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Backpages is an opportunity for the academy to engage with theatre and performance practice with immediacy and insight and for theatre workers and performance artists to engage critically and reflectively on their work and the work of their peers. Featuring short, topical articles and debates, polemics where necessary, it's a place of intellectual intervention and creative reflection. It's also where we hope to articulate, perhaps for the first time, the work of new and rising theatre artists in an academic forum.

My Naïve American Postdramatic Action Hero in Conversation *Search Party vs...* A Provocative Cold Consideration: *3 Winters* at the National

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My Naïve American Postdramatic

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In recent years, there has been considerable blowback on the term 'postdramatic' and the theatre it has proscribed. Bernd Stegemann's influential critique of the postdramatic is that it lacks 'dramatic believability' because of its subversion of dramatic story and character.[1] However, the postdramatic is not defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann as the lack of drama, but as theatre that does not necessarily valorize drama or dramatic text above all elements of the theatrical experience. As Lehmann explains,

> Wholeness, illusion, and world representation are inherent in the model 'drama'; conversely, through its very form, dramatic theatre proclaims wholeness as the model of the real. Dramatic theatre ends when these elements are no longer the regulating principle but merely one possible variant of theatrical art.[2]

Drama is in fact central to many postdramatic works as they struggle with the role and significance of narrative in contemporary representation. Lehmann argues that the postdramatic is characterized by the search for significant expression when 'almost any form has come to seem more suitable for articulating reality than the action of a causal logic with its inherent attribution of events to the decisions of individuals'.[3] The postdramatic addresses and embraces the difficulties of the unified narrative form of drama in continuing to compel an audience into an illusion of a world.

Nonetheless, in the years since Lehmann published his work, Robin Detje has called postdramatic theatre 'the great song of compliance',[4] and Stegemann characterizes it as a theatre ruled by dead theory. These critiques rest on the idea that, in a theater that lacks drama, the role of argument,

1. Bernd Stegemann, 'After Postdramatic Theater', trans. by Matthew R. Price, *Theater*, 39.3 (2009), 11–23, (p. 21).
2. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 22.
3. Ibid., p. 181.
4. Robin Detje, 'Post-Dramatic Theater and the Bleeding Heart of the Seventies', *Theater*, 41.2 (2010). Available online at: <http://theatermagazine.org/detje-article> [accessed 5 May 2015].

debate, and conflict, which can generate in spectators meaningful responses to the content of the drama, is so demeaned as to allow the audience to be passive and uncaring about argument, debate, and conflict altogether. Instead of an engaged audience provoked by the dramatic material of a play or performance, the audience of the postdramatic is instead an ironic consumer of cleverly formed, and formally focused, material. This response is similar to many critiques of the postmodern, which has also been accused of creating a compliant, passive spectator who feels little but detachment and the consequent belief and even comfort in knowing that as individual spectators they are powerless to change the event or, consequently, the world. Lehmann's idea of the postdramatic here, which he claims as a more appropriate and authentic expression of the contemporary world than more traditional dramatic forms, comes up against the need for a form of human expression that, even if it is not an honest reflection of the world as it is, offers some sort of hope for the redemptive possibility of human action.

In the United States, however, the formal innovation of the postdramatic is still a novelty for most spectators, and thus has the potential to create surprising, subversive performances for audiences enamored of and ensnared in traditional narrative drama. While Stegemann is preoccupied with the lack of conflict and the cult of theory, most of the so-called postdramatic performances I have witnessed in the US offer memorable moments of conflict, action, and life, even if those moments come from formal or structural components of the performance and not the dramatic elements. These performances rarely try to create the illusion of a dramatic world, but allow the spectators to experience, through moments, fragments, and presence, the cultural materialist idea that every narrative propagates an ideology. I would like to briefly examine a recent production that focuses on the banality of the everyday as theatrical gesture: Nature Theater of Oklahoma's *Life and Times*, the first five episodes of which were produced in New York City in 2013. This work, and others like it, do not, as Detje argues, leave audiences in a passive spectatorial haze of acceptance, but instead address the subversion or interruption of the formal elements of drama in order to make possible a radical response. As Lehmann explains:

> As long as the forms of conventionalized ways of spectating are not interrupted, the conventional mode of reception in theatre (and film) tends to reduce to insignificance even the most daring documentation and political criticism. Therefore, it remains essential to acknowledge that the truly political dimension of theatre has its place not so much in the thematizing of politically burning subject matters (which, by saying this, are not, of course, excluded!) as in the situation, the relation, the social moment which theatre as such is able to constitute.[5]

For Lehmann, a true political response comes not necessarily from political content, but from formal elements that demand a shift in the perception of the spectators, making them see the world in a different light. Given what we know about cognition and the limitations of the human mind to accept new information that contradicts already received knowledge, the emphasis on form over content should come as no surprise. Take a quick look at the current political environment of extreme partisanship in the United States and you can easily see concrete examples that demonstrate that content has an incredibly limited ability to shift or transform political opinion, or ideas about ideology and how the world works. It is more likely that through some sort of paradigm shift, a shift in the perception of formal elements of a performance and their relationship to the world outside of the performance, that works of art can generate active, engaged, and even politically significant responses from spectators. In what might seem a truly ironic extension of this, these perception shifts, which for Lehmann do not need to be related to an understanding or appreciation of the dramatic content, can bring about sometimes surprisingly Aristotelian recognitions for individual spectators and their relationship to the world – that the world before us is both ours and not ours, depending on how we construct and receive it.

Preschool musical

In January 2013, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma presented the American premiere of the first four episodes of their ten-part opus *Life and Times* as a part of the Under the Radar Festival at the Public Theater in New York City. The piece has been in development since 2007, when artistic directors Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper interviewed company member Kristin Worrall, beginning with the

5. Hans-Thies Lehmann, '"Postdramatic Theatre", A Decade Later' in *Dramatic and Postdramatic Theater Ten Years After: Conference Proceedings*, ed. by Ivan Medenicia (Belgrade: Organizzato dalla Faculty of Dramatic Arts, 2011), pp. 31–46, (p. *35*).

question: 'Can you tell me your life story?' As Copper describes it:

> Their first phone conversation lasted 2 hours. But Kristin was only at age 8, so they made plans to talk again – and again – and again – until finally we had ten phone conversations totaling 16 hours.[6]

Nature Theater continues to work on additional episodes. The plan is to have all ten produced by early 2017. While the scope of the project is compelling in terms of the postdramatic, I want to focus first on two elements that are especially germane to the issue of the role of the drama in the postdramatic. The first is the issue of text, which in this piece is a nearly verbatim text taken from the transcripts of the telephone conversations. The second is the choral quality of the performance of that text, which addresses issues about character, individuation, and drama that are at the core of Detje's and Stegemann's concerns about the postdramatic.

