Deborah Christine Pearson

The shape of a thought: A made-up game

Narrative Preoccupations in Contemporary Performance

Submitted for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre Studies, Royal Holloway, University of London in January 2016.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature

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Abstract

This practice-based thesis asks, "In what unique ways can contemporary performance address our preoccupations with narrative?" It reframes what are frequently discussed in screenwriting handbooks as "the rules of storytelling" as "narrative conventions," then asks what central cognitive preoccupations lie behind these conventions. This research addresses narrative preoccupations from the unique position that contemporary performance occupies in an arts ecology, posited between theatre and visual art, allowing artists to implement narrative conventions while questioning the fundamental nature of the audience's desire for these conventions on a philosophical level. The thesis identifies and discusses three central preoccupations. Those three preoccupations are: i) Representation, ii) Conflict, and iii) Endings.

The practice-based pieces are twenty-seven versions of the script *The Future Show*, in which Deborah Pearson continually rewrote and performed an account of the rest of her life, starting from the end of the performance. Descriptions of her immediate future would "expire" as soon as she spoke them aloud, meaning the concept required constant rewrites of text. Deborah excerpted past versions at Battersea Arts Centre on November 4th, attended by her examiners, and is including video documentation of this performance in her thesis. *The Future Show* came from the prevalent definition of narrative as "the representation of an event," suggesting narrative is a recreation of something which already happened. She questions the preoccupation with representation through writing a "pre-presentation" of events, purporting to present an autobiographical solo piece about what will happen.

An additional practice-based element of this thesis is documentation of her one-on-one piece *Drifting Right* in which, as an avowed left wing voter, she takes right-wing voters on a canoe ride on open waters and invites them to engage in a political conversation with her that is not an argument. This documentation relates to Chapter 2, which examines the narrative preoccupation with "Conflict."

Acknowledgements

About three years ago, a French-speaking friend of mine asked me to proofread the acknowledgements for her PhD thesis, which was in English. I remember that she wrote something like "After having read so many acknowledgements in other peoples' dissertations over the years, I can barely believe that I am now writing my own." That sentence stuck with me, as though standing in a hall of mirrors inhabited by completed dissertations, as I was in the first year of my research at the time, and did not even dare to contemplate that I might one day be reflecting on her reflection, while writing my own acknowledgements, while staring at my own now completed thesis, and knowing that it was my time now to take a moment and thank people.

There is no elegant way to do this, as there are only so many synonyms for gratitude, so excuse the repetition. If anything, I can perhaps see that repetition as a kind of heart beat of generosity and understanding that has kept my research alive, and that continues to resonate, even now as I find myself primarily researching companies who can bind and print a thesis, rather than theatre companies who can make up the bulk of what I wish to write.

Thank you first to Dan Rebellato, my incredible supervisor, who is really the reason I may be getting a PhD. From his very first reply to my email enquiring about studying at Royal Holloway, Dan has been enthusiastic, forthcoming, critical in all the right ways, and just "gets it." When he doesn't "get it," it is because something is wrong, and having a supervisor who believes in me and my research, and who "gets it" when it is worth being got, has been the greatest gift. I feel incredibly grateful for his thoughts and guidance. I owe this research to him.

I'd also like to thank my advisor, Chris Megson, who I always felt excited to show my work to. I looked forward to annual reviews because of Chris's feedback. Getting notes from him on the PhD felt like receiving tremendous gifts in the form of thoughts.

I'd like to thank Royal Holloway's drama department, who have hosted me as a PhD student, a visiting lecturer and a member of the theatre company in residence over the past three years. I'm constantly inspired by the other lecturers in that department – their generosity, warmth, creativity and intellectual rigour frequently made the two hour commute to Egham worthwhile. I'd also like to thank Royal Holloway for the Reid Scholarship, which funded my research for three years, and allowed me to have what I so desperately needed as an artist and researcher – breathing room and head space.

To the artists discussed in this PhD, I'd like to give most of the trophies in the case. As my appendix makes clear, they were all extremely forthcoming and generous with their time and thoughts, and ingenious enough to make work worth studying. To those artists who gave of their time and energy in the form of emails and interviews: Gemma Paintin, Bryony Kimmings, James Stenhouse, Kieran Hurley, Brian Lobel, Tim Crouch, Tim Etchells, James Long, Marcus Youssef, Young Jean Lee, Tania El Khoury, Nic Green, Jess Latowicki, Tim Cowbury, Christopher Brett Bailey and Andy Smith – thank you, both for your help and for your work.

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Introduction

i. 18 years old, sat on a bench, wrestling with narrative

The first time I felt truly excited by a piece of theatre was not in Berlin or London or New York, and I was not watching the Wooster Group or Forced Entertainment for the first time. I was 18 years old and had gone to see a friend of a friend's play at the Baby Grand theatre in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. The play was a fringe remounting of *Never Swim Alone* (1997), a one-act play by Canadian playwright Daniel MacIvor. It was staged in a painfully tiny black box theatre on the second floor of a building on Princess Street to a very small audience. The piece opened with an image of a woman in a swimsuit on a lifeguard chair and two men in business suits. The men were occasionally speaking in unison, making a series of points about what they were wearing, while the woman in the swimsuit was keeping score.

I was confused. I was deeply, wonderfully confused. There was a competition, there were rounds, and there were two almost identical men bragging about who was wearing the right shoes, the right socks, and the right tie. The setting was nowhere recognizable – it was not a beach, it was not a boardroom – it was not even quite that theatre – it was nowhere. Which was fine. As the piece went on, a story began to emerge. The two men were childhood friends and now competitive colleagues, one was cheating on his wife, and the woman in the swimsuit was a girl they had challenged to a swimming race as children who, amidst their competitive desire to win the race, had drowned and died. Although this more conventional story was intriguing, looking back what I remember best were the moments, early on in the

play, when I was sat in the dark, and very excited that I was being engaged by a structure whose rules were clear but not yet clear to me. A game was being played, not simply the "game" in which the woman kept score on stage, but a kind of narrative game. This was a game which had rules that had been devised not by the conventions of naturalism, but by the piece itself. Directly afterwards, as an 18 year old feeling very breathless and alive, I sat on a bench outside of the theatre and began scribbling – I was writing what would become my first text for performance. That very sparsely-attended fringe restaging of a Canadian one-act play contained the seeds of what I continue to find most exciting in theatre.

ii. A made up game

I hate narrative and I love narrative.   In my twenties, I was fortunate enough to encounter a few "breaks" as a young person who was interested in becoming a playwright. This primarily took the form of being invited onto a series of "playwright development" programmes. As a result, I studied the basics of the "three act structure" supposedly latent in many canonical plays and Hollywood films with five different instructors over four years. During those classes, the link between that proscriptive-seeming narrative strategy, and the breathless excitement I had felt while watching an unfamiliar but cohesive structure in *Never Swim Alone*, felt tenuous at best. Every narrative "principle" I was taught in a playwriting group simply made me deeply question that principle – from the male orgasm-like third act climax to the rhetorical simplicity of a "controlling idea" introduced by an "inciting incident."

What I am close to understanding now, is that both *Never Swim Alone* and the three-act structure are a kind of game. The three-act structure is akin to baseball. It has been played for years - masterfully with complexity by some, and in an amateur

and simple way by others. When watching a game of baseball the audience knows broadly how the experience will feel without knowing the players or the details of how the game will play out. Daniel MacIvor's piece, however, is more like a parlour game that friends invent on a Saturday night during a black out. Baseball and the invented parlour game do not play by the same rules, and perhaps would not engage the same players. One has a long history and one may only exist for that one night for whoever happens to be in the room. But they both understand and are built around why we play and what we want out of a game – or to put it more clearly, what we want out of an experience and how we frame that experience. They both understand what we want out of a narrative.

Never Swim Alone would be more comfortably characterised as "telling a story" than the work I make now, and certainly more comfortably characterised as "telling a story" than most of the work I discuss in this PhD.[1] Its "rules" eventually revealed a fictional plot about fictional characters. In a sense it appeared at first as a contemporary performance piece and then revealed a play. But it was not the ways that the piece addressed a preoccupation with *story* that stuck with me, but the ways in which it addressed and understood a preoccupation with *narrative* before this fictional story began to emerge. Work that critically and rigorously identifies and addresses narrative preoccupations is the work that, on a personal level, I find leads somewhere both structurally cohesive and complex. The question is how a maker can bypass the temptation to create something proscriptive (to align with a three act structure for example), to avoid playing a familiar game with familiar rules, in aid of

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[1] This dissertation approaches "story" and "narrative" as being distinct and not synonymous, particularly in so far as their "preoccupations" are concerned. Preoccupations are a key element of this research which is explained at length later on.

inventing a new game to be played in the dark? This research is an attempt to address that question.

iii. The Research Question

This practice-based research asks: "In what unique ways can contemporary performance address our preoccupations with narrative?"

　　We are living through a cultural moment in which there is a pervasive awareness of narrative choices that different sources in the media, research, and online make when presenting information. These choices seem not to be made arbitrarily but for ideological, economic or other reasons. As a result, there is also a sense in which the definitive version of any story (i.e. the truth – a version that is not subject to ideological narrative choices) seems both absent and somehow irrelevant because of its inability to be coherently "told." Narrative, from an etymological standpoint, is derived from the Sansrkit "gna" and the Latin words for "knowing" and "telling" which are "gnarus" and "narro" respectively (Porter Abbott 10). From an etymological standpoint, "telling knowledge" is deeply embedded in narrative, and any act of telling is not simply susceptible to omissions and ideological choices, but necessarily entails such choices, whether those constructing and receiving the narrative are aware of it or not.

　　As H. Porter Abbott wrote, "…narrative can be used to deliver false information; it can be used to keep us in darkness and even encourage us to do things we should not do" (Porter Abbott 12). In Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, Zinn opens his book by pointing out the ways in which history is subject to ideological edits through narrative means. He uses the example of

Christopher Columbus' discovery of America - he points to Samuel Eliot Morison's book *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* as having only one reference to a "complete genocide" of Indigenous people which is "…on one page, buried halfway into the telling of a grand romance" (Zinn 7). He writes,

> My viewpoint, in telling the history of the United States, is different: that we must not accept the memory of states as our own […] The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners (Zinn 10).

Zinn's project of writing a "people's history" for the United States perfectly encapsulates the ways in which narrative choices constitute a powerful ideological action. As he points out in the example of Morison's brief mention of genocide in a book dedicated to Christopher Columbus, the act of structuring and shaping material – i.e. the narrative act – is a deeply political one. Even if, as Morison does, the teller does not omit ideologically conflicting facts, they can choose to mention them in a way as to make them seem irrelevant or pedantic.

Following on from Zinn, we are currently living through an age which has been termed by Jameson as the end of "historicity"[2] in which a simple google search or the choice to read the same news story as reported in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*

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[2] Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity: Time and Event in Postmodernity." Georg Forster Lecture, 2012. *Youtube*. Web. Accessed 10 October 2014.

(not to mention the choice to read subsequent comments on any news story) is an exercise in watching the ways in which ideological narrative choices mediate our understanding of events in real time. As Zinn pointed out in his book, first published in 1980, narrative choices have always mediated our understanding of events, particularly in the work of historians. The multi-nodal nature of internet news cycles, however, means that those living in 2016 are subject, whether they wish to be or not, to a constant observation of (and engagement with) narrative choices being made for ideological reasons, at a pace likely unimaginable to Howard Zinn when he first wrote *A People's History of the United States*. The struggle to control the narrative is now extremely public, very much in the mainstream, and a basic element of the existential condition of living in technologically "plugged in" societies in 2016.

As a result, there seems to be an increasing trend in contemporary performance for makers to make work that questions the fundamental tenets and desires associated with narrative. Many of what I would identify as the strongest and most engaging examples of that trend in performance are studied in this very dissertation. There is a great deal of contemporary performance work that is dealing precisely with narrative conventions and their ideological ramifications - what our narrative preoccupations look like, where they may derive from, and how they enact themselves, for better and for worse. By devoting my thesis to researching this work, while (through my practice-based research) exploring narrative preoccupations and how they can be critically explored in my own work, I hope to make some headway into a narrative research that does justice to the very interesting performance work being made which, through a re-evaluation of narrative conventions, creates space for ambiguity, critique, and artistic exploration in the narrative field.

