few supporters who had refused to leave the building. The tax evasion charges against Malina and Beck were dropped, but each was cited for contempt of court. The Living Theatre moved *The Brig* to a theatre on 42nd Street before the company relocated to Europe. Malina and Henon Reznikov, the Living Theatre’s co-directors in 2007, cited the attacks on 11 September 2001, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and torture in U.S.-run prisons as decisive factors in the company’s decision to return to New York and stage a play about power and brutality. “For years we’ve had to go to Europe to make a living,” Malina remarked. “But right now we are determined to make this new space work. [...] Italy loves us—but America needs us.”

*The Brig* works as both a metaphor for authoritarian systems and a reenactment of a particular prison experience. A former Marine, Brown spent thirty days in a U.S. brig at Camp Fuji in Okinawa (also called the Fujiyama brig), and the play is, in his words, “all fact.” For over forty years, he has been assuring skeptics that he did not invent anything: “The Marine Corps wrote it.” The performance won another Obie in 2007 for Best Direction and Best Ensemble, but audiences were small, and the production did not rouse New York City residents the way the company had hoped. Several critics indicated that the script should have been updated to reflect a new era of torture and sadism. Things have gotten worse, this argument went, and the production did not reckon with the worsening: *The Brig*’s guards appeared too “professional” (Peter Wood) and too “tame” (Alexis Greene) in the wake of a U.S. soldier holding a naked human being on a leash. Charles Isherwood wrote in the *New York Times* that the “behavior of the guards in ‘The Brig’ certainly cannot compare in grim sadism to the graphic pictures from Abu Ghraib.” For Peter Wood, who considers *The Brig* the Living Theatre’s “mythic act of resistance,” the production failed “to truly engage with the here and bloody now.”

In its broad antiwar and antiprison critique, *The Brig* has less to do with a sliding scale of cruelty than with what Nathan Gorelick calls “world-ordering projects.” Narrowing the discussion of *The Brig* to its resemblance (or not) to Abu Ghraib derails this critique. The action onstage is not meant to exhaust the ways human beings can torment one another, which would be a rather odd demand for verisimilitude; nor does it suggest what we are supposed to do in the face of cruelty. Rather, as Erika Munk suggests, *The Brig* presents a simple question, “What is this society of ours?” The post-9/11 national narrative that claims a previously high regard for human rights has been lost in the “war on terror” obscures much of U.S. American history and the contemporary prison system with its isolation units and execution chambers. Evidence of the dehumanizing treatment of people at detention facilities at Guantánamo Bay, Bagram, and Abu Ghraib highlighted, temporarily and
partially, a regime of torture that has characterized, with far less public commentary, policing and prison systems in the U.S. Avery Gordon reminds us, "Torture, humiliation, degradation, sexual assault, assault with weapons and dogs, extortion, blood sport always have been part of U.S. prison culture and behavior." Ghosts, in other words, are not unique to war prisons.

Riveted on the interlocking systems of military discipline and carceral punishment, The Brig exposes the lie that torture is the exception, the result of a few out-of-control soldiers, while professional and sober prison management is the rule, with well-trained, disciplined guards who do not force male prisoners to wear women’s underwear on their heads. The playwright and company trust that being witness to state violence, even on a fictional stage, involves the audience in an ethical situation. The real terror, as the Living Theatre hoped to show, is in the structure—of war and imprisonment.

THE ACTION

Founded in 1947, the Living Theatre has staged more than one hundred productions and performed in twenty-eight countries. Through workshops, performances, and acts of civil disobedience, the company works toward social justice and “a more flexible, more wide-ranging political-theatrical method.” Malina, who directed the 1963 and 2007 productions of The Brig, hoped to convey a structure, “whether that structure calls itself a prison or a school or a factory or a family or a government or The World As It Is.”

Originally designed by Beck, The Brig’s set consists of a cell with ten bunks, a side area with a desk, and an outer compound in front center. The audience must look through two sets of wire to see the action: chicken wire demarcates the main cell, and barbed wire creates the compound that separates the audience from the action. Beck alluded to this meaningful interference in an essay written from Danbury prison in 1965. After explaining that his editor had made 600 changes to his introduction to The Brig without permission, standardizing typography and punctuation, Beck commented, “I look at it now and have a little the feeling I might have if the barbed wire that separates the audience from the action in The Brig had been removed, because somebody thought the spectators could see better that way.” Not being able to see clearly and being on the outside looking in are part of the play’s design. Photographs of the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay Naval Station present a similar view through wire (Fig. 10.1).