The text in *Life and Times* is central, and is the focus in terms of both the intellectual content and the visual landscape. Not only are each of the words from Worrall's phone conversation spoken or sung, they were also projected in centrally located surtitles above the stage space, so the spectators were hearing and reading the text while watching the action on stage. The banality of the text, then, is a central concern of the piece – the delivery of a text that is as close to everyday spoken text as any theatrical text, treated as the material for, in the case of *Episode 1*, a musical operetta, with every word sung through with a repetitive score, a physical choreography, and a growing number of actors participating. This dissonance of the content and the form is evident from the first lines, sung by actor Julie LaMendola:

> Um. . .So. . .
> Shall I start?
> Okay. Um. . .
> So. Let's see.
> Okay. Well –
> As far as I know, I was born –
> In Providence, Rhode Island
> And – my mother
> At the time – I was the – third child for her.[7]

The audience response to the text was often amusement and laughter. At the beginning, the language seems like a theatrical gimmick and, in a sense, it is. The 'Ums' and the 'likes', so common in the everyday life and language of most the spectators at the Under the Radar Festival, are highlighted because of their narrative uselessness, as verbal tics. However, they become in *Life and Times* musical phrases, repeated, eventually becoming tropes that have a rhythm and presence of their own. This transformation of the everyday into the theatrical, or even the dramatic, feels initially satiric when taken to the extremes that Nature Theater of Oklahoma does in this piece. However, as described by critic Charles Isherwood:

> In their inspired hands, the most unbeautiful, sometimes maddeningly hazy and imprecise language takes on a distinct and surprising appeal. [. . .] Language unshaped by an aesthetic formula is shown to have its own funky fascination by being presented in a context in which we expect to encounter an aesthetic experience. Trimmed with the traditional adornments of theater — music and dance, colorful costumes [. . .] the artless becomes artful.[8]

The insistent use of everyday language is a serious and intentional attempt to underscore the problem of the dramatic in a concrete manner. What exactly is it that makes up a drama, and how does one take material that is like life, or a reflection of the world, and turn it into a theatrical performance? This exploration is central to the mission of Nature Theater of Oklahoma:

> We strive to create an unsettling live situation that demands total presence from everyone in the room. We use readymade material around us, found space, overheard speech, and observed gesture, and through extreme formal manipulation, and superhuman effort, we affect in our work a shift in the perception of everyday reality that extends beyond the site of performance and into the world in which we live.[9]

The 'shift in the perception of everyday reality' and its extension into the real world echoes closely

6. Kelly Copper, 'Introduction' in *Life and Times 1*, by Nature Theater of Oklahoma (Chicago: 53rd Street Press, 2013), p. 4.
7. Nature Theater of Oklahoma, *Life and Times 1* (Chicago: 53rd Street Press, 2013), p. 7.
8. Charles Isherwood, 'Theater Talkback: The Rough Beauty of Everyday Speech', *New York Times*, 31 January 2013 <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/31/theater-talkback-the-rough-beauty-of-everyday-speech> [accessed 5 May 2015].
9. Nature Theater of Oklahoma, *Life and Times I*, p. 127.

Lehmann's idea that the political effect of theater is most engaged when the spectators are considering not the details of the dramatic content but rather the relation of the material and actions they are viewing to the world.

Life and Times embraces the banality of the everyday as the source for drama, and in so doing subverts ideas about what makes up drama. This is accomplished not just through the everyday nature of the language, but the choral nature of the presentation of the text. As Copper explains in her introduction to the published text, the fact that the text is an individual story is purposefully subverted through the theatrical presentation:

> Though the language of *Life and Times* is all first-person singular, the 'I' in performance is very much plural. We are not interested in representing Kristin or her biography on stage, but rather use her first person account as a lens for a more enlarged consideration of self, community, and history.[10]

The transformation of the individual story to a community one, and a choral one, reflects a potentially postdramatic consideration of the modern, dramatic formulations of biography and story, and even provide an opportunity for spectators to experience the fragmentation of an individual character into a series of individuals and, at times, a choral unit, a community that represents a culture, even. As Copper explains,

> The 'I' here is a Whitmanesque 'I' – the great 'I' of Song of Myself:
>
> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
>
> It begins with a single voice at the top of the show, and then another joins and another, finally there is not just a woman's voice but a man's, and the story expands to include finally a cast of 10. The actors – though they all still employ Kristin's original first person perspective – speak of themselves, even down to changing the name to their own in performance.[11]

The ideas behind the chorus present a productive paradox here – there is both a recognition and expression of a community but also, in Copper's imagining at least, a return to the personal and even the psychological for each performer. The first person is both a return to a dramatic trope, of the individual character and her/his story, and a rejection of it through the formal choral construction of a communal voice. Like a chorus in a Broadway musical, the group is speaking as individuals *and* as a community. So embedded in this is the complexity of the postdramatic construction that shows not a rejection of the dramatic and its conventions, especially in regards to character and story, but a dependence on those conventions, and the spectatorial expectations that follow from them, in order to shift the perception of reality, to make someone else's story one's own. Much of the interest in the production from media outlets and journalists was in talking to Worrall about her story, and her relationship to the text and the performance. The performance itself, however, is meant to separate that story from its source, instead providing it as the material for a communal event that is not undramatic at all. Instead, the spectators, like the other actors, find in the performance of the text of Worrall's story stories of their own.[12]

The second episode is also a musical, although the focus was on different dance styles, mostly influenced by late twentieth-century popular music. The third and fourth episodes were combined into one elaborate murder mystery/alien invasion genre piece. I saw all four of these episodes in one marathon day, which begin at 2:00pm and ended a little after midnight. There were two short breaks and one 90-minute break for dinner, which was served in the lobby of the theater – hot dogs, with homemade brownies for dessert. The element of duration was clearly also an aspect of the experience of the *Life and Times* performance, and, with the promise of all ten episodes eventually being performed in one weekend, the durational aspect will continue to be a part of the work. This kind of duration also works in a postdramatic way, as it expands the performance outside the normal bounds of a traditional drama, obviously, but also interrupts life more significantly than a normal night at the theater.

The other episodes that I viewed in 2013, 4.5 and 5, not only break the bounds of traditional drama, but stretch the understandings of live

10. Copper, 'Introduction', p. 4.
11. Ibid. p. 5.
12. As a side note, many people have expressed to me how the performance brought back their own memories of their childhoods, which had connections, similarities, and contrasts to Kristin's, and how much the performance made them think about their own past, their memories of it, and how they constructed it. There was a lot of nostalgia, but a lot of self-reflection as well.

theater. *Episode 4.5*, which is based on a call that was interrupted because of a bad phone connection, is an animated film. *Episode 5*, which depicts Kristin's first sexual encounter, is a book written and drawn (by Liska and Copper) in the style of a medieval manuscript, and depicting painted images of Liska and Copper in multiple sexual positions taken from the *Kama Sutra* and other texts. *Episode 4.5* and *Episode 5* were presented together in September 2013 at Florence Gould Hall in New York City. The spectators were each given a bound facsimile of the book and a personal reading lamp, and given 44 minutes and 28 seconds to read the manuscript as an organ player played very loud, gothic music, lit with a spot that reflected his shadow on the blank film screen downstage center. These episodes demonstrate a further movement from the theatrical drama, even as the text, Worrall's phone conversation, is still the foundation for the theatrical and/or artistic event. In perhaps the clearest example of how their work 'extends beyond the site of performance and into the world in which we live', every night in September 2013, at 11:57pm, a three-minute clip from *Episode 4.5* played on 16 of the enormous digital video screens that light up Times Square. This was certainly the most radical departure from the traditional dramatic theatrical event, and also the most relevant as a social moment, interrupting the commercial landscape of the Times Square video screens with three minutes of *Life and Times Episode 4.5*. While the vast majority of the thousands upon thousands of spectators had no idea what they were viewing, I can attest that many of them looked up and noticed the interruption – it was distinct enough from the advertising in its form and style that it garnered the attention of those already there experiencing the performance space of Times Square. However, it was also in that moment that one of Detje's conclusions about the postdramatic became concrete for this spectator: I felt, in the center of this valley of consumer culture, filled with those perhaps seeking opportunities to experience the world and continually finding instead opportunities to buy and dream of buying, that Detje was right:

> A critique of post-dramatic theatre would have to start off in a really old-fashioned critique of society: whoever wants a better theatre shouldn't demand a more traditional theatre but better times. Or worse ones.[13]

13. Detje, 'Post-Dramatic Theater'.

Nature Theater of Oklahoma creates postdramatic theatre that allows for spectators to experience and reflect upon their shifting perspectives. But it doesn't change their lives, or the lives of those around them. And in that respect, despite its best intentions, the postdramatic doesn't necessarily create new opportunities for political change, but merely reflects what the culture is already expressing.

