Counterpoint: Power in the Dining Hall

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After Al Zolynas, “Love in the Classroom”
https://medium.com/@Algy/love-in-the-classroom-7676714638ba

After lunch. Across the circle, in the main hall, transformed into a drama space, where, moments before, 500 young people had eaten. I can smell something. Sickly heavy, sweet savory, all at once. Intense, unwelcome. I realise I am not listening. It is cold.

I sit back from these students, not mine, just borrowed for a time. Telling them as little as I can. I’ve asked them to explore love and power, within the carefully written scripts that came in the teachers’ resource pack for this project.

They’ve come from all parts of the world — Withington and Whalley Range, and Moss Side – even Chorlton — and they’re still eager to … something. Eager just because they’re missing Maths and I’m new and I brought a pom-pom and we played splat. It’s over halfway through, Day One.

They mainly ignore me as I try to listen to the speaker. She’s telling us why cheating is worse than hitting. The room splits, some theatrically gasp, others solemnly nod. All seem to sense we’re looking right at it. Doing what we came here to do.
But, a door propped open in pandemic pantomime,
brings in air, which wafts the foodsmell anew.
It floats around and through us in the room, broken here and there,
fragmented. It feels like lasagna, but it could be gravy, or fish. It could be anything from anywhere.

I sit firm in my seat, and listen,
and it hits me from nowhere – a sudden, sharp, utterly painful sadness for these students.
I catch Aaliyah’s eye. She wrinkles her nose.

“I’m sorry,” I ache to say.
“This matters. Your thinking on love and power and safety matters.
You should have the coziest, cleanest room to think this through.
Imagine if we weren’t in a foodstenched hall, because power chose to not build you a theatre.
We could breathe in the fresh light air; how right and fitting that would be.
Because we can’t separate thinking from place,
from how this crumby hall just isn’t enough, isn’t worthy of your
big open hearts and robust differences and caring thoughts. We can’t unpick cheating versus hitting here.
I’m sorry.”

Instead, I keep a coward’s silence.
The smell lingers on …
I draw the discussion to a close.
We drag chairs back.
Pick up scripts.
And get back to the difficult job
of unpicking power in the dining hall.