When the audience of The Brig arrives, ten prisoners are asleep. There is no curtain, no nod to illusion. In darkness, a guard orders a new arrival out of bed and hits him in the stomach with a billy club. The
Figure 10.1  Camp X-Ray at the U.S. Naval Station at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. This photo was released by the Department of Defense on 18 Jan. 2002. AP Photo: Shane T. McCoy, U.S. Navy.

Figure 10.2  The Brig at the Clinton Street Theater, 2007. Photo: Valentina Russo.
guard wakes the other prisoners by crashing a garbage can cover on the concrete floor, his version of reveille. Timed with the crash, “bright, white, electric” light covers the stage. The imprisoned, identified by number or simply called “maggots,” are not permitted to walk but must run or “show evidence of a trot.”27 Brig Regulations, which are printed in the program, stipulate how they are to stand, eat, dress, run, and sleep. Prisoners must keep their eyes focused ahead at all times and never make eye contact with guards. When not trotting, they must stand at attention reading The Guidebook for Marines. (See Fig. 10.2.) Before crossing white lines on the floor, prisoners must shout, “Sir, Prisoner Number [Blank] requests permission to cross the white line, sir!” This goes on for two hours.

At one point, Prisoner Five puts on his jacket without permission, and a guard commands him to “kneel in front of the toilet named two, and tell the toilet what you have done” (60). (Even the toilets are numbered.) We hear Five offstage declaring his offense to bowl two. Act one ends with a guard forcing Prisoner One to huddle on the floor while Prisoner Two “protects” One from shrapnel by placing an upside-down garbage pail over him, running in a circle, and slamming the lid on the can with each revolution. In act two, prisoners clean the entire stage, scrubbing the floor with soap and water—a “bacchanal of terror and intoxication”28—and singing the Marine Corps hymn: “From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli. . . . We have fought in every clime and place / Where we could take a gun.” There is only one break in the routine. After Prisoner Five is released, his time served, Prisoner Six lets out a “terrifying scream”: “I am thirty-four years old. For God’s sake, let me out of this madhouse. I’m not one of these damned kids. I can’t stand it anymore” (72). Six is quickly straitjacketed and dispatched on a gurney. A new prisoner arrives to take his place.

THE AUDIENCE

To prepare for the 1963 performance, Malina created strict rehearsal rules based on brig regulations. Rehearsal Regulation 2c states, “During Rehearsal Time, there is to be no business or discussion other than that relating to rehearsal.” Regulation 5 demands that “all actors and crew will maintain a respectful and serious attitude toward one another. There will be no joking tolerated during Rehearsal Time, especially in reference to the relationships of guards and prisoners”29 The director, stage manager, or technical director could order work penalties for infractions. The actors agreed to the system but also instituted a five-minute break that could be called by anyone at any time. For every seven hours of rehearsal, there was one hour of drill and training exercises conducted by former U.S. Army and Marine Corps drill-masters.30 Two actors, Tom Lillard and Chic Ciccarelli, had been in the Marines, and Brown was at rehearsal for guidance.
Malina compared the process to a biologist using a Petri dish to "grow a foul and noxious growth within a safe situation. We isolated it." Spectators became witness to actual and referential pain. In the first production, actors broke ribs, became sick, and experienced "every kind of agony." The actors playing the guards improvised penalties if a prisoner accidentally stepped on the white line or failed to secure a button. The shotguns were real. In 2007, drill practice again preceded rehearsals, two actors had served in the Marines, and some actors slept overnight in the theatre.