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Action Hero in conversation

Gemma Paintin, James Stenhouse, and Carl Lavery

Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse trained at Bretton Hall, and have been working together as Action Hero for eight years. During that time they have toured to theatres, bars, and public spaces across five continents and have performed to audiences everywhere from an old cinema in Bangkok (2013) to Shanghai Grand Theatre (2012) to a Satan's Riders Motorcycle club house in Tasmania (2013) and a blues bar in Texas on the same stage as James Brown (2010). Their work has been commissioned by Arnolfini (*Extraordinary Rendition, Watch Me Fall)*, InBetween Time (*Frontman, Extraordinary Rendition*), Fierce Festival (*Frontman*), Bristol Old Vic Ferment (*Hoke's Bluff*), and Warwick Arts Centre (*Hoke's Bluff*) and supported by many more in the UK and abroad. In this interview Carl Lavery talks to the company about their dramaturgical processes and practices in relation to one of their best-loved and most spectacular shows *Watch Me Fall* (2009-).

CARL LAVERY: *Could you tell us something about who Action Hero are, and perhaps spend some time describing your work?*

ACTION HERO: We met as undergraduates at Bretton Hall (a now defunct Arts College in West Yorkshire) in 1999 but didn't work together as a duo until 2005–06. We lived in Taiwan together in 2003–04 and while we were there made a show with some Chinese performers in which the seeds of our collaboration started to grow. We did an MA at Bretton Hall when we returned to the UK and James made a kind of dance piece with some undergraduate students called *A Western*. When the MA was over we worked together on an evolution of that piece with a friend of ours that eventually became our first show together. The way in which Action Hero emerged was a kind of long process of economizing the creative process and because we're

Image 1. Action Hero. Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse. Photograph courtesy of Carl Lavery.

a couple it ended up being just the two of us and a show for a bar.

A Western was a performance for a bar where Gemma and I attempt to re-enact scenes from an imaginary Western. In 2009 we made *Watch Me Fall* which is a home-made stunt show which grew from a reenactment of a motorcycle jump Evel Knievel did at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. *Frontman* was a show we made in 2011 which is a replica of a music gig that draws from the egos and self destruction of iconic Frontmen, and in the last two years we've made a durational (six hour) argument to camera called *Slap Talk* and a show called *Hoke's Bluff* which is a show about a fictional town and a fictional sports team inspired by nostalgia for places which don't exist.

We've made other, smaller or one-off projects too but these shows are the ones that seem to stick and there are thematic threads that run through these shows to do with the iconography of masculinity and the nature of entertainment as well as an inquiry into the relationship between a performer and an audience. We've two early stages projects on the go at the moment too – a one-on one-piece called *Extraordinary Rendition* that's about the military-entertainment complex, and another called 'Wrecking Ball' which might be a kind of play.

CL: *The name Action Hero is intriguing. There's something mock heroic in there, but it also resonates, in a way, with the Viennese Actionist movement from the 1960s. Is there attempt, in your name and work, to gently mock the pretensions of performance art, its seriousness?*

AH: I think our approach is partly routed in performance traditions and processes of the 1960s and the word action does suggest a methodology. We're very interested in the 'doing'. We've always been keen to do things rather than talk about them and when we started making work together there was a lot of work around that talked about how it felt, or pointed at something, and we wanted to

embody it more and find a way to be reflexive and analytical at the same time as emotionally and physically engaging with our source material. I'm not sure we're mocking the pretensions of performance art directly but perhaps mocking the formality or rigidity of the discourse around the processes that seem to have grown out of the performance art tradition. The idea that something can't be called Live Art or performance art because it's not 'arty' enough or because its too theatrical is an idea worth mocking I think. At a recent Q&A after a show it was suggested to us that our work places the audience in an awkward place because it asks the audience to be critically engaged and thoughtful but it also engages them emotionally, and in a lot of work there is a disconnect between those two states. But we're interested in that strange borderland between the two, which better reflects our experience of moving through the world. We are also happy to borrow ideas, content, and form from popular culture, which gives the work a sense of absurdity or humour and our idea of the 'Hero' is part of that. There is also an element of our work that, I think, acknowledges the effort that's being put in to the act of entertainment and/or art making. There's often a sense of endurance (for the audience as well as the performers) and the mechanics of the act of performance are often exposed in some way so we like to think the moment of performance might seem like a heroic moment in some way, even when it fails or when the action itself appears to be a futile gesture.

CL: *In* Watch Me Fall, *the music by the Stooges was really loud, and the audience, when I saw the show, was hyped up, excited. It felt more like a gig than a theatre piece. I felt physically involved. Can you talk about your interest in creating theatricalized experiences that are not what we'd commonly recognize as theatre* per se*?*

AH: We spend a lot of time thinking and worrying about how an audience approaches the work and how we can remove a lot of the barriers that exist in theatre-spaces between the performer and the audience members. We enjoy using theatricality in our work and are excited by the possibilities of theatre as a social gathering but so much of the context that surrounds theatre seems to nullify the audience's experience. Our piece *Frontman* is a direct challenge to 'the theatre' in a way because it is most definitely a theatre show but it borrows so much from live music that it tends to confront the rigidity of the usual forms of presentation for a theatre piece. Its brutally loud for instance, the audience are standing, there is a bar in the space; its all set up to invite the audience to behave in a way which allows more dialogue between performer and audience. We find it strange how rarely the traditional modes of presenting theatre are challenged; its not a radical thing to put a bar in a space or ask your audience to stand for example, but our experience of touring our work is that these things can become 'problems' very quickly.

CL: *Audience involvement or collaboration is a crucial element in your work. How do you achieve that, and what are the problematics? It's a risky way of working.*

AH: A lot of it is to do with care and attention to the context as we've just been discussing. An audience for our work is often more receptive and more vocal once they've had a drink or two so we try and ensure they've had a drink or two! But we can't control the context all the time so there are devices we employ to configure involvement within the work itself. We have found developing our work with audiences to be a really useful tool. Showing the work before its finished, making mistakes, placing the work in lots of different contexts before its finished, means it evolves and grows with a real sense of what the possibilities are and what the audience are likely/unlikely to do and what kind of invites they respond to best. *Watch Me Fall* was shown as a work-in-progress in front of 500 people at midnight on a Friday night at the Shunt Vaults in London. Someone stole the bicycle half way through, we were shouted at, mocked, ignored, it was terrifying and utterly desperate but it fed the process for that show perfectly. We also showed a work-in-progress of *Watch Me Fall* at a club night in Glasgow. James spat a ping-pong ball at someone's forehead and the audience member threw a bottle at James's head. So it's a case of trial and error really! As we've made more work we've become more aware of what audiences feel comfortable with and we have more of an intuitive sense of how they feel. If you're generous and open with your invites and the audience feel comfortable that you're not going to make them look stupid for becoming involved or ignore their offer, if they know you're competent and they understand the rules of the game then it's a genuine collaboration. Our main rule is that ultimately we can't predict an audience's behaviour and so if you're going to provide an invitation be prepared to accept anything back.