Central to this thesis is a re-evaluation (through practice and research) of narrative in contemporary performance by focusing on "narrative preoccupations" and how these can be creatively addressed in the contemporary performance medium. To date, this is the first research that examines the term "Narrative Preoccupations" in the ways in which this thesis does – not as being synonymous with narrative conventions, but as an in-depth means of critically thinking through the dominance of narrative conventions. The term "preoccupation" is employed extensively in this research. Its definition is unpacked at length in a later section of this introduction, and it is used as a jumping off point for philosophical enquiry into deeply rooted structures, desires and associations that are both cultural and cognitive. An enquiry into these preoccupations derives greater understanding of their nuances, and this research explores whether or not a nuanced understanding of narrative preoccupations can result in dramaturgical innovation in terms of structuring a performance. This research identifies "narrative preoccupations" as being latent in what Fredric Jameson calls the "central function or instance of the human mind" (xiii), or what I term "the shape of a thought," and the ways in which contemporary performance makers can and have addressed instinctive narrative desires. This research hypothesizes that by exploring the cultural and cognitive ramifications of narrative preoccupations, an artist can find a path towards a creative but rigorous approach to structure in performance. In my dissertation this dramaturgical strategy was explored through a combination of critical thinking into narrative preoccupations through research, and by applying these questions to my own work in practice to explore the ways in which these preoccupations *can be* addressed, rather than focusing simply on how they *have already been* addressed. This necessitated the practice-based element of this research – only by applying the narrative preoccupations to my practice could I demonstrate

and test their efficacy for innovatively thinking through narrative structure in performance. As discussed later in this introduction, my thesis question was "In what unique ways *can* contemporary performance address our preoccupations with narrative?" The importance of a practice-based approach to this project is embedded in the word "can" as offering up an approach that is not simply survey based, but that explores and tests new possibilities for creating structurally innovative but cohesive work through exploring narrative preoccupations. As a performance maker and dramaturg, I am constantly thinking through the nature of narrative in performance, with an emphasis on a philosophical and critical approach to narrative shapes, conventions and tropes in both my own work and the work of others. There is a section entitled "Navigating the practice" included with the practice-based materials of this PhD which gives the reader a more in depth idea of the practice-based journey and how it informed and formed this research.

As with any PhD research topic, every word in this question has been considered, inwardly debated, and in some cases, changed. The first word that may raise eyebrows or questions is "unique" – unique when compared with what standard? In the case of this research, the word *unique* springs almost directly from the cultural context of the term *contemporary performance*. "Contemporary performance" is the term I use to refer to work that is not always classified as theatre, although it sometimes is, and not always classified as performance art, although it sometimes is.

Contemporary performance exists at the intersection of theatre and performance art. A central tenet of the methodology of this dissertation is to avoid defining terms in favour of thinking through "preoccupations" rather than inherent traits, and this approach will be discussed at length later on in this introduction. Nonetheless, it may be useful to spend a moment discussing the unique ways in which

the term "contemporary performance" is used in the theatre industry, and the tendency towards discord and disagreement that is latent in the term.

Contemporary performance is a broader term than theatre and broader too than performance art. As Gregory Battock and Robert Mickas put it, "…the term performance […] has always been loosely defined […] encompassing a broad area of activity by a wide variety of artists with diverse styles, methods and concerns." As they go onto point out, the "broadness" of this definition is in part directly linked to the reputation that performance has for being inventive with form. "This lack of strict definition […] was not necessarily bad. For a number of reasons it proved advantageous to the artists and to the development of the form. Performance was suited to experimentation" (Battock and Nickas 5). That said, in contemporary performance work I have seen in the United Kingdom since 2007 there are also trends which emerge and could arguably act as their own "conventions" - a lack of script or conventional story or obvious 'fiction', use of non-professional actors and arguably an avoidance of acting, and frequently the framing of a piece as an experience with a beginning, middle and end that asks for an audience's exclusive attention over a period of time.

As defined by Richard Schechner, performance is "a broad spectrum of entertainments, arts, rituals, politics, economics and person-to-person interactions" (7), and yet even Schechner's definition was informed by theatre, even if only in positioning itself in opposition to it, as in 1992 he announced "The new paradigm is performance, not theatre" at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. In recent use in industry circles in the United Kingdom and North America, the term "contemporary performance," in spite of its broadness, has come to be linked to and informed by the context and history of theatre, frequently asking for the sustained and

exclusive attention of an audience over a period of time, just as a conventional play does. In this way it is distinct not merely in context but frequently in form from performance *art*, where a performance may be on-going as one piece among several others in a larger gallery setting, and an audience may be permitted to divide their attention between that piece and others.

That said, a great deal of contemporary performance is also influenced by the realness or "realness" of performance art. Performers frequently perform 'as' themselves as opposed to as characters, and often the actions they perform on stage involve a real risk of failure, and are more comfortably referred to as tasks. Just as Marina Abramovic *really* sat across from a series of friends and strangers as part of *The Artist is Present* (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, James Stenhouse from the company Action Hero *really* exercises to the point of exhaustion in the training montage for *Hoke's Bluff* (2013), and Gob Squad *really* invite uninitiated audience members on stage to act as key performers in *Kitchen* (2007) and *The Western World* (2015).[3] Contemporary performance shares something in common with conceptual art, as ideally form and content reflect each other or are perhaps indistinguishable from each other.

The 'contemporaneity' of contemporary performance is a fuzzy concept. It is both a quantitative term that suggests work produced over a more-or-less recent period and a qualitative term that suggests work that 'captures' some distinct part of contemporary experience. In terms of the qualitative aspect, this thesis will demonstrate throughout how certain dramaturgical terms with a long history

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[3] There is a real element to more conventional theatre of course – the presence of the actors, whether or not they can remember their lines, and the durational experience of watching the performance unfold for the audience, yet conventional theatre rarely sets out to explicitly draw our attention to this shared task-based reality, as that breaks or draws attention from the illusion of a fictional world that many conventional plays set out to create for an audience.

(representation, conflict, etc.) are given particular force and shape by their application to contemporary political and cultural concerns.

This said, given the wide variety of terms that artists working in performance in 2016 use to describe their practice, my use of the term "contemporary performance" is primarily a personal choice, both as a practitioner and a researcher. The term "performance" has a history of flexibility, taking in practices which otherwise struggle with terminology. As Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis wrote of Richard Schechner's definitions of performance studies, "he seems here to construct a pattern and a narrative to authenticate his own practice" and yet he also "properly and generously insists that his is not the only narrative to have determined Performance Studies" (106). Some readers may wonder why I have not chosen to use Lehmann's term of "postdramatic theatre" or the popular British term "Live Art." As this research is concerned primarily with narrative "preoccupations" – it is also wary of the limits (through academic and geographical preoccupations) that terms like "post-dramatic theatre" and "live art" suggest. The correct terminology to refer to the genre of theatre examined here is a constant source of debate, both among academics (as evidenced in the special issue of *Performance Research*, 'Performing Literatures' (14.1, 2009), and particularly in Beth Hoffmann's excellent article on the term "live art") and among the practitioners themselves. There are many artists whose work I discuss as "contemporary performance" who would vehemently refer to themselves as "live artists." "theatremakers" or "playwrights." This is best exemplified, perhaps, when in his book, *The Forest and the Field*, Chris Goode references performance artist Marina Abramovic's declaration that she hates theatre because it is fake. He quotes Abramovic as saying, "Theatre is fake […] The knife is not real, the blood is not real and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is

real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real" (38). Goode then defends the use of the term "theatre," writing that "…however I might on any given day choose to define theatre, I think I would always want it to be able to include works such as Abramovic's *The Artist is Present*."

Tania El Khoury, one of the artists discussed in this research, aligns with Abramovic and takes great umbrage with the term "theatre" and prefers to use "live art" in reference to her work. In a published dialogue in which she and I debate whether we prefer to be referred to as theatremakers or live artists, El Khoury says that she dislikes the term theatre because "It calls for a passive relationship in which, as a spectator, you pay to lie back and watch other people on stage feeling […] hoping that this will somehow move you" while I respond telling her that "…thinking of my work as 'theatre' is a really important part of my practice. I'm inspired by the conventions and expectations that come with a term that is as old and loaded as 'theatre'" (El Khoury and Pearson 122). There may well be many other examples of artists featured in this research who feel strongly about being or not being contextualised as theatre, live art or performance art.

In spite of the range of terms the artists explored in this work apply to themselves, there is a temptation to define contemporary performance by the means of production employed. Anecdotally, contemporary performance makers do not seem to take a conventional theatre production model for granted. Many artists resist a hierarchical and set production model which employs a set of separate individuals to be responsible for separate elements of a performance - employing one person each in the role of playwright, director, sound designer, stage manager, lighting designer, and expecting those individuals' responsibilities to deviate very little from those pre-set roles. From my experience working as a dramaturg and outside eye in rehearsal

rooms, many contemporary performance makers (either by choice or by budgetary necessity) tend to use a production model in which there is a "lead artist" or two "lead artists," a set of individuals with diverse skills, but the discussion around various elements of a production, particularly the relationship between staging and text, is more fluid and collaborative than the terms "playwright" and "director" would suggest. The project seems to dictate the team and the means of production, as opposed to taking a prescribed "way of doing things" for granted in terms of how a piece is made. This said, even this observation is a problematic way of attempting to delineate boundaries between theatre and performance, as a theatre company such as Improbable employs an extremely fluid production model through their use of open space technology, while still using terms like "playwright," "director" and "theatre," and there are likely examples of artists who identify their work as "live art" or "contemporary performance" who proscribe to very set and hierarchical production models.

This dissertation does emphasise questioning "narrative *conventions*" in favour of thinking through "narrative *preoccupations*," but this dissertation is not interested in privileging theatre, drama or playwriting, or in privileging live art, performance art or relational work when using a term like "contemporary performance." This dissertation attempts to avoid adding fuel to the on-going debate between "(literary) drama" and "(art-based) performance" as Bottoms puts it (3), or the "text-based" and the "non text-based" as it was commonly referred to in UK industry circles. A great many of the artists in this book (including myself) are writers, and have published texts of their performances, while also acknowledging the limits of accessing the full experience of a piece via reading the text alone. The divide between "text-based" and "devised" work in the United Kingdom is arguably

becoming increasingly irrelevant as many artists straddle the line between writer and maker (some of whom have work that is analysed in this very dissertation), and many institutions (like the Royal Court under Vicky Featherstone and the National Theatre under Rufus Norris) are also increasingly interested in commissioning and presenting work by makers and writers who straddle this divide.

Whether or not an artist, like Young Jean Lee, self-identifies as a "playwright" or, like Tania El Khoury, self-identifies as a "live artist", or, like Tim Crouch, self-identifies as both, is important primarily as a means of understanding the context that artist positions themselves in, either because the fit is comfortable, or because the fit is excitingly uncomfortable, bending and stretching the term a little to accommodate that artist's work. Some of these artists are interested in "breaking theatre" as Tim Etchells puts it (Bottoms 4), and others are interested in shunning a term like "theatre" entirely in favour of "performance art" or "live art". As Beth Hoffmann points out, "the slipperiness of the formal nomenclature - live art, performance, performance art, theatre, experimental theatre, 'this area', 'what you will' – reminds us that the medium specificity of theatre is not perhaps as easily definable as some of the rhetoric of both literary theatre and live art suggests" (*Radicalism and the Theatre in Genealogies of Live Art* 103).

Although as an artist, I am inspired and propelled by identifying my own work as theatre, as a researcher my focus in this dissertation is not on "theatrical preoccupations," "performance art preoccupations," or "live art preoccupations" (though these may be subjects for another project), but on "narrative preoccupations." While acknowledging the diverse ways in which the artists discussed here self-identify, I have chosen to discuss the work studied in this dissertation as "contemporary performance" to create as broad a church as possible, where the

unusual and critical ways in which "narrative preoccupations" can and have been thought through in a performance setting are the focus of the research, rather than the focus being on how this work sits in a context as "theatre" or "performance art." It is for exactly this purpose that I am grouping these artists together under the term "contemporary performance," which predominantly references work at the intersection of all of these forms, united by a self-aware and critical approach to the narrative preoccupations discussed in the chapters which follow.

By discussing the intersection between theatre and performance art found in contemporary performance, the reader can perhaps begin to better understand my meaning in using the term "unique." By "unique" I mean, unique *to* contemporary performance, and in this sense, not quite like theatre, not quite like performance art, but informed by both. What opportunities to think through <u>narrative</u> are afforded us by the unique position that contemporary performance occupies in the artistic landscape?

There is another, small word in my research question, a recent change that feels integral to the project, particularly because it is a result of the practice-based nature of my research. This is the word "can." "In what unique ways *can* contemporary performance address our preoccupations with narrative?" In the initial stages of my research I felt a responsibility to survey the approaches to narrative already existing in the contemporary landscape I work in. Three years on, I realize that this research is as much about pointing towards what *could* happen, as it is about surveying what *has* happened. This *could* is in part down to a belief held historically by some scholars and artists that contemporary performance exists separately from

narrative, and in fact its rejection of narrative tropes is one of its defining features.[4]

In my experience, this belief is fast fading from both contemporary performance

makers and academics, though this may be as much a result of a change in the attitude

towards narrative in performance, as it is a result of a change in discussions of

narrative in the wider world.