Descriptions of The Brig's form invoke realism: "documentary realism," "blowtorch realism," "naturalism with a vengeance," "stark social realism," "a feverish fetishism of realism," "hyperrealism." Many critics have repeated that, whatever it is, The Brig is not a play. Newsweek announced that it "out-Brechts Brecht for creating and repudiating theater at the same time," and Walter Kerr refused to call Brown an "author," closing his review with the telling claim: "We are, in short, treated approximately as callously as the victims who have got themselves in this fix." Howard Taubman declared The Brig "a painful evening in the theater," but suggested that "if what happens on the stage of the Living Theatre is a true representation of conditions in the brig, the President or his Secretary of Defense ought to order an investigation forthwith." Taubman reported a few months later that he had been assured by "a host of former Marines who have seen 'The Brig' or read about it that it is not exaggerated."

While there appears to be nothing spectral about the tense physicality of the performance, the action takes place in a cage that haunts and defines U.S. culture. Malina and Beck were drawn to The Brig in part because of their own experiences being locked up. Beck writes, "Prisons haunt. I think once in, you never get out, never get prison out of your bones, not until the last one falls." Vivid sign and vague nightmare, The Brig possesses a strange clarity and interiority. It functions like a tableau, which, according to Roland Barthes, does not have a subject but a meaning. Barthes suggests that the subject of Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage is not the Thirty Years' War or "even a denunciation of war in general; its gestus is not there: it is in the blindness of the tradeswoman who believes she is making a living from war and who is actually making a death from it; even more the gestus is in my own vision, as a spectator, of that blindness." Similarly the subject of The Brig is not prison per se, nor U.S. incursions into Southeast Asia. There is only one reference to war: a guard jokes about "the gooks" he's going to "tear up" (58). (The Brig is, Munk writes, "an antiwar play without war.") The play's gestus is in how spectators see the structure of cruelty and the suffering. The insistence on visible fact reverses the CIA mandate to not see what you see.

Amid the resurgence of documentary theatre composed from historical records, legal transcripts, personal letters, and newspaper reports, the Living Theatre chose a play that barely speaks—or that speaks, in Antonin Artaud's well-known formulation, "halfway between gesture and thought." David Edgar commented in The Guardian in 2008 that most
audience members on their way to contemporary political theatre do not wonder how “the horrors of terrorism and war” will be shown but only ask, “will it be stools or chairs?” The theatre of testimony (e.g., Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo’s *Guantanamo: ‘Honor Bound to Defend Freedom’* and Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen’s *The Exonerated*) relies on voices and stories. *The Brig* is not driven by this kind of testimony. There is no narrator or protagonist, no placard or projection, no access to the thoughts of guards and prisoners. Michael Feingold praises this restraint: “Never signaling to us how we ought to view the prisoners’ situation and never milking it to provoke emotional reactions from us, the piece simply presents what happens.” The audience becomes witness to physical suffering and learns nothing about personal lives. Spectators watch prisoners write letters without knowing what they are writing or to whom. In this way, writes Karen Malpede Taylor, the play “bitterly mocks the bourgeois theatre’s assertion that the essential mystery of life is housed in the distance” between mind and body. We become no more acquainted with prisoners than guards. All we know, all we can see, hear, smell, and feel, is their relationship to one another and the cage that binds them (and us) together.

Malina found directing instruction from an improbable mix—Vsevolod Meyerhold, Erwin Piscator, Antonin Artaud, and the *Guidebook for Marines*. Having seen the damage in Brown’s details (“Here in the darkness with the bright overhead light there lay exposed the open wound of violence”), she hoped that spectators would experience a “horrified” recognition of “extreme authority.” As Anne McClintock suggests, “we need to take a long, hard look at the simultaneously humiliating and aggrandizing rituals of militarized institutions, whereby individuals are first broken down, then re-integrated (incorporated) into the larger corps as a unified, obedient fighting body.” With *The Brig*, the Living Theatre moved toward a theatre of cruelty that urges people, in Artaud’s words, “to see themselves as they are.” At the very least, *The Brig* does not brainwash anyone. It does not appeal to benevolence or lost democratic ideals. At best, it establishes what Malina calls “physical empathy” with victims of violence. Beck wanted the forced separation between the audience and actors to mobilize spectators: “Put up a barricade of barbed wire. Separate until the pain of separation is felt, until they want to tear it down, to be united. Storm the barricades.” On one side of the wire is potential revolutionary change and on the other what Blau might call “the essential body, which is the thing that hurts if history hurts.”