CL: *My own response to participating in* Watch Me Fall *was complex. I'd be drawn in and distanced at the same time. I'd also be horrified and find it incredibly funny, too. Do you find that's a common reaction – that sense of complexity, that ambivalence?*

AH: Yes, it is and the most interesting performances of that show are when that same conflict is playing out across the whole audience. When some people are cheering loudly and even taking on some of the macho persona of the hero, wolf whistling or whatever and then other people are starting to back off and shake their heads in disgust it becomes a really fascinating environment. I think its borne from something we mentioned earlier, that in our collaboration we accept the differences of opinion we have as a duo, we accept the contradictions within our own thought processes, and we reflect that ambiguity in the work because for us, that's the reality of the world! It's always confusing and ambiguous so why would we present a definitive singular vision of it?

CL: *In* Watch Me Fall, *we all want, in some sense, to see James mess up his jump, to crash and burn. That's terrible. You seem to make us aware of that in the performance. Similarly, I really wanted the high-five from a character or persona who appears misogynistic, but I was also uncomfortable with my pleasure, here. The whole show seems structured to make us aware of that, to make us feel a little uncomfortable, but in a very subtle way.*

AH: For us it's about what we are prepared to watch to be entertained. There is always an absurdity about being in front of an audience or a crowd and 'doing something' for them. Why do we watch a man crash a motorbike and shatter his pelvis? Why do we watch a man jump over a paddling pool on a child's bicycle? What is it that gives us the pleasure as an audience? We like to question that role you have as an audience member and ask questions of you as a participant in the spectacle. I'd like to think that thought process evolves after seeing the show and becomes a question about how you participate in the world. The relationship Gemma and I have on stage, the relationship the audience has with me, the relationship the audience has with Gemma are all representative of the broader dysfunctional relationships that exist in our wider contemporary experience. The audience might love me at the same time as being repelled by some of my actions and that's similar to the relationship we have with the male hierarchy in general I think. I think we're naturally forgiving as humans and the dominant male hegemony exploits that through the way men are represented in the entertainment industry. We're constantly being cajoled into hero worshipping fairly repellant men. Through the making process of the show we found it was surprisingly (and worryingly) easy to convince a crowd to cheer and high-five James and it allowed us to push at the edges of what is acceptable behaviour and see if the audience stayed with him.

CL: *Is the very real possibility of failing in your work integral to its success?* Watch Me Fall c*ould easily be misread or mispronounced as Watch Me Fail…*

AH: I think so yes…but its very complex territory. We don't set out to fail, we want each show to succeed and when it does fail on any level it feels shit for us and the audience, so its not something we encourage in our work necessarily. But we have found that when work exists near that edge, close to the point of failure and when an audience can sense their responsibility for keeping the wheels of a performance on, really interesting things happen so we try our hardest to exist in that territory just beside failure. It's a difficult place to work though because an audience has a lot of responsibility and sometimes for whatever reason they don't want to collaborate, they don't want that responsibility or they turn up unprepared for it and they just reject what you're doing and it falls on its face. I would also say *Watch Me Fall* and *Frontman* have elements of failure actually built in. There are moments that are intentionally awkward or moments where the relationship between us and the audience is intentionally broken so perhaps you can't call that real failure, but its certainly a territory we enjoy exploring and in all our work we always try and build in elements that are apparently broken, or rough around the edges. Someone once described *Watch Me Fall* as a 'punk collaboration with the audience', which is an interesting description of our approach.

CL: *There seems to be an economy of means in* Watch Me Fall. *All those small things – like the 'look' of Gemma's dress, the use of coca cola, and the way you use the US vernacular but without 'doing' the accent – allow us to imagine and read so many things into this slightly ridiculous re-enactment: US cultural hegemony, spectacular consumption, sexual politics in the 1950s, the seduction of glamour, the end of Empire, and so on. How do you know what is enough?*

AH: We've always approached the making of work under the assumption that our audience are open, intelligent, and thoughtful people. But we are aware of the fear that we all have when faced with the unknown. James for instance is terrified of one-on-one performances because he knows a lot will be asked of him in that encounter and that can be a daunting prospect. Not everyone is hugely courageous and adventurous but that doesn't mean they're not open to new experiences or unintelligent or whatever… our shows look after the

Image 2. *Watch Me Fall*, Action Hero, Gemma Paintin. Photographed by Briony Campell.

audience in many ways. It's always a simple premise that doesn't need massive leaps of interpretation to understand but within that structure we locate complexity. We describe it often as nurturing an audience so that we can push them. That might sound patronizing but it's based on our own experiences of being 'the dumb audience member'. Audiences are dumb because they're big groups of people who don't know the rules of the game and we've all felt that feeling of not knowing and it's awkward and can make us behave in uncharacteristic ways. But once an audience starts to feel empowered or becomes aware of their agency within the live environment they become a totally different beast. The economy of means is part of that agency because we're asking the audience to do a lot of imagining. Those gaps we're asking the audience to fill are perhaps the most interesting parts of performance for us and its perhaps what distinguishes performance from other art forms. Its why we chose to present our ideas in this form, because we're excited by the possibilities that emerge when people are brought together in a room.

CL: *What type of performance traditions do you draw on for this type of work? Somewhat strangely, it reminded me as much of the spectacular acting style of French companies working in the 1970s like early Théâtre du Soleil and the Grand Magic Circus, as it did Lone Twin and Forced Entertainment. That seemed very original to me – a kind of popular theatre for a digital age.*

AH: Well the *Watch Me Fall* source material included Mexican wrestling matches and human cannonballs so it has always had that sense of showmanship or spectacle to it. We like to borrow from events that are inherently theatrical and we don't feel bound by an expectation of what performance art is or should be. So as well as being influenced by Lone Twin, we're also heavily influenced by tacky US sports movies, or the band Brian Jonestown Massacre, or boxers talking in pre-fight press conferences. We're as much interested in the performance modes (and traditions) of those things as we are in contemporary performance. Also we trained as actors in the first instance and although we're very skeptical of 'acting' we are aware of it as a tool we can use in our work. Gemma spent a lot of time

in the *Watch Me Fall* process convincing James that he can/should do some 'proper acting' in it to drive the ideas/themes of the piece. I think our more theatrical background also does give us a sense of precision in performance that gives us those moments like Gemma picking up the ping-pong balls. We spend a lot of time in rehearsals getting the exact detail of a movement just right, or the angle of a look between us. Contemporary performance can be frightened of theatricality because it's associated with conventional forms and established models of working, or even 'fakeness' and we understand it can be problematic, but it's also a mistake to forget that any performance is inherently theatrical (like it or not). For us it's about presenting your ideas in the form that fits those ideas best and sometimes that means 'not acting' but it can also mean doing some 'acting' or placing emphasis on a particular moment or image through theatrical languages.

CL: *A final question: for all the focus on James in the show, the moments that have remained with me – the lines I repeat with my kids at home – are to do with Gemma. She's the one we actually root for. Can you explain that?*

AH: From our perspective both the roles we play can be seen as heroic or foolish, but James does unforgiveable things to Gemma so we'd hope that people root for her in that situation and we hope that people see through James's charm offensive. But then again it's hard to not identify with the desperation that James has in the show.