My research is posited within the almost twenty-year context of practice-based

creative theory in the United Kingdom. While what *has* happened can be comfortably

addressed by the written and theoretical component of this dissertation, what *could*

happen can only be fully explored by a combination of philosophical enquiry and

practical implementation. Taking inspiration from Rosi Braidotti, who said in a recent

lecture "Critique and creativity work together to actualize the possible,"[5] I have

attempted to explore some of the artistic possibilities afforded by critically addressing

narrative preoccupations in performance, in part through my pieces *The Future Show*

and *Drifting Right*. This approach has been furthered with my colleagues and even

students, concurrent with my PhD project, through my work as a visiting lecturer at

Royal Holloway and workshop leader in the UK and North America, and particularly

through my work as a dramaturg for several contemporary performance companies

including Action Hero, Paper Cinema, and Made in China. By identifying what I feel

are the central tenets and preoccupations in our thinking about narrative in

performance, I hope to inspire other artists to see narrative preoccupations not as a

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[4] The term "anti-narrative" has long been in use to refer to avant-garde or experimental visual art, and has also been used in reference to experimental theatre since the 1960s. For instance, American experimental playwright Richard Foreman writes of his work, "My theatre is a theatre of situation and impulse" leading one theorist to conclude that "Foreman belongs to the theatrical traditions of the "Absurd." Certainly, his theatre depends on the unpredictable and a concept of 'anti-narrative'" (Hand 219).

[5] Braidotti, Rosi. "Vectors of Affirmation." Central Saint Martin's, London. 12 March 2015. Lecture.

strict framework of conventions that their work must adhere to or reject,[6] but as jumping off points to be aware of, and with which they can productively and creatively negotiate and explore.

This said, my practice-based research also deeply engages with a study of what *has* happened in terms of narrative preoccupations in contemporary performance. When studying a field like "contemporary performance" the issue of inclusion arises in my use of the word "contemporary." In 2007, I founded *Forest Fringe*, an organization that I now co-direct with the artists Andy Field and Ira Brand. Through this organization I have worked, as a producer, with many of the artists whose pieces I cite in this research. As a dramaturg I have worked with Action Hero and Made in China, and I discuss pieces by both of these companies in the chapter on conflict, although I did not dramaturg the pieces discussed in this research. Of all of the pieces considered in this dissertation, I have only *not* worked with the artists of four pieces – Mike Daisey's *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* (2011) in Chapter 1, James Long and Marcus Youssef's *Winners & Losers* (2012) in Chapter 2, and John Moran's *John Moran and his Neighbour Saori* (2007) and Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment* (2012) in Chapter 3. All four of these pieces were produced in North America, meaning that although I have seen some iteration of all three, the artists are not linked to my artistic community through the UK-based Forest Fringe.

As this is practice-based research, the work of my "contemporaries" in my artistic community is integrally informative to my practice. Through Forest Fringe, I have been part of an extensive network of practitioners, from well-established senior artists like Tim Etchells and Tim Crouch, to mid-career artists like Tania El Khoury

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[6] A Beth Hoffmann wrote: "'Narrative', thought simply as 'story', might at first seem significant to live art only in its absence. Indeed, the refusal of coherent, well-made plot structure has long served as a key means of distinguishing live art from dramatic theatre" (*The Time of Live Art* 55).

and Kieran Hurley. I view "contemporary" as *my* artistic contemporaries – the pieces

discussed in this research have all been staged since I began working professionally in

the field in 2007, and all of the work discussed has had an influence on my thinking

about and through both my practice and my understanding of narrative in

contemporary performance. The informal research and thinking that artists do is

always informed by the work that is happening in their contemporary community, that

said, subjective experience must be checked against rigorous analysis of the field, and

I have attempted to do just this in the chapters that follow. As John Freeman writes of

practice as research, "In the normative terms of research we are able to say that

practice relates to the idea of prototypicality, where one's practice serves as a model

for the work of others in one's field; but practice also relates to the employment of

existing work, so that practice is shaped by work seen, just as one's own practice as

research is informed by begged, borrowed and/or stolen ideas" (263). My practice

has not been changed by every piece that an artist in my community has made – in

fact, given how many companies Forest Fringe have worked with over the last nine

years, the sample of artists and their work included in this research is proportionally

small and selective. I have necessarily focused on work, staged since 2007, that has

profoundly influenced my thinking about narrative in contemporary performance.

This process of being inspired and challenged by the work of my contemporaries was

always underway. Watching and thinking through their work has been a key source

of embodied knowledge in my artistic practice. This PhD research project has

allowed me to formalize, deepen, reflect and deliberate on that knowledge in order to

share it with a reader.

iv. Preoccupations, Performance and Narrative

The term *preoccupation* in my research question may strike some readers as unusual and worthy of discussion. This term came as the result of time spent wrestling with a definition for *narrative*. While there is an entire field of research and enquiry into narratives in literary studies called Narratology, there is a great deal of dissonance when it comes to defining narrative within that field. Some definitions are overly narrow and others are so open as to be impossible to pin down.

Gregory Currie, on the narrow side of the argument, defines narratives as: "the product of agency, they are the means by which someone communicates a story to someone else" (Currie 1). Already the notion of "story" is central to Currie's theory. Currie's definition goes on to stress the importance of a narrative as an artefact, suggesting that conversations cannot be narratives, writing later in the book that due to the emphasis on *agency* in his definition, dreams do not qualify as narratives, as they were not deliberately and consensually created by someone, they simply have narrative qualities (Currie 21). To my view, an insistence on agency and artefact in Currie's definition means that while Currie may be describing a story, he is not describing a narrative. While stories are "made up" by someone, narratives are cognitive structures that we perceive instinctively.

Literary theorist Fredric Jameson calls narrative the "central function or instance of the human mind" (xiii). What Jameson means here is that narrative is not simply an aesthetic choice or strategy, it is a deep cognitive structure – the shape of a thought, the way in which we process experiences past, present and future. He is far from alone in this interpretation. Similar statements can be found in writing about narrative in education, history and media.[7] As Louis Mink writes, "narrative as such

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[7] Clandinin and Connelly 5, Carr 7.

is not just a technical problem for writers and critics but a primary and irreducible form of human comprehension, an article in the constitution of common sense" (214). Taking this interpretation further, narrative could be said to be the way in which we shape and order thoughts, events and our own identities.

Marie-Laure Ryan writes that "One of the least controversial claims of contemporary narratology is that a narrative text is the representation of a number of events in a time sequence" (Ryan 109). This "uncontroversial" definition stems from Aristotle writing in *Poetics* that tragedy was "the mimesis of a praxis," and as there is no direct English translation from ancient Greek for both the terms "mimesis" and "praxis," "representation" and "event" are by no means the final word on Aristotle's intended meaning. The widespread nature of this uncontroversial definition[8] has paved the way for several narrative preoccupations that I return to later in this research.

In an open letter to Marie-Laure Ryan, fellow narratologist David Rudrum clarifies his own, very open approach to defining narrative. He tells Ryan that in a previous article he was not merely suggesting that we should only define narrative according to its use, but rather that we should not seek to define narrative at all. He writes "[Defining narrative] implicitly carries with it the danger inherent in all definitions – that of setting up a view of a subject that is at best narrow, and at worst foregrounds certain kinds of texts over and above others" (202). Although Rudrum's very wide definition of narrative has the advantage of reflecting the equally wide range of narrative forms visible in contemporary performance and does not privilege any form over the other, it is perhaps too wide, and in order to make headway with my research I found it necessary to identify some starting points for discussing

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[8] "the representation of an event" is also employed by H. Porter Abbott in his *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, which I discuss at length in Chapter 1.

narrative. Rather than approach these starting points as inherent traits, engendering a definition of narrative, these starting points are key narrative *preoccupations*. I do not insist that a narrative contain any particular set of qualities in order to be considered as such (i.e. representation, events, or as in Currie's case, an authorial voice with agency), rather I feel it is more productive to identify certain questions associated with narrative that the audience and artist(s) ask themselves when watching or making performance. These are the sites of our expectations or the preoccupations that we bring to a narrative situation or context. Rather than attempt to define narrative in terms of its inherent formal properties, I prefer to think of it as a set of expectations – or as I call them, *preoccupations* – brought to a performance by an audience. They are both the locus of narrative conventions and informed by narrative conventions, but they are not synonymous with narrative conventions.

Central to this thesis is the notion of approaching a study of narrative in contemporary performance not through a static definition, but through questioning and addressing narrative preoccupations. Rudrum's point, in which he espouses avoiding definitions in order to avoid discussing a topic in a way that is overly narrow, does not simply apply to narrative, but to performance itself, and to our performance preoccupations.

As Marvin Carlson points out, perhaps due to its interest in experimentation and invention, performance is "an essentially contested concept" (Carlson 149). That said – although this research resists defining terms - it is necessary to delineate boundaries around a discussion of narrative and a discussion of performance in order to make headway into the research of either. Taking inspiration from Tim Etchells' description of Forced Entertainment's work, my research seeks "to find a way to stage questions rather than to stake claims" (*Certain Fragments* 9). Rather than insisting on

a set of inherent qualities, I delineate the field of narrative through identifying a set of

questions and preoccupations that arise for makers and audience members when a

piece is described as "narrative." The same could, and frequently does apply to our

definitions of "performance."

v. "Narrative" and "Performance" – Delineating through identifying unique and shared preoccupations

Assigning or insisting on a list of epistemological qualities that exclude or include

certain works as *narrative* and *performance* risks foregrounding certain kinds of texts

– likely those whose conventions in both fields are most familiar and well worn. This

is an unfortunate approach given the proliferation of formal inventiveness at the heart

of contemporary performance. A more productive approach to the study of both

narrative and performance is to identify a set of preoccupations for each - the

particular questions that both artists and audiences notice and consider when

something is contextualised as a narrative or a performance, regardless of whether or

not the piece adheres to or challenges those preoccupations. Rather than attempting to

insist on a set of inherent (and possibly subjective) qualities, narrative and

performance are most productively delineated by asking what particular questions

makers and watchers ask when a piece is framed as either. In the case of

performance, an audience may ask themselves or the piece questions about

ephemerality, liveness, the necessity of their presence in the space (if there is a

physical space) and the presence of the other audience members or performers (if

there are other audience members of performers). As Carlson points out, through

quoting Richard Bauman discussing the word "performance" in a broader sense, there is a double consciousness associated with performance:

> According to Bauman, all performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action. Normally this comparison is made by an observer of the action – the theatre public, the school's teacher, the scientist – but the double consciousness, not the external observation, is what is most central[…] Performance is always a performance *for* someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as a performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self (Carlson 150).

This description of 'double consciousness' is a major area of overlap with narrative, where, as discussed in Chapter 1, narrative theorists since Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics* have identified mimesis as both a key narrative and theatrical preoccupation.

In the 2007 translation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Karen Jürs-Munby describes something like theatrical (though not exclusively narrative) preoccupations. She writes, "… we are dealing with deep structures that still inform the expectations of the majority of the audience when they come to theatre or talk about it in everyday language. […] A spectator may instinctively try to piece together a plot from what the performers say – needless to say that all such expectations will be frustrated …" (Lehmann 10). For Lehmann, new theatre, or postdramatic theatre, is viewed in relation to our expectations of drama. Lehmann

uses the term "postdramatic" rather than "dramatic preoccupations," to work through the ways in which contemporary performance is informed by the history of drama, while resisting and counteracting many of the audience's dramatic expectations. Although there are similarities in our approaches, I do not consider this research "post-narrative." In fact, addressing narrative preoccupations is, if anything, not about moving past narrative, but about acknowledging the pervasive nature of narrative in our thoughts and lives, while not taking the resulting narrative conventions for granted or employing them uncritically.

The term "preoccupation" originated in the late sixteenth century and meant "anticipating and meeting objections beforehand."[9] It is a useful term both because it suggests a state of pensiveness or thoughtfulness, but also because it has a clear association with cultural baggage, and in some sense, an anticipated objection to that baggage. In French, "preoccupation" translates as "worry" – and like a worry, a preoccupation lingers in the mind, frequently not of our own accord. Unlike Currie's definition of narrative, a preoccupation does not need to be a product of agency. It is ever present whether we would like it to be or not. The term "preoccupation" also suggests bias and prejudice, and this is deliberate. Bias and prejudice are inherently associated with our expectations of narrative, particularly in performance. As Fredric Jameson writes in *The Political Unconscious*:

> …we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts comes before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if

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[9] *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Volume II. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973. Print, 1656.

the text is brand new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories

developed by those inherited interpretive traditions (James x).