After hitting Prisoner Two in the stomach, a guard tells the prisoner, “Your insides are soft, maggot. Stand at attention. Nobody asked you to bend over. Stand up. You’re making me sick with your little-girl tricks” (56). Saying “please,” making eye contact with guards, doubling over in pain—that little-girl trick—elicit more violence. (*The Brig* reminds us that Marines “harden” one another in brigs, and military police “soften” detainees for interrogation.) Still, in the mechanistic frenzy, there are vulnerable moments: one prisoner weeps; another breaks down; two
prisoners talk, briefly, out of hearing of the guards; prisoners are newly exposed when frisked or strip searched. Malina, who shares Meyerhold's belief that spectators can be roused by the "human body standing there trapped" in front of them, studied the clenched muscles in the actors' bodies. Her goal was to avoid "useless pain" that perpetuates hatred and vengeance and to create active and "cathartic pain. We staked ourselves on cathartic." The company hoped that a corresponding physical tension in the bodies of audience members would establish a “kinship”: cathartic because the audience is purged of illusions and activating because the reality cannot be endured. If the performance works, Malina writes, the moment after the blow should "move us to revolutionary action for our fallen brother."

Rather than storming the barricades, U.S. audiences at The Brig might be more reasonably expected to turn to pillars of salt. Drawing from Artaud's 1930 writings, Martin Harries observes, "Lot's wife becomes a sign of the threat of a culture's imminent petrification, of its reification and inability to respond to the crisis that surrounds it." A Gallup poll shortly after the Abu Ghraib photographs were released reported that 54% of U.S. citizens were "bothered a great deal" by the news. A year later, that sorrowful percentage had dropped to 40%. The lawlessness of Guantanamo continues under a new presidential administration. In a June 2009 Gallup poll, 45% opposed closing Guantanamo; another 20% had "no opinion."

The fourth wall, transgressed by the Living Theatre in The Connection and Paradise Now, appears unassailed in The Brig. The New Yorker commented in 1963 that "the audience might just as well not be there." Yet, simply by staying in their seats, grimacing, and wanting this awful thing to end without making a move, spectators act. The passive, obedient audience may be the most real element of the reenactment. This lack of movement obviously does not apply to human rights organizations and individuals who have struggled to end the detention, the torture, and the war, but it does capture a complicit tolerance for violence among U.S. citizens.

The political efficacy of The Brig depends on the audience seeing the injustice and hearing its own dreadful silence. Robert Brustein's response in 1963 remains apt: "With this ruthless documentary, the Living Theatre confronts you with the thing itself, trying to break through that crust of indifference which Americans have developed in the face of evil." Brustein admits that the performance may not alter the workings of the Marine Corps, but he writes, "if you can bring yourself to spend a night at The Brig, you may start a jailbreak of your own." For the Living Theatre, any personal jailbreak would have to involve a break with war and prison culture as well. In 1957, when Malina was released from the Women's House of Detention, where she had been imprisoned for refusing to take shelter during an air raid drill, she wrote, "I am not free because I am in the street that surrounds and encircles the prison."
THE CONNECTIONS

Soldiers at Abu Ghraib have had to explain how they could have seen what they saw and not know it was wrong. Their answers are fairly consistent: the standard was established when they arrived; everyone knew what was going on; they were terrified. When the FBI interviewed military police, no one reported having seen any transgressions. Avery Gordon summarizes:

prisoners handcuffed to the wall with nylon bags over their heads being deprived of sleep; “retraining” of detainees spread-eagled on the floor, yelling and flailing; naked prisoners kept prone on wet floors; men ordered to strip and then placed in isolation; use of electric shock; police guards repeatedly kicking prisoners in the stomach; threats to harm family members; burning; branding—none of those “rose to the level of mistreatment” in the minds of observers because these were, to quote the respondents in the report, “no different from . . . procedures we observed used by guards in US jails.”

Human rights violations in U.S. police stations, jails, and prisons command public attention only when someone has been “exceptionally careless” (or takes a picture), and a case pierces what J.M. Coetzee calls in the South African context the “protective ring around the activities of the security police.”