We do think of *Watch Me Fall* as a feminist piece and despite the fact that Gemma is complicit in what happens she is very much a victim of the microcosm of the world this piece creates.

◊

Search Party vs…: Sports Commentary, Participation, and the Sport/Art Event

Pete Phillips

Preface

Search Party is the collaboration between live artists Jodie Hawkes and Pete Phillips. In 2007 we started making *Search Party vs…* – an interactive, durational performance exploring our reoccurring interest in sport. We're fascinated by sport; in narratives of the sports event, the relationship between task and failure, fandom and the sporting gaze, and how these ideas can be used as strategies for creating, framing, and performing live art events. We make performances for theatres and public spaces and our sports related practice has existed in both contexts. *Search Party vs…* takes place in public and is predominantly concerned with a desire to engage with the inhabitants of public places, creating performative contexts which generate shared endeavor. Existing somewhere between mass public spectacle and intimate one-on-one performance, *Search Party vs…* borrows the notion of team from sport to examine connections between the personal and the geographic, exploring ideas of community, place, and belonging. Participation in *Search Party vs…* functions on some levels through the performance's ability to be authentically framed as an amateur sports event. Through a discussion of Claire Bishop's outsourced authenticity[14] I outline how the performance borrows from sports media, specifically the commentator, to frame acts of participation, complicating the live art event, creating a relationship of co-dependence between the *sport* and the *art* in *Search Party vs…*.

Search Party vs…

Search Party vs… is a three-day durational performance where inhabitants of a host city/town are challenged to a marathon table tennis tournament.[15] Situated in public place, usually the pedestrianized centre of a city, *Search Party vs…* develops an engagement with impromptu audiences to create social situations disrupting what Grant Kester calls the 'atomized pseudocommunity of consumers'.[16] By-passers are invited to represent the city and play a game of table tennis against Search Party. In Bishop's conceptualization of outsourced authenticity the artist delegates (a degree) of control over the delivery of an event to the participant and receives in return 'a guarantee of authenticity, through their proximity to everyday social reality'.[17] In *Search Party vs…* the event is not *completely* delegated –

14. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells* (London and New York: Verso, 2012); also see Claire Bishop, 'Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity', *October*, 140 (Spring 2012), 91–112.
15. *Search Party vs…* has been made and developed with long-term collaborator Jodie Hawkes, as part of our existing artistic collaboration. See Search Party <www.searchpartyperformance.org.uk> [accessed 14 June 2015].
16. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 29.
17. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 237.

the artists remains present in the event with the participant, Jodie, as opponent whilst I act as commentator.

The warm up

As commentator, I describe the action, keep the score, encourage participation from the crowd, and crucially frame each participant's experience as a significant moment in the forming of a micro-community. These roles facilitate this promiscuous event in its dual agenda. I am commentator of a sporting contest. I am also the performer in a live art event. I facilitate and describe the table tennis tournament whilst reframing it for a wider meaning. These two roles blur and become muddled. Most of the words are pre-written, although I choose in the live moment when to say them, whether to deviate or ignore them completely. The games are authentic but the narrative is almost guaranteed.

One strategy for reframing the context of each game during *Search Party vs…* is the 'warm-up text'. Each participant gets a few minutes to warm up, acclimatizing to the conditions, practicing a few shots – a mechanism common to table tennis and other similar sports. During this time I deliver pre-written statements, creating a context for the game, setting up some parameters for how the participant is to engage.

> As the players are warming up, we're looking around at the faces in the crowd and we're thinking 'surely one of you, just one, has the right blend of skill, nerve and self-belief to lead this city to victory'. And as (insert name) is warming up, s/he's thinking, 'it could be me. It could be my name up there in lights, set down in the record books. It might be my photograph adorning the walls of teenagers. It could be my name on the back of replica shirts, it could be me opening supermarkets, shaking hands and signing autographs. It could be me.'[18]

Garry Whannel describes the role television plays in foregrounding individual sports stars 'as points of audience identification in both individual and team sports'.[19] For Whannel, sport performers have a threefold function for television;

> as stars they are the bearers of the entertainment value of performance; as personalities they provide the individualisation and personalisation through which audiences are won and held; and as characters they are the bearers of the sporting narratives.[20]

The live commentary in *Search Party vs…* deliberately borrows these familiar sport-broadcast strategies, especially the idea that particular performers/stars are endowed with a narrative function – in this case the local hero. The text is delivered relatively simply, because we're in familiar territory. For the sports fan, this is a familiar narrative, a familiar sentiment, but it clearly sets the agenda for how they should imaginatively position this event.

Matti the trainee-plumber-from-Kuopio (Finland)

The narrative of the local hero is one of a number of scripted threads that run through each performance of *Search Party vs…*. What isn't clear at the start of the performance is how and when this narrative will emerge. But crucially, there is always a point where a participant is reframed as the local hero, often after returning for a rematch. In keeping with Whannel's description of how television uses sport stars, the narrative thread, delivered through a combination of pre-written (scripted) statements and improvisation, encompasses the reframing of this particular participant and moves forward including specific references to the particular circumstances/characteristics of the newly crowned local hero. During *Search Party vs Kuopio* (2008),[21] Matti, a 17-year-old trainee plumber from Kuopio, became the local hero. He arrived at the performance on a moped, and returned several times over the three-days, bringing other table-tennis playing friends on their mopeds. Matti became a recognizable part of the local hero narrative, to the point where his arrival was announced by the commentary text:

> And the sounds of mopeds on the breeze can only mean one thing, Matti, the hometown hero, has returned once again to rescue Kuopio.[22]

The sound of Matti's moped was greeted by cheers from the gathered crowd, some who perhaps had

18. Jodie Hawkes and Pete Phillips, *Search Party vs Launceston* Commentary text, 2011.
19. Garry Whannel, *Fields in Vision: Television Sport and Cultural Transformation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 114.
20. Ibid., p. 115.
21. *Search Party vs Kuopio* was performed at ANTIfestival in Finland in 2008.
22. Jodie Hawkes and Pete Phillips, *Search Party vs Kuopio* Commentary text, 2008.

witnessed one of his earlier triumphs, others displaying a familiarity with the idea of Matti as local hero through this event of the approaching moped, exhibiting what Dubey would call the 'sporting gaze'.[23] 'That hypnotic integration into a world of heroes and myth – [that] shows the fan's willingness to make dream life a part of the everyday world.'[24] What is interesting here is the clash between the familiarity of the narrative frame and the aesthetic of the participant. We recognize the frame from elite, broadcast sport, but what we see is definitively amateur, participants in normal clothes, of different ages, body types, and levels of physicality. This is the authenticity described by Bishop, the 'proximity to everyday social reality',[25] the clear and undeniable texture of non-performer, of participant, of the world as experienced through the everyday, manifest as a texture within the artwork. This schism, between the frame and the participant becomes particularly interesting when the participant is typically out-of-place or undesirable in the location of the performance, in this case the pedestrianized high street.