A preoccupation accompanies an audience member or artist into the room

beforehand, before any work has been done, or any performance has happened.

While Jürs-Munby and Lehmann discuss a preoccupation with the dramatic as

informing the majority of spectators when they come to the theatre, and an interest in

plot as being instinctive to audience members, my research focuses on preoccupations

that stem from our narrative instincts – what Jameson calls "the central function or

instance of the human mind" (xiii).

Approaching an art form by being aware of our dominant preoccupations

when viewing or creating work can prove a useful starting point for innovation. The

most famous example perhaps is Marcel Duchamp's 1917 sculpture *Fountain*. Known

to some as "The Urinal," some of what is most interesting about this piece are the

ways in which Duchamp is aware of and plays with visual art preoccupations. A note

of forewarning – as William A Camfield points out, the literature on *Fountain* "is

staggering in quantity" and yet, "… an examination of this literature reveals that our

knowledge of this readymade sculpture and its history is riddled with gaps and

extraordinary conflicts of memory, interpretation and criticism" (Camfield 64). I am

not a visual arts scholar, and am using Duchamp's sculpture primarily to demonstrate

a principle that I will apply throughout this dissertation to *performance*. Choosing a

piece that is both so firmly embedded in our cultural consciousness and whose history

and analysis is plagued with inconsistencies (so that whatever is written here, a reader

may have read or heard something that will contradict it from an equally valid

source), clearly poses a hazard, but it is precisely the popularity of this piece which makes it such a useful reference point for exploring the notion of "preoccupations."

The piece was presented as part of the first exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists. The initial notice that the Society released in 1917 claims that this annual exhibition would allow artists from different schools to exhibit their work together, certain that whatever they sent would be exhibited, and that "for the public, this exhibition will make it possible to form an idea of the state of contemporary art" (Camfield 66). There was no requirement to join the society save paying the initiation fee of one dollar and the annual dues of five dollars.

Duchamp was aware that this first exhibition for the society was not only about making clear its aim to be an open forum to exhibit art , but it was also about employing this open approach with the aim of redefining the "state of contemporary art," making it an ideal situation in which to question the public's preoccupations with art itself.

The first preoccupation Duchamp's piece could be said to question is that art should not be functional. As Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "All art is quite useless." This quote has, in various re-phrasings, been repeated on several occasions by artists in differing fields, and has frequently acted as a catalyst for debate, questioning whether art's power is its uselessness in the face of capitalism, and whether or not government funds should fund "useless" art. The argument over the artistic preoccupation with "uselessness" was recently very present when the design collective Assemble won the 2015 Turner Prize. Many saw this as a troubling political choice[10] suggesting that we were moving into an age when art and functional

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[10] There is a plethora of writing online about Assemble winning the Turner Prize. The tenor of the discussion is summarized neatly by Hugh Pearlman writing, "Is this the death of useless art then?" in his blog post "Architecture for art's sake" for the website of the RIBA Journal. 8 December 2015. Web. Accessed 18 December 2015. https://www.ribaj.com/buildings/architecture-for-art-s-sake

design would intermingle, and in this sense, "art for art's sake" would be at risk of disappearing.

Duchamp's *Fountain* is not in use as an actual urinal, but its functional shape suggests that the only reason it is not in use is because it is being exhibited in a gallery. This cuts to the heart of the question, "Can art be useful?" leaving it unanswered – a urinal is useful, but within a gallery setting, it is useless, and this setting is what supposedly contextualises it as art.

Another preoccupation is that art should have a recognisable author or artist. Duchamp does sign *The Fountain* but not as himself. He signs as "R. Mutt." In fact he was always unclear about the authorship of *Fountain*, suggesting at one point that it was by a female friend, the Baronness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven (Camfield 64). Duchamp's work has been so productive of both aesthetic debate and artistic practice that it evidently appeals to and aggravates a great many other cultural preoccupations, not all of which I need to address here. By playing with the public's preoccupations with visual art, i.e. "the already read" or the cultural baggage, that artists, spectators and critics carry with them into a gallery context, Duchamp forged new territory for thinking about what constitutes art. But unlike Rudrum's suggestion that we avoid defining art, *Fountain* is as powerful and effective as it is because it is very aware of a possible definition, created by a series of preoccupations, and it systematically explores and questions these very preoccupations.

Fig. 1. Duchamp, Marcel. *The Fountain*. 1914. Reproduction 1964. Porcelain. *The Tate Modern*. The Tate Gallery. Web. 25 Oct. 2016. Digital Image.

Following on from Lehmann's research in *Postdramatic Theatre*, contemporary performance dances with the ghosts of our understanding of conventional plays. To use the sixteenth-century definition of "preoccupation", it anticipates in order to object to our expectations of theatre. And indeed, as an an intersecting art form, it also anticipates and objects to our expectations of performance art or visual art. In this research, the set of "anticipated objections" that interest me are of a narrative nature, but my approach to narrative is more ambivalent than the word "objection" suggests. In my experience, particularly through the practice-based element of this research, by thoughtfully *addressing* narrative preoccupations, an artist can both have their cake and eat it. They can find complex and difficult ground to navigate that is inspired by being reflexive and critical when considering what an audience craves in narrative, while also creating work that is

formally cohesive, creative within constraints, and ideally employs constraints or a structure that is dictated or invented by the artist(s) for that piece, upon careful reflection of narrative preoccupations, rather than employing well-worn conventions or familiar narrative tropes.

vi. How to Address

The remaining word in my research question that I have yet to unpick is *address*. "In what unique ways can contemporary performance address our preoccupations with narrative?" As I have written, this research is not suggesting a post-narrative model, nor is it suggesting that contemporary performance employs the narrative conventions espoused in playwriting and screenwriting textbooks. What I propose is that, having identified the narrative preoccupations latent in the "central function or instance of the human mind," that contemporary performance not ignore or satisfy these preoccupations, but address them. Contemporary performance is in the unique position, because of the debt it owes to theatrical conventions of audience attention and care, and visual art philosophies of critiquing, questioning, and undercutting its very foundations, of being able to identify narrative preoccupations from where they sit on the horizon, invite them to come forward, and directly address them. I invite the reader to think of this "address" as they would think of speaking to a person who is lurking in the rehearsal room or on stage. We can ask them what they are doing there. We can ask them what they want. We can ask them why they came. And we can usher them out or invite them in. But to ignore the lurking person completely is to do a disservice to all present in the room.   There is a great deal of ground that can be covered by speaking to and with our narrative preoccupations in the contemporary performance context. This address may look like a shout of rejection or anger, a

seductive whisper of love, or an argument that leads to another argument. But contemporary performance can have the conversation with narrative in ways that conventional theatre or performance art would struggle to, and these possibilities for dialogue with our narrative preoccupations create exciting possibilities for being both inventive and cohesive with structure and form in the contemporary performance medium.

vii. The Dramaturgy of the Dissertation

This research engages with what I identify as three fundamental narrative preoccupations – i) Representation, ii) Conflict and iii) Endings. In identifying these preoccupations I attempted to think through and past genre-based narrative conventions to the most basic concerns that inform those conventions. One preoccupation that students brought up in a recent workshop I ran on my research was "character," for example. This is a major point of interest particularly in theatre, but also in literature, film and even legal narratives which analyse the transcripts of trials. In a performance situation we may ask ourselves "Who am I watching? Are they trustworthy? Are they being themselves? Are they believable? Was this pre-rehearsed?" Many fundamental components of this preoccupation are encompassed, particularly in so far as they are addressed in a contemporary performance context, within the preoccupation with representation. Equally, many of the knottier questions of a character's inner motivation, turmoil, and sense of power or agency are located in our preoccupation with conflict. Representation, Conflict and Endings act in this research as overarching preoccupations within which we can locate and examine

several more genre-specific concerns, like authorship, meaning and message, actions and events, and resolution.

The methodology for this research consists of identifying these three central and wide reaching narrative preoccupations in performance, writing a chapter on each that is informed by theory, case studies on contemporary performance pieces which address that preoccupation, and my own work. Concurrent to the theoretical research were my ongoing practice-based projects: *The Future Show* (2013), which is the central piece of practice-based research I have done; and *Drifting Right* (2014), a one-on-one performance research project that is exclusively associated with Chapter 2 of this dissertation. *The Future Show* is an on-going project that premiered in April 2013, and has continued to be "rewritten" until the most recent performance in June 2015. *The Future Show* finds relevant resonances in all three chapters of this thesis, having come out of me questioning the "least controversial" narrative definition put forward by Marie-Laure Ryan and others (originating in Aristotle's *Poetics*), that narratives are a *re*presentation of an event or a series of events over time.

Chapter 1 unpacks the word "representation," wrestling with it as a narrative preoccupation, and questioning whether a narrative is always a re-presentation of a story that pre-exists its telling. This goes on to explore the possibilities of re-presenting the self over time on stage in autobiographical work, examining pieces by Tim Crouch, Mike Daisey, Brian Lobel, Kieran Hurley, and my own work. A good deal of the chapter examines the conceit of *The Future Show*, as a script that I rewrite for every performance, which purports to tell the true story not of what has happened, but of what is *about* to happen, i.e. the rest of my life, starting from the end of the performance and ending with my death several decades later.

Chapter 2 of this PhD focuses on one of the main narrative preoccupations, particularly in performances which take place in Western countries dominated by Capitalism, which I identify as a preoccupation with conflict. This chapter posits the idea that while in reality conflict is an element of disruption or chaos from the status quo, shapeless, and difficult to assign a beginning, middle and end to, our preoccupation with conflict relies primarily on wanting to see a conflict contained. I identify three dominant strategies that narratives have used to give the illusion of having contained a conflict – I define these as "the competition," "the objective," and "the argument." The second chapter of this thesis considers Michelle Gellrich's research in the book *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle*, which points to the absence of discussions of conflict or *agon* in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and assigns the first non-polemical discussion of conflict in narrative to Hegel in his lectures on aesthetics. As a result, Gellrich points out that our understanding of conflict in the arts is inextricably linked to Hegel's dialectic, which inspired Marx's theory of Communism, allowing us to see a logic and grander order to the procession of successive conflicts over time. In the section on competition, this chapter suggests that in our current neo-liberal society, viewing conflict as competition is a preoccupation that is linked with capitalism, and performances which examine conflict as competition frequently seem to also be examining and questioning the tenets of capitalism. "The objective" section of the chapter explores conflicts with the self, and the ways in which an individual attempts to "contain" these conflicts and symbolically resolve them by setting themselves an objective and attempting to attain it. This section addresses both my relationship to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and predicting the future which is immanent in my constant rewritings of *The Future Show*, and James Baker's body-based durational piece *30 Days to Space*. This

chapter points out that both competitions and objectives are subject to a time limit and a kind of end point in which respectively a winner and loser are chosen or an objective is attained or not attained. "The argument" section of this chapter stands in contrast to both "the competition" and "the objective" in that an argument is not subject to a time frame, rules, or a winner or loser, but rather either fizzles out or ends with a conversation or a dialogue. This section was the inspiration for my piece *Drifting Right*, in which, as a self-avowed leftist, I take a right-wing voter on a canoe ride on open waters, and I invite them to have an honest and open conversation about politics with me in which neither of us attempt to "win" an argument.