In response to the idea of a “new war prison,” Caleb Smith points to the history of subjugation and mortification, of “making dead,” in U.S. and British prisons. Modes of imprisonment may have distinct stated purposes (to gain intelligence; to reintegrate troops into the armed services; to punish or rehabilitate prisoners) and differing practices (family members generally know where relatives are in domestic prisons; some mode of grievance and legal redress are technically extended to U.S. prisoners; the harsh treatment inflicted on imprisoned military personnel is purportedly not only to demean). Yet, war and civilian systems of captivity share architectural designs, operating procedures, accreditation standards, and, at times, personnel.

Guantánamo was modeled on U.S. maximum security prisons. The U.S. government hired correctional officers who had been involved in violence against prisoners in Pennsylvania and Virginia to work at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo. Charles Graner, sentenced to ten years for his role in torturing detainees (also pictured with Jamadi’s body), had worked at State Correctional Institution-Greene, a maximum-security prison in Pennsylvania where he had been cited in two lawsuits for beating up prisoners and using racist intimidation. When he entered the military in May 2003, he was “given supervisory positions at Abu Ghraib precisely because of his experience as a prison guard.” Ivan L. “Chip” Frederick, who reported in a plea bargain that he had beaten and humiliated Iraqi
detrainingees, including forcing one to masturbate in front of him, had been a prison guard in Virginia.

In 2003, former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft appointed Lane McCotter to restructure prisons in Iraq. At the time, McCotter was the business development director of a Utah-based private prison corporation that was both widely criticized and under investigation for unsafe conditions at its facilities. In 1997, McCotter had resigned as director of Utah Department of Corrections after videotapes showed a mentally ill man named Michael Valent strapped naked in a restraint chair for sixteen hours. His ankles were shackled and chained to the chair, his wrists handcuffed, and his body angled upward. A blood clot formed in his leg, and three hours after he was removed from the chair, Valent died. The medical investigator concluded that prolonged restraint had caused the lethal blood clot. (His is not the only wrongful death attributed to the “devil’s chair.”)

The U.S. State Department’s description of war detainees ranged from “the worst of the worst”—a phrase frequently applied to men and women on death row and in supermax prisons—to “anyone who might know something.” Military spokesman Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt said in 2004, “These people wouldn’t be at Abu Ghraib if they were innocent.” The U.S. government now acknowledges that 70 to 90% of detainees in Abu Ghraib were unconnected to Al Qaeda. The overwhelming number of detainees had been caught up in sweeps of neighborhoods and battlefields or turned over to coalition forces for financial gain. The Pentagon estimates that the number of Al Qaeda fighters in Guantánamo was about 8% of all detainees. The Brig does not disclose why the men are being held, and Brown has explained that he considers the reason “unimportant. Should anyone be treated this way, even if he is awaiting execution for murder?” By withholding the fact that only Marines who had committed minor offenses were held in the Fujiyama brig, Brown prevents the easy conclusion that a month of physical and emotional assault for being four hours AWOL is excessive but remediable with a few reforms. Instead, audiences must decide on principle if this is moral treatment of anyone.

If the performance is too tame by contemporary standards, it is so in the way the Justice Department memos rationalizing torture were tame. In 2002, Assistant Attorney General Jay Bybee provided this definition of torture to the Office of the President: the act “must inflict pain that is difficult to endure. Physical pain amounting to torture must be equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death.” If the person is dead, you may have crossed a line. In one of The Brig’s few explanatory lines, a guard explains to a new inmate, “you don’t invent your own definitions, you memorize ours” (65). Another resonance occurs when the prisoner is forced under the tight-fitting garbage can in The Brig. A guard explains that he is now “armored government property.” As detainees, wearing earmuffs and ski masks, stepped off
planes at Guantánamo, U.S. soldiers lifted the muffs and whispered in their ears, "You are now the property of the U.S. Marine Corp."77 The Brig does not, as Piscator might have liked, trace connections among military discipline, correctional practice, and legal torture. And because The Brig dramatizes Americans brutalizing other Americans, and does not deal with racism, it cannot convey the scope of what has happened, and is happening, to people in U.S. custody from Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Indonesia—or the disproportionate number of black, Native, and Latino/Latina Americans in civilian confinement. But The Brig does present a vision of accepted behavior in both security wars and security prisons. The performance reframes the government photo-op (Fig. 10.1), a masquerade that reveals more than it intends and materializes the protocols, codes, and manuals that prop up violent systems.