Bob the homeless-table-tennis-player from Launceston (Australia)

During *Search Party vs Launceston* (2011) Jodie played a game against Bob, who self-identified as homeless. Bob played against Jodie and lost. During the game shoppers and parents and workers on their lunch breaks and a group of school children on an outing cheered Bob on. A huge crowd gathered to cheer him on. Bishop identifies a number of the reasons why artists use people as material in their work, several of which offer a useful perspective on how this moment is important in *Search Party vs Launceston*:

> to give visibility to certain social constituencies and render them more complex, immediate and physically present; to introduce aesthetic effects of chance and risk; [...] to examine the construction of collective identity and the extent to which people always exceed these categories.[26]

Following Bishop, Bob – *the homeless table tennis player* – a usually invisible user of this particular public space, ignored (or worse) by the other inhabitants of the high street was celebrated, and given – although only briefly – some sense of parity. He's here, he can't so easily be ignored, and the acknowledgement of his physical presence in this playful table tennis tournament, renders his relationship to this place, and the other users of it more complex.

Furthermore, the pseudo-community of consumers is ruptured. *Shopping*, the only really legitimate use of this space was temporarily suspended and these disparate individuals, who most probably were ignoring each other and almost certainly ignoring Bob engaged in a social action. The atomized individual consumers are reformed as a collective identity, a team, exceeding the boundaries of the individual, to engage in the communal.

The performance doesn't have any significant or lasting impact on this or other social issues that crop up, in the way that works considered part of the social turn are expected to, but it does create a mechanism where these issues can surface, if only temporarily. And interestingly, as a mechanism, the performance responds quite specifically to the particular character of each location it inhabits. It's not an artwork about homelessness and agency, but the openness of the offer of participation, and the bypassing of any implicit social hierarchy allows for the complexity of particular public spaces to be foregrounded.

A Sport and Art event

For Bishop, using non-performers to deliver an artwork under the instructions of an artist challenges the notion of singular authorship. Even though the artist constructs the event, its precise outcome remains unclear, creating a lack of control (to a degree), which is the trade-off for authenticity.

> By setting up a situation that unfolds with a greater or lesser degree of unpredictability, artists give rise to a highly directed form of authenticity: singular authorship is put into question by delegating control of the work to the performers; they confer upon the project a guarantee of realism, but do this through a highly authored situation whose precise outcome cannot be foreseen.[27]

In *Search Party vs...* participation allows the game to be played *as* a sport, the game of table tennis is played by the rules, live, without prior *rehearsal* or

23. Rod Dubey, *Indecent Acts in a Public Place: Sports, Insolence and Sedition* (Toronto: Charivari, 1990).
24. Ibid., p. 52.
25. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 237.
26. Ibid., p. 238.
27. Ibid., p. 237.

Image I. *Search Party vs...* Jodie Hawkes, Launceston, Australia, 2011. Photographed by Ashley Bird.

choreography and (seemingly) authentic competition ensues. So in this case the trade-off for authenticity, which according to Bishop is the relinquishing of a degree of control, actually serves a vital structural purpose of the performance. The complication, in relation to Bishop's outsourcing authenticity occurs in the co-presence of artist and participant. When the artist is absent from the artwork, and outsourced non-performers carry out their instructions the loss of control/authorship is only temporary.

> In wresting a work of art from this event, the artist both relinquishes and reclaims power: he or she agrees to temporarily lose control over the situation before returning to select, define and circulate its representation.[28]

In the examples given by Bishop, the artist leaves the performative aspect to the outsourced participants, before gathering the detritus and reframing it through specific contextual lenses for another audience. This dynamic is shifted by the presence of the artist alongside the participant, in fact *against* them, within the performance event. The 'wresting a work of art from [the] event' happens within the event itself. This relationship is key in my attempts to position *Search Party vs...* as a live art/sport event. The factors that make it a sports event are implicit in the structure, but crucially are played out alongside the factors that define it as an artwork. The integrity of the sporting contest, to paraphrase an idea from David Best's seminal 'sport isn't art' argument,[29] the idea that the end (winning the game) is more important than the means (how it is played) for the participant, sets up a clear position for engagement. This, alongside the proximity to real social reality, guaranteed by Bishop's outsourced authenticity, sets up the conditions, not only for an authentic sporting contest, but

28. Ibid.

29. David Best, 'Sport is Not Art', *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 12 (1985), 25–40.

Image 2. *Search Party vs Launceston*. Launceston, Australia, 2011. Photographed by Ashley Bird.

also for the spectacle of an authentic sporting contest. We're playing to win and we look like we're playing to win. These are *real* people, playing a *real* sport (to whatever degree of sophistication). And when this doesn't happen, when participants' *play-along-with-the-performance* there are clear strategies embedded within the commentary to break this rhythm.

The paradox for me in *Search Party vs*. . . is that it is only through achieving this sense of authenticity as a sporting contest that the artwork can function as an artwork. Once the conditions of (amateur) sporting competition are established, not within the infrastructure of a sporting governing body, but through the integrity of the game, the commentary text has the platform to create social situations; strangers cheering on a plumber on a moped, shoppers acknowledging a homeless man in an alternative context. It *needs* to be a sport event in order to function as an art event. And then when it functions as an art event it is only because it is also a sport event.

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A Provocative Cold Consideration: *3 Winters* at the National Theatre in London

Lena Šimić with Neal Anderson and Gabriel Anderson

Lena Šimić is a performance practitioner and pedagogue, born in Dubrovnik, Croatia, living in Liverpool, UK. She is co-organizer of The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, an art activist initiative run from her family home. Lena's autobiographical performance practice is informed by its relation to everyday lived experience, memory and fantasy.

On 31 January 2015 I took a train with my two sons aged 14 and 12 from Liverpool to London. We were going to the National Theatre (NT). This was their first ever visit. Ron Meadows, my colleague at Liverpool Hope University, suggested I see *3 Winters*, a Croatian play at the National Theatre. I am Croatian. Feeling intrigued, I watched the trailer, felt it was a bit too

'traditional/standard' for my taste but emailed Duška Radosavljević, my research collaborator on 'Mums and Babies Ensemble' project and my national 'frenemy' (we were both born in Yugoslavia, but now Duška is from Serbia and I am from Croatia), sharing my 'traditional/standard' concern and asking for her thoughts on this play. Duška responded fairly positively, confirming that it was traditional but also 'not bad'. She shared her *Exeunt* review of the production.[30] I read it, and was hooked. There might have been a tiny flicker of nationalist feeling in me provoked by Duška's last sentence in the review: 'And, despite any minor reservations, it must be said it was a joy to be finally admitted into the fold of the British mainstream in this way, for the first time in over twenty years of regular theatre-going.'[31] 'Yes, I will go! Moreover, I will take my two older sons with me, my two British-Croatian boys', exclaimed the dormant nationalist in me.

3 Winters is the first ever Croatian play (written by Tena Štivičić) to be produced and staged at the National Theatre in London. It opened on December 2014. Croatia joined the European Union (EU) the previous year. In a way, *3 Winters* represents Croatia's cultural entrance into British mainstream theatre, literally and metaphorically. Croatia has arrived; in Radosavljević's words *3 Winters* is a 'state of the nation play' with its appropriate dramaturgical and performance aesthetics, those familiar theatrics of the mainstream theatre, witty and smart, humourous and bold, technically well executed, funny and serious at the same time, somehow apparently pluralistic and diverse, appealing to the idea of multicultural Britain. However (and unfortunately) 'if you are not pissed off, you are not paying attention' still applies. The moment I sat down to write this consideration, the moment I decided to pay more attention to the event, it all started to collapse. To think deeper means to get angry; now I'm pissed off.