The final narrative preoccupation explored in this PhD (in Chapter 3) is our preoccupation with "endings," in which I argue that one of the key elements of identifying a narrative is the knowledge that it will end or that is has ended, delineating the performance as an event, a whole, distinct from the march of time. In this chapter I explore the conventions we associate with signalling endings in performance, beginning with applause, and going on to discuss strategies for the final moments on stage, examining endings that employ what I term "the zinger" and "the airlock." I also question pieces that purport to end with asking the audience to take real action and attempt to sit outside of a representational sphere, looking at the letters written by audience members to the families of martyrs in Tania El Khoury's *Gardens Speak*, and the female audience members who sang the song "Jerusalem" naked on stage at the end of Nic Green's 2009 piece *Trilogy*. I consider where our desire to observe endings in narratives derives from, suggesting that it is linked with our fascination and unresolved relationship to our own deaths. This section has a resonant link with the ending of *The Future Show*, in which I describe my own death to the audience. This final preoccupation is informed both by the research I

conducted into representation in contemporary performance, as somehow sitting both outside and inside the real, and the notion of containing or showing an ending to conflict in performance. Our fascination with endings is also associated with journey or arc, meaning and message, and watching events unfold over time.

viii. "Narrative Studies" and The Theoretical Framework

The use of theory in this dissertation was guided by my own original concept of reframing narrative conventions or traits as "narrative preoccupations" as a means to examining their position in contemporary performance. Narrative studies is a very wide area of research, resulting in a theoretical framework that takes in research from a very diverse range of disciplines. Throughout this process of cross-disciplinary research I was continuously asking which theories were transportable across disciplines, allowing them to illuminate thinking through narrative preoccupations in general as opposed to reflecting exclusively on that specific discipline's approach to narrative structure. This thesis draws upon some narratology (largely dominated by literary studies), some narrative "how-to" guides (which tend to focus on screenwriting) and some narrative and cognitive behavioural theory discussing "the self" as a kind of narrative construction. As there is comparatively little written about narrative theory in performance, the bulk of narrative-in-performance research done in this thesis came from interviews conducted with the artists studied in this thesis, which made space for exciting discoveries in the field. This dissertation sought to link these primary sources from the world of performance with established narrative theories from elsewhere, finding and making connections between disciplines in narrative theory, and putting interdisciplinary narrative research in conversation with contemporary thinking on narrative from practicing performance-makers.

Although this dissertation seeks to connect and create space within narrative theory across disciplines for a re-consideration of its relationship to contemporary performance, narratology (the study of narrative primarily in literature) is traditionally employed in narrative research in the humanities, meaning that some well known literary narrative theorists may seem absent from this dissertation. Vladimir Propp's syntagmatic approach to the structural analysis of Russian myths, for example, is not examined in this research, as his break down of the functions of Russian folklore are most fruitfully applied not to the broad notion of narrative preoccupations as a shape or structure for content studied here, but to the notion of "story" – particularly stories which employ recognizable characters. In her preface to the second edition of *Morphology of the Folktale*, Pirkova-Jakobson writes, "Propp… states the number of… functions obligatory for the fairy tale and classifies them according to their significance and position in the course of the narrative. Their sequence is finally the basis of his typology within the genre. He abstracts the compositional pattern that underlies the structure of the fairy tale as a whole and formulates its compositional laws by way of structural signs" (Propp xxi). This structural approach to narrative is divergent from the intriguingly open definition put forth by Aristotle in the *Poetics* (and discussed at length in the chapter on representation) of narrative unity consisting of a beginning, middle and end. While my research is interested in our narrative preoccupations as stemming from "the representation of an event," Propp's research is more illuminating when applied to our compositional preoccupations with certain kinds of narratives, primarily those that would comfortably and instinctively be described as being a "story," particularly a story with a hero, a villain, and recognisable characters, as is evidenced and frequently referred to in the functions he

identifies in his research.   It is worth noting that later in Propp's career he turned away from a strict study of form and structure, "and deals instead with the affinities that exist between the fairy tale and religion (myth and ritual) and social institutions at different levels of their evolution" (Propp xxi).

Tzvetan Todorov's *Structural Analysis of Narrative* is also not discussed in this dissertation, primarily because Todorov conflates narrative with "plot" – a term that privileges literary and fictional genres of narrative and narrative mediums which sit uncomfortably with a great deal of the contemporary performance work studied here. Plot, in particular a literary plot, is the real subject of this essay, and leads Todorov to re-tread Hegel's dialectic (which is discussed at length in the conflict chapter) with his "equilibrium theory." Todorov's equilibrium theory and elements of Hegel's dialectic arguably have classical roots, as Anaximander's writing on rupture and continuity, discussed in the same chapter, demonstrate.

Todorov, as a structuralist, is interested in "the introduction of scientific principles in literary analysis" (72) and, in the essay, disagrees with Henry James' assertion that it is a mistake to try and separate novels into distinct parts as dialogue is descriptive and description is narrative, by comparing the novel to the physical properties of temperature or the biology of the bloodstream. His essay, "Structural Analysis of Narrative" seeks to offer "an abstract description of […] the structural approach to literature" by focussing on plot as an abstract literary property through a close reading of plot in several tales from Giovanni Bocaccio's *Decameron*. Todorov himself affirms the importance of applying his structural analysis of plots to literature rather than another medium or discipline: "…to affirm the internal nature of this approach does not mean a denial of the relation between literature and other homogenous series, such as philosophy or social life. It is rather a question of

establishing a hierarchy: literature must be understood *in its specificity*, as literature, before we seek to determine its relation with anything else" (71 – italics added).

All of the literary examples that Todorov uses in his essay, in order to demonstrate the abstract literary concept of plot, are from Giovanni Boccacio's *Decameron*, but Todorov writes "I do not intend […] to give an analysis of the *Decameron*: these stories will be used only to display an abstract literary structure, that is, plot" (73). Todorov comes away with the conclusion that the tales which he selected from Boccacio's work fit into the formula "X violates law -> Y must punish X -> X tries to avoid being punished -> (Y violates law/ Y believes that X is not violating law) -> Y does not punish X" (73) which he writes indicate two types of plots – "avoided punishment" and "conversion" (75). Todorov's reading of "avoided punishment" and "conversion" are, I would argue, much less universal and much more specific to Bocaccio's *Decameron* than he suggests. A preoccupation with punishment is particularly important to Giovanni Boccacio's *Decameron*, as a work framed by a narrative of a group of young noble people escaping the plague in Florence by taking refuge in a country house, and taking turns telling each other tales. The social disruption caused by the plague creates the possibility for a Carnivalesque approach to social norms among the young nobles – as Boccaccio himself writes in the introduction "everyone behaved as if they were going to die soon, so they cared nothing about themselves nor their belongings […] With so much affliction and misery, all reverence for laws, both of God and man, fell apart and dissolved […] as a result, everyone was free to do whatever they pleased." In Bocaccio's frame narrative, the young nobles who are taking refuge from the plague in Florence take advantage of this breaking of norms by telling a series of tales in which laws and social norms are broken, particularly those relating to the church, without any consequence for those

who break them. Boccacio's tale telling structure is particularly preoccupied with a subversion of social norms, and is particular to *Decameron* and to Bocaccio's intention to write a set of tales that would give some sense of the freedom of disorder that a fear of death brought forth in that period in Italy.

Todorov uses what he sees as an abstract structure surrounding these tales of punishment in *Decameron* to discuss what he calls "equilibrium." He writes, "The minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. This term, 'equilibrium,' which I am borrowing from genetic psychology, means the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular system of exchange. The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement" (75). This theory shares a great deal in common with Hegel's dialectic and the notion of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. While Todorov wrote this essay in 1969, the dialectic is a concept from the 19th century and its prevalence in philosophical, economic and literary theory has arguably proved much more influential to what I would identify as our narrative preoccupation with conflict. For exactly this reason, I discuss Hegel's dialectic at length in my chapter on Conflict. Although Todorov's equilibrium theory shares a great deal in common with the dialectic, Todorov does not address this lineage in his essay, and his theory of equilibrium does not appear significantly different enough from Hegel's dialectic to merit inclusion. Matthew Garrett writes, "Todorov participates in a long tradition of what we might call over nomination within narrative theory, whereby the same concept is christened and rechristened by each of its students" (11). Todorov's theory of equilibrium is more general, less expansive, and explicitly associated with literature and a structural analysis of

narrative. The ways in which he associates equilibrium with "plot" is also problematic for this research, as "plot" like "story" is a term that immediately begins to privilege certain approaches to narrative and to performance forms and not others. For this reason Todorov's work is not included in this research.

Paul Ricoeur is absent from the chapter on representation and the chapter on endings, even though he wrote *Time and Narrative* about the human need to construct identity within time. Paul Ricoeur's narrative theories in *Time and Narrative* are not included because of the very specific ways in which Ricoeur reframes Aristotle's *Poetics* according to its spatial structure within a novel, and within the medium of reading. As William C. Dowling writes, "Where Aristotle saw an essentially spatial structure, with beginning, middle and end as parts of a simultaneous whole, Ricoeur sees a structure that is at once spatial and temporal: a chain of causal implication that must be traversed in time, and in a state of partial or imperfect knowledge, before there dawns any imitation that these same events might also be seen as a unity of action" – i.e. – Reversal (9). Dowling's description of "causal implications" and the reader's "partial or imperfect knowledge" privilege work in which the author is very much in control of a pre-written narrative which the reader is then lead through quite deliberately, while the performances examined here often employ a strong element of risk, and a lack of control (or a shared control) between the audience member and the artist(s). As Ricoeur wrote of the second stage of his notion of three part Mimesis, it is essential that the story be able to be told both forward and backwards ("d'avant en arrière et d'arrière en avant"), even if both the fictional characters and the reader are moving through the text unaware of this simultaneous movement. The moment at which both the fictional characters and the reader become aware of the pre-

determined fate of the story was what Ricoeur calls the *Totum Simul*. This *Totum Simul*, however, is entirely dependent on the agents in a narrative being both temporally and physically separate from the author or maker of the piece. In contemporary performance, where the text (if it exists) is only ever a blueprint for a possible performance, this notion of a simultaneous backward and forwards motion through a narrative is temporally impossible as a live experience only moves forward in time. Even in the most conventional play, the performers can only hope that what was pre-rehearsed may reproduce itself at the performance, but this is never guaranteed. The ephemeral way in which a performance can only ever move forward in time (rather than back and forth as Ricoeur's analysis of a fixed literary text does), means that mimesis and time work inherently differently in literature and performance.

The novel itself is, in many ways, a very distinctive form, and much newer than theatre as a means of conveying narrative – as Walter Benjamin describes it in "The Storyteller,

> The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times… What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it… The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the

representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound

perplexity of the living (364 – 365).

Although novels and contemporary performance arguably share an interest in

"the profound perplexity of the living", they do so in extremely different ways

because they have inherently different approaches to "representation" and "action."

The primary "action" that a reader is always involved in when reading a novel is

reading, while in contemporary performance an audience member may be sitting in a

theatre, but they might also be walking through streets wearing headphones,

discussing politics in a canoe, sending text messages to a stranger, or, as in Ant

Hampton and Tim Etchells' *The Quiet Volume* (2010)*,* they may be reading. Indeed

reading a novel and seeing or experiencing a performance are such diametrically

opposed experiences from a temporal perspective, that perhaps the only reason we

might associate them with each other is that they both convey a narrative via some

form of representation. When we disseminate representation through a novel,

however, the action is always reading, and the representation created via words on the

page, begins, by a strange kind of alchemy, to create a world of action that is entirely

internal and solitary and unique for the reader. A performance piece in which a

narrator tells a story out loud (like my own piece *The Future Show* or Kieran Hurley's

Beats (2012)) could be argued to be doing something similar in terms of making use

of the audience's ability to create imagined actions internally through words alone,

but even in this case, an audience has no agency over the pace of a spoken story.

When reading a book they can put it down and pick it up – but in a performance they

have to be there at a specific time and for a specific period of time to be the recipient

of that narrative. Spoken storytelling pieces also differ from reading a novel as the

audience member has more information (or quite a different paratext) with which to interpret and colour their understanding of a purely spoken narrative - staging choices in terms of what is on stage with the narrator (as Daniel Kitson employs full naturalistic sets in his storytelling shows *C90* (2006) and *Mouse* (2016), for example) will impact their understanding of the story, how the speaker delivers the text and what they are wearing will also influence the audience's experience of this representation which, on the surface, happens primarily through words. These inevitably impact the ways in which the audience member understands and reads the what is being "represented" when a story is told on stage. An innate understanding of the ways in which audiences read the staging and performance while listening to a spoken narrative is very cleverly demonstrated by Tim Crouch when he tells an autobiographical story about a man holding his arm above his head in *My Arm* (2003) while never once raising his own arm.

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" (excerpted above) is another example of a well known narrative touchstone from literary studies that is not employed extensively in this dissertation While Benjamin discusses the impossibility of telling stories after the war, the strength of this essay lies in its literary analysis, as it is at heart a discussion of the death of simple stories in favour of the complexity of the novel. Shared preoccupations between novels and contemporary performance could prove very interesting territory for future research, particularly if applied to some of Forced Entertainment's work, but this is a subject for another dissertation.

This dissertation quite deliberately avoids attempting to "wrestle" contemporary performance pieces into literary canonical narrative theories, particularly when these have been written with an aim to exploring literature or

literary drama. It is, indeed, a problem that so much of narratological studies focus on novels and folktales and frequently neglects theatre, a problem that this research seeks to address in its own, albeit small, way. This research takes a wide and inclusive disciplinary approach to writing and thinking about narrative, and places the most appropriate and interesting theories from a range of disciplines in conversation with the notion of "narrative preoccupations" and then apply these to contemporary performance work.