THE STREET

Samuel Provance was one of the first people inside the military to speak out against U.S. torture. He felt he had a duty to report what he witnessed at Abu Ghraib because of something he heard from a Holocaust survivor: "Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander."78 In the theatre, The Brig stages victim, perpetrator, and bystander. On the street, a fourth possibility emerged.

In the summer of 2007, the Living Theatre took The Brig to Columbus Circle, Union Square, and Ground Zero. In a flier, Gary Brackett invited others to join "The Brig: now playing—against the war—at Ground Zero."79 On 4 July 2007, amid cranes and construction equipment at the site of the destroyed towers, the actors, dressed in military garb, did push-ups, cleaned the street with invisible props, and undressed to their white underwear. Signs read "Support Our Troops—Stop the War" and "Close Guantánamo." Passers-by stopped to watch and take pictures, applauding at times, looking on in somber recognition at others.80

Police officers arrived and told the actors they had to move along. In uniform with batons and guns at their hips, the officers became part of the performance. When Brackett was told to leave, he responded in character: "No, Sir! I respectfully decline. Sir!"81 Unsure if they were dealing with a protest, a performance, or actual Marines, the police tried to find a person in charge and approached the guards, who similarly refused to obey. Jerry Goralnick, who for ten years performed in the Living Theatre's anti-death penalty street performance Not In My Name and participated in the antiwar performance No, Sir!, told me that the company's strategy when the police arrive is to "just keep going," nonviolently.82 After unsuccessful appeals to the actors, police attempted to block spectators from seeing the
performance, forming a line between the audience and the players. Brackett
recalled, “The police became the barbed wire.”

The street version of The Brig revised several elements of the locked-
down performance. When prisoners are undressed in the staged produc-
tion, their vulnerability is heightened, their bodies visibly trembling. At
Ground Zero, this same state of undress became resistant, a defiant naked-
ness and public protest. In the end, the performers began singing “Stop the
War” to the tune of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and many in the audience
joined them. Brackett told me that they had not planned to sing, but sim-
ply availed themselves of something from their performance history. The
spontaneous song in the sunshine replaced the imposed, imperialist Marine
Corps hymn under electric light. As guards and prisoners stood in alliance
and at attention, their posture conveyed respect for the antiwar movement.
In response to Valentina Russo’s video The Brig at Ground Zero posted
on YouTube, one person thanked the Living Theatre for “making the first
suitable memorial to the site.”

Russo’s video also captures the police instructing a couple of young men to
lower a banner calling for Guantánamo’s closure. An older spectator un-
connected with the Living Theatre intervened and protested in an emotional voice
that people have a right to free expression, that it was the Fourth of July, that
people had died here. He flipped through signs, chose one that called for an end to the war, turned away from the police, toward the audience, and said, “I’m going to hold this sign.” The fourth wall does occasionally and beautifully come down.

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NOTES

7. Mayer 257.  
9. Rayner xii.  
15. Gary Brackett, personal interview, 8 June 2009. Brackett noted that the 130-seat auditorium was usually less than half full; in Italy, 300 to 400 people attended each show. See Callaghan.  
18. Wood 62.  


24. Malina 83.


26. Brown's calls for a curtain are crossed out in later manuscripts. Kenneth H. Brown Collection. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin. For a “curtainless context,” see Rayner 146.


29. Malina 93, 94.


31. Malina 91.

32. Malina, et. al. 210, 211–212.


word” (Taubman, “Theater: Marines in Jail”); “[T]his was not a play!” (Gerald Rabkin, “The Return of the Living Theatre: Paradise Lost,” Performing Arts Journal 8.2 [1984]: 10.) Brown has countered that he never called it one: he subtitled his script “a concept for theatre or film.” See Malina et al., 213.

42. Munk 40.
43. Artaud 89.
47. Malina 83–100.
48. Malina 84.
51. Beck, “Storming the Barricades” 34.
53. Malina 85.
54. Malina 99.
55. Malina 100.
60. Brustein 29.
61. Brustein 29.
64. Gordon 49.
68. Gordon 48.
70. McClintock 64.
77. Margulies 64.
78. Provance, “Prepared Statement.”
81. Brackett, personal interview.
83. Brackett.
84. Brackett.