3 Winters appears as a solid, responsible, and appropriate play to stage. Yes, it is time for Britain to accept Croatia into its cultural mainstream; it's time for the British public to (re)consider the Balkans 1990s war. *3 Winters* fits in well with that middle class sensibility of multicultural Britain. Štivičić herself lives in London and has written the play in English, even when her early writing process involved drafting the play in both Croatian and English as she herself explains in the National Theatre podcast in conversation with Susannah Tresilian.[32] As someone who is also a Croatian emigrant and living in the UK, as well as a performance practitioner who has written and performed specifically for a British context (although predominantly within live art not theatre), I applaud this specificity of artistic engagement. According to Štivičić herself in the podcast, she didn't want to end up with a Croatian play and then have to translate it as 'plays in translation always lose a dimension'. As it is commonly acknowledged translation might misfire or misrepresent. Furthermore, one would imagine that being part of the performance making process and sitting in rehearsals allows for a more direct intervention into one's artwork. But does it really? What happens when we lose translation? What happens when we smooth over the cracks of transcultural engagement and (critical) problems which translation offers? What influence can one writer (and in this case a willing representative of one's nation who is writing this play in the knowledge it will be produced for the NT in London) have on the NT and its predominantly mainstream theatre aesthetics — which are there to please the usual crowd of middle class theatre goers? Isn't it more likely that any new play will have to 'bend and blend' in order to slot into the mainstream theatre machine? I would note that in the NT podcast Štivičić herself claims she's not wanting to represent Croatians, nor educate the British on Croatian history but just tell the story of a family, and in that showcase an aspect of our human condition, which is, of course, noble but deeply problematic. Having *3 Winters* written for and staged at the NT is a cultural and contextual event, not the isolated private affair the writer seems to believe.

Then why am I bothering to write this consideration? I do not long to call it a review as the play's already ended, and yet, the writing cannot be called an article either. I don't feel committed enough for that endeavour. I am sure that some committed academic, a defender of innovation at the National could very easily dismantle my superficial claim that the National offers predominant mainstream theatre aesthetics and support it by an array of examples of different productions

30. Duška Radosavljević, Review of *3 Winters* at National Theatre, 26 November 2014, *Exeunt*, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/3-winters/> [accessed 5 May 2015].
31. Ibid.
32. 'Tena Štivičić on *3 Winters* with Susannah Tresilian', *National Theatre Podcast*, 19 November 2014 <https://soundcloud.com/nationaltheatre/tena-stivicic-on-3-winters> [accessed 5 May 2015].

which confirm 'innovations' in the last 20 years, if not more. But, here I am, and here it is. This writing stuck somewhere in between a review and an article; I'm calling it a consideration, a provocation, a more thoughtful reflection on the experience of visiting the NT with my children, themselves first time theatre goers to the National Theatre, to watch the first ever Croatian play being staged there.

This writing stems from uncomfortable notions of nationality. I ask myself: why am I stuck in this national frame? Do I feel a sense of responsibility to my Croatian nation? I tell my children I am uneasy about saying I was born in Dubrovnik, Croatia, because I was born in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, that country which is no longer here. I explain to them: and if it is possible for me to have been born in Yugoslavia, a nowhere, then it's possible I could have been born anywhere else, and that elsewhere could have been renamed into somewhere else. I am beyond the idea of national borders, very much beyond it. I can't muster that nationalism, and yet, here I am, somehow excited by a thought 'well, it's the first ever Croatian play at the National; it's an occasion; you better go and see it; take the kids!'

My other hesitation here is that I am critiquing a fellow Croatian emigrant, moreover, a fellow woman artist? Should there be a sense of national, even gender solidarity between us immigrants into the UK? Shouldn't we just be pleased to be allowed in, both into the country as well as its cultural and academic milieu? Why bother with this critique? Writing this cold consideration is no revolution, after all. Croatia has got a play about its past, an interwoven story of three generations of the Kos family in a house in Zagreb, staged at the National. No one is expecting it to be an upheaval, one play in the NT factory. Is this really the thing over which one should pause, pay closer attention and use as a vehicle to get angry about the world and our reactive, mainstream culture? 'Don't write about performances you don't like' I remember my PhD supervisor advising. Why am I writing this and who for?

Taking the children changed my rules of engagement. I suddenly became much more bothered. I want to use this as an opportunity for critical parenting, for an engaged conversation about arts and culture, as well as history, citizenship, and nationality. This becomes a pedagogical opportunity. 'What do my children make of this experience?' becomes for me that crucial question. The following day, on our Virgin Pendolino back to Liverpool, I held a conversation with them both, individually, first Neal (14) followed by Gabriel (12).

The play itself is a story of the Kos family and their family home across three generations. In 1945 just at the end of the war, we see Rose (a strong-willed partisan woman) move with her husband and baby daughter Masha into an aristocratic house where her family used to work as servants; she is given the key to the house by the newly formed communist government. In 1990, at the brink of the break up of former Yugoslavia, the house is occupied by Masha, her husband Vlado (a history teacher and socialist) and their two daughters Alisa and Lucia. Finally, we find ourselves in the year 2011, at which point the two daughters emerge as the main protagonists. Whilst Alisa is a PhD student in London, who enjoys her moralising and yet oddly detached critical voice for the current situation in Croatia and beyond, the younger daughter Lucia is to become the new legal owner of the house with the help of her entrepreneur capitalist husband-to-be. The house passes from aristocrats through communists to new capitalists.

Conversation with Neal Anderson (14)

Conversation with Neal written up from notes made on the train home

Lena Šimić: *What was London like for you before going to see this play; what do you remember doing in London?*

Neal Anderson: Eminem, airports, protests, and always loads of people at Wembley. And I remember my Year 7 trip to London when we went to the London Eye and saw the *Lion King*. Oh yeah, Artsadmin and Dad shouting about injustice in this world, about everything that is wrong, about climate change. And then the G20 protest when someone got hit by the police and ended up dying. I remember standing there with lots of policemen and meeting people and eating fish and chips. Also St Paul's Cathedral and that weird video of Gabriel dancing.

LS: *Was that Occupy?*

NA: Yes, it was Occupy. I'm not even sure why we go sometimes. I don't think you tell us everything.

LS: *Well, why do you think the protestors occupied the area around St Paul's?*

NA: They occupied the area because they could. Well, they did it, didn't they? Their statement was about injustices in this world, how unfair democracy is because we can only vote for our constituency, and nothing bigger and that's not fair.

LS: *Why did we go this time?*

NA: You wanted to expose us to the theatre, National Theatre and *3 Winters* play.

LS: *So what was the play about?*

NA: It was about three generations of people in the same house, 1945, 1990, and now. It's the first ever Croatian play to be shown in the National Theatre and it's important because theatre is branching out with a new genre and a new culture.

LS: *How did you feel about the National Theatre, the building and atmosphere?*

NA: It's definitely for richer people. We wouldn't normally go there. Café is expensive, like really expensive. People were quite middle class. That's clear from the way they spoke and the way they dress and walk around. They stroll around, without purpose, it's hard to describe but you could tell. I doubt there were many Croatian people there. Tina didn't go.