The theory examined in this research takes Aristotle's *Poetics* as its jumping off point, as the *Poetics* is the oldest fragment of text which was dedicated to an exclusive analysis of both narrative and live performance, having established on-going preoccupations that are uniquely applicable to both areas. This dissertation goes on to engage extensively with Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, which is also uniquely revelatory when applied to contemporary performance because of the ways in which it establishes and insists on every text, whether it is aware of it or not, being political. Fredric Hegel's theories on the dialectic then come to prove crucial to a theory and reading of conflict in narrative in performance, both because, according to Michelle Gellrich in *The Problem with Conflict Since Aristotle*, Hegel writes the first examination of conflict in narrative in which he does not characterise conflict in purely negative terms, and because of the ways in which the dialectic has later been appropriated by Marxism, resulting (perhaps unconsciously) in contemporary performance companies making work that critically considers our narrative preoccupation with conflict as being synonymous with a societal preoccupation with Capitalism.

The third chapter in this dissertation focuses on "endings" as narrative preoccupations which contain and delineate an event as distinct from the rest of the march of time. This chapter also makes disciplinary connections in terms of its theoretical research between scientific research, performance theory, screenwriting handbooks, and literary theory. The literary theorist Frank Kermode's book *The Sense of an Ending* is a touchstone for this chapter, as it suggests that we crave endings (and in fact successive generations paint themselves as living through apocalyptic times) because of the existential difficulty of imagining ourselves as being born and dying in the middle of history. The philosophical implications of this theory prove extremely illuminating when applied not merely to literature, but to live performance.

ix. The Narrative Turn

In the 2005 introduction to *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz observe what they call "the narrative turn," which they expand upon as, "the tendency of the term 'narrative' to cover a wider and wider territory, taking in (some would say 'sucking in') an ever-broadening range of subjects for inquiry." They write that it "has moved from its initial home in literary studies to take in examination of other media (including film, music and painting) and other non-literary fields (for instance, law and medicine)" (2). Although it is arguable but I would posit short-sighted to situate narrative's "initial home" in literary theory,[11] a wider view of what is considered "narrative" in mainstream western culture could be said to be present in current thinking in contemporary performance. While narrative may at some point have been considered synonymous with "story" or with

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[11] In *Rhetorica Ad Herrenium*, a text on rhetoric attributed to Cicero, there is a chapter in book 1 on "Narratio" and its rules. This is one of the earliest uses of the term and does not refer to poetics, but to law and statement of facts.

the narrative conventions employed in literature, many makers of contemporary performance have begun to understand *narrative* as referring to over-arching structural principles of cognition, rather than whether or not a piece of contemporary performance could be comfortably referred to as telling a "story."

Beth Hoffmann sums up the thinking behind incorporating an expanded view of narrative into performance succinctly in her writing on narrative and time in live art: "Thinking about narrative entails not only thinking about 'story' (i.e., knowing whether there is one) but, more fundamentally, about the possibility that art that exists in time always already works in narrative ways. Narrative can thus refer to any of the means employed by a work to signal its orientation in and movement through time …" (*Time and Live Art* 55). When discussing endings in Forced Entertainment's work, Tim Etchells comments on "how we read narrative or how we read sequence or how we read matter and how the final element of those things closes a discourse in a certain way."[12] The idea of narrative being not necessarily synonymous with story, but linked to sequence and "a reading of matter" or discourse has begun to take root in contemporary performance[13], and it is my belief that by locating the most basic relationships that human beings have to narrative in performance, a huge deal can be accomplished in making structurally rigorous yet complicated work.

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[12] Etchells, Tim. "About Endings." Personal interview. 5 Feb. 2015. (Included in Appendix).

[13] On Sarah Grochala's blog she wrote about "the kind of narrative that keeps you on the edge of your seat because you're genuinely not sure where it's going to go next . i should add here that by narrative i mean something much broader than what people often mean when they talk about narrative…" (Grochala). This was followed by the comment, attributed to Simon Bowes: "narrative (however broadly we might apply the term), or the relation between content and form, or craft, or thickness all count."

Chapter 1 - Representation

i. Mimesis

My discussion of narrative preoccupations in contemporary performance begins with a term with classical roots: "representation." An exploration of the connotations of the term "representation" as a narrative preoccupation in performance serves as the catalyst for my practice-based project *The Future Show*, discussed throughout the thesis. I discuss the theoretical implications of "representation" as a preoccupation in contemporary performance, and then move on to the implications of a subversion of this term in autobiographical performance, analyzing other work by artists who play with the preoccupation with representation specifically in relationship to representing the self. But first I will begin by examining the classical roots of the term "representation" as being closely linked with narrative, and its resulting connotations on our narrative preoccupations.

In order to trace our narrative expectations of representation as far back as possible, this chapter begins with a discussion of Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*, the earliest references to the narrative arts as *Mimesis*. I return to a discussion of Aristotle's *Poetics* throughout this thesis, as references to the tenets first attributed to *Poetics* are pervasive in contemporary practical guides to narrative for dramatists and screenwriters as well as in theoretical writing on narratology. In this sense, the basic principles outlined in Aristotle's *Poetics* could be said to be at the centre of our narrative preoccupations. And yet this would be too simple a lineage, as *Poetics* came into mainstream use for dramatists in the Renaissance. The fragmentary nature and difficulty of translating *Poetics* also complicate its position within the cannon of narrative theory. Very few Ancient Greek terms have modern English equivalents,

meaning that it is not simply Aristotle's ideas that may inform our narrative preoccupations, but the complications and difficulties of translating the key terms which illuminate the meaning of his ideas. This is particularly true for Aristotle's discussion of *Mimesis*, which serves as the starting point for a discussion of the term "representation" in this chapter.

The term *Mimesis*[14] does not have a direct modern English equivalent but has been translated as "representation" (trans. Kenny, Janko, Butcher) "imitation" (trans. Heath) and "imitative" (trans. Jowett).[15] *The Republic* is the earliest instance of the term Mimesis being explicitly applied to the arts. Before this there are instances of its appearance in Ancient Greek texts, though "… mimesis never simply meant imitation. From the very beginning it described many forms of similarity or equivalence, from visual resemblance to behavioral emulation and the metaphysical correspondence between real and ideal worlds" (Halliwell qtd. in Potolsky 16). Equally, before *The Republic*, "Greek culture regarded images as an actualization or 'presentification' of what they represent" (Potolsky 16). In other words, images and art were not considered reproductions of the subject they depicted, but they were considered to be the subject they depicted, to genuinely present this subject or some aspect of it to a viewer. This is reminiscent of Michael Craig-Martin's attempt to reclaim this elision between reality and art with his 1973 piece *An Oak Tree*, after which Tim Crouch named his 2006 play. In the piece, Craig-Martin claims to have transformed a glass

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[14] "Several translators simply use the word *mimesis* itself inside an English context. Commonly, the use of transliteration instead of translation is a mark of cowardice in translators. But in this case the difficulty of finding an English word that fits in all the Aristotelian contexts makes one sympathize with those who have given up the task" (Kenny xvi).

[15] "While it is difficult to discern a clear development in meaning, early use of mimesis and related words refer chiefly to the physical mimicry of living beings by bodily gesture or voice, and only more rarely to paintings or statues. Yet even in its earliest uses, mimesis never simply meant imitation. From the very beginning it described many forms of similarity or equivalence, from visual resemblance to behavioral emulation and the metaphysical correspondence between real and ideal worlds (Halliwell, 2002: 15)" (Potolsky 16).

of water into an oak tree.   Tim Crouch quotes the artist in interview in the text to his eponymous play:

> Q. To begin with, could you describe this work?
>
> A. Yes, of course. What I've done is change a glass of water into a full-grown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water.
>
> Q. The accidents?
>
> A. Yes. The color, feel, weight, size…
>
> Q. Do you mean that the glass of water is a symbol of an oak tree?
>
> A. No. It's not a symbol. I've changed the physical substance of the glass of water into that of an oak tree.
>
> Q. It looks like a glass of water.
>
> A. Of course it does. I didn't change its appearance. But it's not a glass of water, it's an oak tree (Craig-Martin qtd. in Crouch, *Plays One* 53).

Jean-Pierre Vernant argued that Plato's use of the term "Mimesis" as explicitly associated with the arts is the starting point for our modern notion of art as an image of or symbol for something else.[16] Plato is responsible for "redefining art as mere appearance, not a real thing" (Potolsky 17) and this instance of first defining art as imitative is complicated in that the same mention of art as imitation is entangled with an extremely critical stance on mimetic art. Plato quotes Socrates as saying that, "Of the many excellences which I perceive in the order of our State, there is none which pleases me better than the rule about poetry […] the rejection of imitative poetry, which certainly ought not to be received …" (trans. Reeves X). Socrates goes on to outline his theory of Forms – the theory that reality is a mimesis of the Forms which

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[16] Qtd. in Potolsky 17.

cannot be recognised by the senses but by the intellect alone and which were all invented by a Creator.[17] He suggests that this means that art is problematic because it is false – it attempts to represent reality, which itself is a mere representation of the Forms, meaning that mimesis is not valid because it is at three removes from the Forms[18] - "…the tragic poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and from the truth…" (trans. Reeves X).

Aristotle famously responded to *The Republic*'s critical stance on mimesis with a defense of the representational arts in the *Poetics*,[19] the earliest treatise devoted entirely to aesthetic criticism, which takes both narrative and theatre as its subject. Aristotle describes epic poetry, tragedy, comedy and dithyramb as *Mimesis* and says that what is imitated or represented in this work is "praxis," nearly universally translated in modern English as "action" and "events". He does not deny theatre's use of mimesis, but argues, unlike Plato's Socrates, that it is a natural and fundamental element of human nature. "Two things, both of them natural, seem likely to have been the causes of the origin of poetry. Representation comes naturally to human beings from childhood, and so does the universal pleasure in representations. Indeed, this marks off humans from other animals: man is prone to representation beyond all others, and learns his earliest lessons through representation" (trans. Kenny 20).[20] Both *Mimesis* and *Praxis* are more inclusive terms than "representation" and "action"[21] – but the limited range of direct modern English equivalents to ancient Greek means that our terminology for narrative enquiry is inevitably narrower than

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[17] This is curious given Socrates' view on death as an eternal sleep in *The Gadfly*, but perhaps we should note that *The Republic* was also copied out and preserved by monks over centuries.

[18] "The basis for (Aristotle's) interest in studying […] such diverse fields […] was his rejection of Plato's theory of Forms" (Janko xii).

[19] "It is many centuries too late to change the title of this treatise of Aristotle's, but 'Poetics' gives a misleading impression of the contents of the treatise. The Greek word *poiesis* (literally 'making'), as used by Aristotle, has both a narrower and wider scope than the English word 'poetry'" (Kenny xi).

[20] Because I refer to several translations of Aristotle's *Poetics* in this chapter, I have chosen to cite according to translator.

[21] "Praxis" is a verb and noun that refers both to what one does and to how one fares.

either Aristotle or Plato intended it to be.   As Anthony Kenny points out in his most recent translation of *Poetics*, "When the concept has been so tendentiously narrowed down from its original scope it begins to lose its utility" (xvii).

"The Mimesis of a praxis" is the dominant mode of discussing narratives in Western culture since the popularization of Aristotle's *Poetics* during the Renaissance. In the introduction to *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott translates this as "The representation of an event" (3) and as discussed in the introduction, Marie Laure-Ryan writes that "One of the least controversial claims of contemporary narratology is that a narrative text is the representation of a number of events in a time sequence" (Ryan 111). In his playwriting manual David Edgar confirms this, writing:

> Aristotle's big idea has dominated theatre criticism from his own time, via the Renaissance and the neoclassical period, through to the thinking of twentieth-century structuralist critics and to the screenwriting gurus of our own age. That idea is that tragedy consists of "the representation of an action", and that that action trumps everything else. (Edgar 18)

Regardless of its cultural dominance, when I first encountered Porter Abbott quoting this definition, the limited and imprecise nature of the term "re-presentation" immediately stood out as inappropriate for a theatrical context, a medium which is defined by being a live event – in a sense by its present-ness, by its unrepeatability, and where action (if it unfolds at all) unfolds in the present. Even in the most frequently-produced classic play, audiences often witness events which are happening live, rather than hear about or see a recreation of the events later on. Canadian

academic Holger Syme also took issue with this, with mixed results. In a blog post response to a meeting with performance artist Jacob Zimmer entitled "Theatre does not tell stories," Syme writes: "plays are not stories. Whatever a play may do, it does not tell a story ... A performed play doesn't tell anything. A character might … This applies even to one-person performances: the show doesn't tell a story. What the show does is a put a character in front of you, in some kind of situation, defined or uncertain, and let that character speak" (Syme). It is interesting that for Syme a story is so intrinsically connected with an act of telling – i.e. *re*-presentation through spoken language. Syme does not merely write that "theatre does not tell stories," he writes that because of this "a play *is not* a story." According to Syme, a story is not a story unless it is *told*. This distinction leads Syme to the bold but in my view ultimately misguided conclusion that theatre cannot be a story and does not convey a story. In fact, even in the case of written literature, the idea that "telling" is necessary to the existence of a story, or that telling suggests that events pre-exist their account, is up for debate. Although an audience member experiences a performance or play live as it happens, the same can be said of their engagement with a particularly gripping book. An engrossing read can give the impression of being immersed in a story, and a reader is not aware of what will happen before it does happen. Even if they "skip ahead" they will not experience a written event in all of its intended complexity. Sharing time, in the present tense, with a narrative and watching (or reading) events as they unfold is an integral part of storytelling – hence the old playwriting adage, dramatists should "show" rather than "tell."