LS: *Do you think it's important to have this play in the National Theatre?*

NA: I think it's important to have that play there because it shows what the UK thinks of Croatia. Even when the play is written by a Croatian writer, it's not Croatian really. It's all in English: set design and props and actors. It's British. The play had different types of characters in it representing different demographics: communist (Rose and Vlado, the Dad), capitalist (young daughter Lucia), the one who went to London who is a liberal intellectual (older daughter Alisa). The problem is that they can't get along with each other. They are all shouting a lot and then after that there's a bland joke. Shouting followed by a bland joke. Bland is important because I didn't laugh.

LS: *Did you not enjoy it? You seem to have followed it rather well.*

NA: I followed it because I had to. I might as well follow it. What else could I do? I wouldn't recommend it to a friend because they don't know about Yugoslavia. Documentary footage in between scenes was more interesting. You constantly had to switch mind-sets between different time periods. 1990s were the most interesting. Most characters were in it and there was so much going on. The last scene before the end of the first act was the best. I thought £100 was too much for it all (£50 for adult and £25 per child). They all spoke in clear English with no slang, all were middle class. The only view was from the middle class. There was no view from soldiers on the battlefield or controllers of the war but only from the middle class point of view. The play must appeal to the middle classes in the audiences otherwise it wouldn't be on. They wouldn't want to see some boring story of a soldier whose father died of tuberculosis and now he's living in a shack and has to fight in a war. I mean that's capitalism as well but they don't want that version of capitalism. At the end of the play capitalism wins, the younger daughter gets the house. Capitalism wins because that's where people think they are most free. They are made to believe they can make money. I didn't like her, that younger daughter character.

LS: *So are you disappointed to have seen it? Do you think it had an effect on you?*

NA: Maybe. I will have to reflect on that. Maybe on the bus when I go to school one day, it will come back to me.

LS: *How's this theatre different from the one you usually see with us, say at Artsadmin when we go for Two Degrees festival?*

NA: This one is much more practiced. I wouldn't say there is more skill, but it is professionally produced and then it's much more immersive.

LS: *Do you know about Bertolt Brecht, playwright and theatre practitioner from the 20th century, and how he wanted to disclose the means of production in theatre, showcase how everything is made. He would break the illusion (what you call immersive), so the audience would see how all the scene changes are done and how, for example, actors change costumes.*

NA: I was wondering about all the transitions and everything that actors have to do to be in place for the next scene. I kept looking at that, the changes in between. The other performances, like Tuebrook Transnational,[33] were a lot more interactive. Seeing Tuebrook Transnational work was a better experience, for me, because I knew the people involved. But films look better and you can do more in film. I don't want to do theatre.

Conversation with Gabriel Anderson (12)

I sound recorded the following conversation with Gabriel and wrote it up afterwards.

Gabriel remembers London for the Eminem concert and the protests we never win on. He

33. Tuebrook Transnational is a community based performance group in Tuebrook Liverpool that stages outdoor site-specific projects, such as audio tours and collective performance walks. See Tuebrook Transnational <http://tuebrooktransnational.com/> [accessed 14 June 2015].

thought this play would be pointless because of its depressing subject: war in Croatia. However, it turned out it wasn't that bad; it was dramatic and therefore enjoyable. Gabriel gave it 8.5 out of 10. He enjoyed the younger daughter Lucia's attitude on her wedding day, the arguments, intensity, and stress of the situation. He compared wars to weddings. Lucia was funny as she used to take pictures of everyone and annoy them. In a way, she was the only normal person in the play, with an iPhone. As for the other women: the older sister, Alisa, was shouted at by the former boyfriend and soldier suffering from PTSD, the mother Masha was depressed and lonely, the mother's sister was beaten up by her husband.

It surprised me that Gabriel read the play quite negatively in terms of women's roles, whilst the reviews I've read about this play seem to highlight the power and importance of women's roles.[34] Should simply having female characters in plays be enough, regardless of how they are portrayed? Gabriel offered an analysis of the mother figure, Masha, as someone who couldn't feel affection and only complains to her husband. To him, she seemed to have no political affiliation. The father figure, Vlado, a history teacher, on the other hand, was very political. He reminded him of his own Dad and myself, his Mum, especially with all that talk of communism, capitalism, and anarchism. I was glad not to be compared to Masha, with no political affiliation. Lucia also seemed apolitical to Gabriel and he glossed over the problematics of her connection to the new capitalist society and dirty dealings of her fiancé in order to secure the house for their family. In his eyes, she was normal. Her politics were invisible.

We talked about nationalism and my inability to identify through national borders. Gabriel told me he thought that Yugoslavia was just like Great Britain, but a lot bigger, with more countries. He said he learnt about that congress in 1990 at which the republics disagreed. The last lines of the first part of the play were: Yugoslavia is fucked (he spells it out in letters). He said that Yugoslavia fell apart because people disagreed about their future and that in a parallel universe somewhere, it still exists.

As for the experience of the NT, he was reminded of the Empire Theatre in Liverpool: both venues sell ice-cream. He complained about the experience of eating at the café being dreadful, not the food, but the seating plan. We did wander around the building trying to find an empty table and in the end sat outside on a rainy day. People, by the looks of them, seemed really old, he insisted. Gabriel saw two young people, both around ten. People at the National have those plain accents, posh plain accents; he doesn't belong there because he has no such accent. He wouldn't really want to go again; it takes up too much time, a whole weekend in London.

When concluding on his experience Gabriel thought the play was good but also inaccurate: I mean that wasn't really true that you could just get a key to a house? How did Rose get a key? I told him it was idealistic and true: in Yugoslavia all property was state-owned and therefore owned by the people. He wondered how come they couldn't do that with homeless people now. Furthermore, it seemed to Gabriel very unlikely that the masters would get off with their servants. Why not? I wondered. Well, if they did, and the baby was really theirs (the masters) why would they kick her onto the streets? I explained that it was socially unacceptable and that therefore Carolina (the aristocrat) wasn't able to handle it. It took her 30 years to get over it, exclaimed Gabriel. The baby was her family, Gabriel persisted. In the end, the servants got mixed up with the aristocrats. Such a mixture produced young capitalists, the young daughter being a prime example. She owns the house now, I explained. She is the only normal one, Gabriel reiterated.

Concluding thoughts

I am predisposed to praise this production but I can't. I would like to affirm it, but the critic in me is stronger. 'If you are not pissed off, you are not paying attention', rings in my mind. It is wintertime here in Liverpool and I am cold and ungenerous. I did just spend £180 on this experiment (and this is only on the train and theatre tickets), on this family trip with teenage children to London to see a play at the National Theatre. This is the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, being critical, being pedagogical, learning together, being pissed off together, disagreeing with dominant mainstream culturing,

34. See Elaine Aston, Review of *3 Winters*, by Tena Štivičić, Lyttleton, National, 22 December 2014 <http://dramaqueensreview.com/2014/12/22/3-winters-tena-stivicic-lyttleton-national-theatre/> and Susannah Clapp, '*3 Winters* review – Generous, Surprising and Extremely Powerful', *Observer*, 7 December 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/dec/07/3-winters-review-croatia-national-theatre-tena-stivicic> [accessed 15 June 2015].

pointing to the cracks, to the areas where we just accept culture as it is and are content not to delve deeper. In the upcoming springtime family day trips might include something else rather than theatre. Our next London trip with the whole family is for Time to Act national climate march at the beginning of March. I am excited to experience it, be part of the social movement for ecological justice but also to think through the problematics of ideology I, as a parent, impose on my children. On the other hand, the children themselves, are sure to surprise me with their own viewpoints on the event, just like they did with this consideration on *3 Winters* at the National.

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