Syme's reading of "telling" as suggesting that the events of a story must precede their presentation likely derives from the problematic translation of mimesis as "*re*presentation." The confusion the dominant use of this translation produces is not

unique to Syme. H. Porter Abbott addresses just this confusion, particularly in discussing theatre and narrative, when he writes, "*Representation* is a vexed term… Those who favour Aristotelian distinctions sometimes use the word *presentation* for stories that are acted and representation (re-presentation) for stories that are told or written. The difference highlights the idea that in theatre we experience the story as immediately present while we do not when it is conveyed through a narrator" (Porter Abbott 15). Having addressed this issue, he goes on to define what *he* means by re-presentation, and why he continues to use the term when discussing narrative, even given its limitations:

> My own view is that both forms of narrative are mediated stories and therefore involved in re-presentation, conveying a story that at least *seems* to pre-exist the vehicle of conveyance. A good counter-argument to my position asks: Where is this story before it is realized in words or on stage? The answer, so the argument goes, is: Nowhere. If that is the case, then all renderings of stories, on the stage or on the page, are *presentations* not representations […] But for my definition, I will stick to the term "representation." I do this in part because the word is so commonly used in the way I am using it and in part because it describes at least the feeling that we often have that the story somehow pre-exists the narrative, even though this may be an illusion (Porter Abbott 15).

As Porter Abbott points out, regardless of the obvious shortcomings of the term "representation", it is a commonly used term, and (although difficult to prove) he suggests that there is a "feeling that a story somehow pre-exists narrative." It is impossible to know if this feeling that a story that (in his words) "pre-exists" its

narrative discourse is an inherent narrative preoccupation, or one that has developed as a result of the frequent employment of the term "representation." What we do know is that the dominance of a term that alludes to a past version or a past reality that pre-exists its presentation or account opens up questions around ephemerality, production and mediation in performance.

My central point of inquiry in addressing or challenging the narrative preoccupation with "representation" has come from analyzing the repercussions of my own practice-based response to the term "representation" – a piece entitled *The Future Show* - in which I tell an autobiographical story entirely in future tense. This chapter does not discuss all representation in performance, but specifically focuses on the consequences of challenging a preoccupation with representation in the ways that *The Future Show* employs this challenge – namely, within the genre of autobiographical performance. I will examine the difficulty of re-presenting the *self* on stage, particularly in the future tense, as well as the practical challenges of creating a mimesis of the immediate future – given that the audience will have access to the genuine article following the pre-presentation. I examine these traits in context with other performance work that interrogates the narrative preoccupations associated with re-presentation of the self – namely Tim Crouch's plays *The Author* (2009) and *My Arm* (2003), Brian Lobel's *Ball and Other Funny Stories about Cancer* (2012)*,* and Mike Daisey's *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* (2011) among others. *The Future Show* (2013) is an account not of things that have already happened, but of what may be about to happen – an attempt to challenge our notion of mimesis as a process whose starting point is located in the past.

ii. What is *The Future Show*?

Fig. 2. Preparing for *The Future Show* at the Out of the Blue Drill Hall in Edinburgh, Forest Fringe, August 2013. Photo Credit: Juan Camilo.

     The Future Show is a monologue read out of a binder. The set is a table to put the binder on, a chair to sit in and a microphone to speak into. The last words of the piece are predicted (or dictated) verbatim by the first words of the piece. I walk onto stage, look into the eyes of the audience, and then say into the microphone, "I will say 'The length of a breath' and as soon as I say this you will clap. Even those of you

who were a bit bored will clap because it's a comfortable way to signal an ending."[22]

From there I go on to describe the particularities of how I will leave the stage (according to the unique traits of whichever venue I am performing in – where the door is, if mic cords are visible and/or taped down, if there is an operator to wave goodbye to) and I describe the audience leaving the space. (Do they walk down stairs? Are there stairs? Do they walk into a lobby? Do they use the washroom? Is there a bar?) I continue to narrate the future into the next day, the next week, events marked in my calendar, vacations that are planned. What I read from the binder accelerates and fragments until it becomes a more general narration of ageing, ending with the end of my life, in which my final thought lasts "the length of a breath." In addition to interrogating the term *re*presentation – is it possible to *re*present an event that is about to happen – the piece also interrogates the representation of a life – where and when should a piece about an individual's future end?

iii. Representing the future self

As Foucault points out, "An author's name is a noun. It poses the same problems as a noun. […] It is more than an instruction, an action, a finger pointed towards someone; in one way, it's the equivalent of a description." (Foucault 10).[23] In autobiographical work this finger is pointed toward the self, and the question inevitably arises – how can anyone "truthfully" represent themselves?

As Terry Eagleton writes, "If the source of representing is the self, it is doubtful whether the self can be captured within its own view of the world, any more than the eye can be an object in its own field of vision. In picturing the world, the self risks

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[22] "The length of a breath" is currently the last line of the show.

[23] The English translation is my own. The original is as follows: "Le nom d'un auteur est un nom propre; il pose les mêmes problèmes que lui. […] Il est plus qu'une indication, un geste, un doigt pointé vers quelqu'un; dans une certaine mesure, c'est l'équivalent d'une description."

falling outside the frame of its own representations… For the Modernists, this is a problem which is resolvable only by irony – by representing and pointing to the limits of your representation in the same gesture." The modernist approach could be said to be at the heart of the conceit of *The Future Show*. A faithful representation of a future self is a task that has already set itself up to fail. In that sense, the action of the piece adheres to David Edgar's view on dramatic action in a play – "… an action is not about completion but an acknowledgement of various kinds of failure" (Edgar 24).

That said, in a review of a work-in-progress showing Andrew Haydon was convinced enough by the veracity of the representation that he caught himself wondering if the story I told was true. "I've no idea if it's true or not, but I like the fact that something that's already doing something unlikely – i.e. purporting to describe the future – still has the ability to make me worry about 'truth'. That's very odd and very clever." Haydon's musing that the story I predict for myself may or may not be "true" shares a kinship with Marcel Proust's epic set of novels *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. "Proust gave an epic to modern literature: through a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as is often the case, he made his life into a Work for which his book would serve as the model …" [24] (Barthes 492).

Before exploring the repercussions of telling a story in future tense, and whether or not I would use my story as a model for my life (like Proust), the difficulty of representing the self in performance is a recurring problem in contemporary performance worth contextualising, where performers often play *versions* or *personas* of themselves.

Tim Crouch plays with the expectation that he will faithfully represent himself in all of his work – beginning with *My Arm* (2003), the (apparently autobiographical)

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[24] The English translation is my own. The original is as follows: "Proust a donné à l'écriture moderne son épopée: par un renversement radical, au lieu de mettre sa vie dans son roman, comme on le dit souvent, il fit de sa vie même une oeuvre dont son propre livre fut comme le modèle …"

story of a man who keeps his arm held above his head for his whole life, in which

Crouch never raises his arm – and most explicitly perhaps in *The Author* (2009), a

piece placed within the audience where the author Tim Crouch faces up to having

written a play that irresponsibly and unthinkingly represents violence. In that piece,

unlike in *An Oak Tree* (2006) where the character's name is never specified, the

character of the author is named Tim Crouch and is, autobiographically, very similar

to the real Tim Crouch. "The topography of that play is our house in Brighton. […]

The more rooted in my life, the more authentic it was."[25] These autobiographical

similarities, paired with the very dark nature of Tim's lines in the piece and the

attribution of the writing of the text to a *real* Tim Crouch, created some particularly

heightened moments of confusion for the audience about how Tim was representing

himself. In one of the few anecdotal examples of an audience member successfully

changing the text of the show, at a production (either in Bristol or Edinburgh – two

recorded accounts interestingly contradict each other)[26] a woman in the audience

continued to say to Tim Crouch "Are you Tim Crouch? Are you Tim Crouch? ARE

YOU TIM CROUCH?" and would not stop until she was responded to. Eventually

Crouch responded, "I am Tim Crouch, that is Vic Llewellyn, this is Esther Smith,

that's Chris Goode, and we are performing a play called *The Author* which is set at

the Royal Court theatre in London, and every word we are saying has been

scripted."[27] He revealed to the audience member (who could have bought the

published script after the performance and confirmed its existence to herself) that this

was a story that *pre-existed* its medium of telling – everything was scripted. It was a

true re-presentation. Crouch then relays that "for the rest of the piece the audience

were puppies. They were docile, understanding, getting it, they got it." When asked

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[25] Crouch, Tim. Personal interview. 3 Feb. 2013. Included in the appendix.
[26] ibid.
[27] ibid.

if he was interested in having an audience be docile puppies he said, "No. Particularly there. I want them to have to work it out."[28]

Mike Daisey ran into controversy regarding a "truthful" representation of his life events after a recorded segment of his theatre piece *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* (2011) aired on *This American Life* [*TAL*]. The piece was originally a theatrical monologue at the Public Theatre in New York in 2011 about a trip Daisey made to a factory in China and the working conditions of workers making Apple products. Ira Glass, the producer of *TAL*, saw the piece in performance, and invited Daisey to adapt it for the radio. When it was played on *TAL* it was the series' most downloaded episode, but after factual inaccuracies came to light the segment was retracted. Due to the political nature of Daisey's piece, combined with its appearance on a show that purports to present journalism, Daisey was asked to address the truthfulness of the story on an episode called *Retraction*. In the episode, Rob Schmitz and Ira Glass hold Mike Daisey accountable for "lying", and the distinctions and blurs between theatre and journalism as storytelling mediums repeatedly come up. In Rob Schmitz's conversation with Cathy, the translator who worked with Daisey in China, after discovering one of Daisey's many inaccuracies Cathy and Rob appear to hold different opinions on the importance of facts in theatre:

> *Cathy Lee:* He is a writer. So I know what he says is only maybe half of them or less actual. But he is allowed to do that right? Because he's not a journalist.
> *Rob Schmitz:* I don't know. You're right. He's a writer. He's a writer and an actor.

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[28] ibid.

Cathy Lee: Yeah.

Rob Schmitz: However, his play is helping form the opinions of many

Americans.

("Retraction #460" 8).

In the performed narratives contemporary to Aristotle, "fiction" was not established in the way it is now. Poets either adapted myths, histories, or lampooned existing political figures in comedies, like Aristophanes' *The Clouds*. But all poetry was, as Aristotle puts it, mimesis of "either the kind of thing that was or is the case; the kind of thing that is said or thought to be the case; or the kind of thing that ought to be the case" (Heath 42). Stories were based on either real situations, situations believed to be real or situations that ought to be real, making factual accuracy a possible concern. The satirical portrayal of Socrates in *The Clouds*, for example, contributed to the societal perception of him as a corruptor of Athenian youth which was brought up at his trial, suggesting that narrative in ancient Greece had the power to influence society's perception of real people and events and that this influence could have real consequences. Poetry was commonly held to be "the educator of Greece" (trans. Janko x).

Over two thousand years later, Rob Schmitz puts forward a similar view of theatre – that plays "form the opinions of many Americans." This said, after Cathy mentions that Daisey is not a journalist, Schmitz reminds us that Daisey is a writer *and* an actor, which, as Matthew Potolsky points out, may be a way of suggesting that he is untrustworthy. "Throughout Western history, actors and actresses have been regarded as potential seducers or the moral equivalent of prostitutes. […] Questions about the morality of performers, notes Mendel Kohansky, have relegated actors and

actresses to the social margins in almost every world culture. This marginality can render them pariahs or, as in modern Western media culture, objects of extreme fascination" (72).

In his initial interview Mike Daisey himself seemed undecided about the importance of telling the truth in a theatrical context. He and Rob Schmitz had the following exchange:

Rob Schmitz: Does it matter if the things you've said in this play are untrue?

Mike Daisey: Yeah I think the truth always matters, truth is tremendously important. I don't live in a subjective universe where everything is up for grabs. I really do believe that stories should be subordinate to truth. ("Retraction #460" 12).

In a later conversation with Ira Glass, after having said that "stories should be subordinate to truth," Daisey admits that the inaccuracies were *in aid of telling the best possible story*. He says, "I think I was terrified that if I untied these things, that the work, that I know is really good, and tells a story, that does really great things for making people care, that it would come apart in a way where it would ruin everything" ("Retraction #460" 15). A good story may not be the same thing as a good re-presentation, especially where autobiographical work is concerned. Although Daisey's monologue is clearly re-presenting something – the question is *what* is it representing? The events as they happened, the events as he feels they happened, or the events as he feels they *should* have happened? It is interesting that Daisey worries that being honest about the fictional elements of his autobiographical monologue would "ruin everything" because the "truthful" status that was unwittingly assigned to

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the piece is likely impossible to disentangle from its success. This work that "tells a story," though in effect mis-represents, may have been getting away with more than an explicitly fictional story would or could. Writing about non-fiction or apparently true stories, Porter Abbott points out "This is the deep appeal of narratives like […] staged monologues representing a real person in her own words […] Factual truth sells, and audiences will forgive failures of art and even lapses of narrative suspense in the delivery of this kind of truth. Indeed, too much art and narrative drive can make the truth suspect" (Porter Abbott 145).

Daisey asked to make a final statement on *This American Life* about the importance of factual accuracy in autobiographical representations for the theatre. He said, "Everything I have done in making this monologue for the theatre has been… to make people care. I'm not going to say that I didn't take a few shortcuts in my passion to heard. But I stand behind the work. My mistake, the mistake that I truly regret is that I had it on your show as journalism and it's not journalism. It's theatre. I use the tools of theatre and memoir to achieve its dramatic arc and of that arc and of that work I am very proud because I think it made you care…" ("Retraction #460" 17). Daisey very publicly declares that a mis-representation of autobiographical events is acceptable in a theatrical context. As Rousseau points out, the actor has "become adept in habits which can be innocent only in the theatre" (80). Aristotle makes a similar point about factual inaccuracies being acceptable as theatre though not as journalism – "The criterion for correctness is not the same in poetry as in ethics. And not the same in poetry as in any other art… If the poet meant to represent something and failed through incompetence, the fault is intrinsic. But if he deliberately chooses to misrepresent… the error is not a fault in poetry but a sin against some other art, like medicine" (trans. Kenny 51). That said, Aristotle likely

never encountered a performer playing themselves and telling a story about their own lives – which arguably audience members read differently. As Jerome Bruner writes, "One imposes criteria of rightness on the self-report of a life just as one imposes them on the account of a football game or the report of an event in nature" (693). To further confirm Daisey's own stance on autobiographical theatre as performed story-telling rather than a self-report, he made the amateur rights to the text of *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* available for free in 2012 so that others could play him and re-present this work that "tells a story."[29]

The difficulty of accurately representing the self in performance is one that is not merely entangled with questions around objective factual accuracy, but also around the subjective – namely the fluid and changing nature of representing the past self to the present self. Brian Lobel has spoken about his relationship to performing his autobiographical monologue *Ball* (2003) in which he wrote about his experience with cancer when he was twenty years old:

> I was 28 and performing material I wrote when I was 20 and I was really uncomfortable because what happens with the writing is that it gets stopped. It stops writing. If you were a filmmaker it would be considered okay that you made something when you were 20 and then you made something when you were 30 and they were different. But when it's your body that performs it – my 29 year old self couldn't really perform my 20 year old self. I was now out and queer, and a lot of the work had to do with fertility. I was playing this

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[29] "When we released THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY OF STEVE JOBS under a royalty-free, open-source license we called it an experiment. When it generated over 100,000 downloads in its first week, more than every new American play of the last few decades, we knew it was a phenomenon larger than us. And today, after there have been over one hundred and twenty-five productions in theatres around the world that have translated into six languages, we know it's been a massive success because so many other artists have given their own time and energy to this story" (Daisey 2).

game of hide and seek inside of it. That was the clearest thing that had

changed, but actually my opinions towards mortality and my body and my

relationship with my parents were also really different[30]

Lobel addressed this situation by eventually publishing a trilogy of shows about

cancer,[31] starting with the piece he made when he was 20 years old, followed by a

piece he wrote five years later called *Other Funny Stories About Cancer* and finishing

with his 2010 cabaret piece *An Appreciation.* In the monologue *Other Funny Stories*

About Cancer he addresses not only his changing relationship to himself, but the

process of self-editing he went through in creating the first autobiographical piece.

> When I was writing I thought, 'Brian, people are uncomfortable with cancer
>
> patients being too angry, or too political, or maybe anything other than just ill' –
>
> […] The story was getting too complicated and profane. Keep it simple stupid.
>
> Keep it simple stupid. And nice. And inspired. And all about cancer and
>
> survivorship. So I cut out the queer sex, I cut out the racist rabbi and I cut out
>
> the wet dream story (Lobel 56).

Ball was a narrative of his cancer written when he was 20 years old that skirted

around sexuality – a subject that Brian would later frequently address in performance.

In a footnote of the published text Brian writes that when performing *Ball* he would

gauge his audience before deciding whether or not to explicitly refer to himself as

queer.[32] This said, Lobel explicitly writes that his changed relationship to discussing

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[30] Transcript to a panel discussion on the writer/performer. Recorded in Austin, Texas at Fusebox
Festival, 23 April 2013. Included in the appendix.
[31] *Ball and Other Funny Stories About Cancer*. London: Oberon, 2012. Print.
[32] "Inclusion of the word 'queer' in the live performance was determined on a case-by-case basis
depending, completely, on my assumptions about the audience" (Lobel 28).

his sexuality on stage was not his sole reason for writing the sequel to the initial text of *Ball*.

> … the work of bringing together *Ball, Other Funny Stories about Cancer* and *An Appreciation* into one publication is my attempt to demonstrate how feelings around bodies morph, mature and even completely contradict each other over time. […] It's not as simple as me having 'come out' about sexuality at some point along the way, or becoming emboldened as a queer performer; my opinions about death, the privileging of cancer, the relationship between survivors and those who do not survive cancer, and about my desire to incorporate other people into my own cancer narrative have changed greatly over time as well (Lobel 17).

Though somewhat less rooted in my physical body than Brian's piece, my first solo show also brought up questions about how genuine it felt to re-present a past version as my present self on stage. My show *Like You Were Before* (2010) was an autobiographical piece about the past in which I showed the audience a video that was taken in 2005, the day before I left my birthplace Canada for the UK for what (I didn't realize at the time) was a (so far) permanent move. In the piece, I learned the lines I had spoken unthinkingly in the video and I spoke them live in front of the audience five years later – attempting to redub myself as I had been then, and using my live presence as an indicator of the difference between who I was once and who I was now. The piece was an attempt to highlight what it means to leave somewhere, the maddeningly finite nature of recorded media, and the maddeningly finite nature of the past itself. Ironically, after repeatedly performing the show and touring it in 2011,

the live text of the piece began to feel disingenuous and dated for a series of personal

reasons, though it was also not dated enough for this to be particularly interesting. I

was changing by increments, and a set text spoken and performed live could not do

justice to those changes. By 2012 I decided to create a kind of "time capsule" of this

show about my past.   I announced that I would not perform it again in the UK until

five years had passed since it had been written and ten years had passed since the

initial video was filmed – in 2015. Just as the show had originally been about

attempting to represent a video of me taken five years ago, a later performance of the

text would become about me trying to represent the maker of that piece from 2010,

who in 2015, would be five years behind me, a version of myself that would sit more

comfortably as a genuine re-presentation.
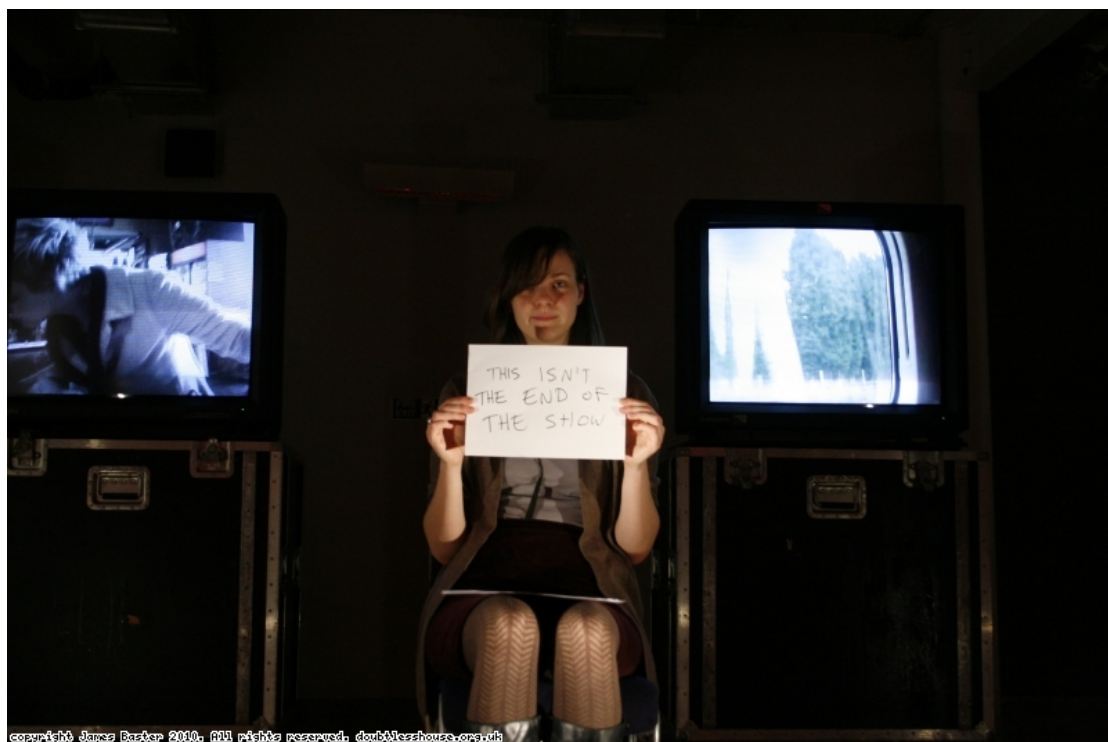
Fig. 3. *Like You Were Before* at the Arches, Glasgow, April 2010. Photo Credit:
James Baster.

I performed this version of the show at Battersea Arts Centre in London from

November 4th to November 7th 2015 as part of a double bill called *Time Pieces* along

with a "behind-the-curtain" remix of *The Future Show* entitled *The Future Show (Excerpts)*. Simon Bowes wrote about this performance on his blog, having seen an early work-in-progress in 2010 and the revival in 2015. He comments, "What struck me I think the first time, back in 2010 and now, two nights later in 2015 is the sheer youth of the people in the frame [...] In the revival, Pearson's delivery feels like the delivery of a younger person too. There's a naivety, a commitment to doing-it-like-it-used-to-be-done, a sharp contrast with the performance register of the Future Show." Bowes picked up on the fact that within the revival, I attempted to perform the show almost exactly as I had done five years beforehand, in a register that is very different to how I have performed in recent years. In this sense, to quote one of the translations of mimesis, I was "imitating" my younger self. At the performances at BAC, I revealed this imitation only once in the piece, before doing a dance, where I told the audience that this is an old show that I had elected to re-perform five years later, and that there are many choices within the show that as a maker, I would not make now - attributing the dance sequence which features in the middle of the show to one of these younger-self choices. Before dancing I told the audience that I would perform the dance not because I think it's good, but to respect the integrity of the piece as it used to be. Funnily enough, I never took full ownership of that dance when I performed in 2010 either. I am not a particularly skilled dancer or mover, and would always couch the sequence in an apologetic disavowal, blaming it on the feedback of audience members who claimed to love it, for example. Structurally I knew that this somewhat embarrassing dance should be preceded by a "lowering of expectations" in order to be enjoyable for an audience. In 2015 I simply lengthened the text, appending a section in which I pointed out that this was a show I had made five years ago, and blamed the dance on my past-self's choices as an artist. But this disavowal

also served to re-contextualize the show itself and particularly its performance style –
its simplistic DIY set (featuring a wheelie chair, a monitor, a camera and a
projection), my tattered slightly twee costume, and my upbeat and guileless delivery
became apparent as throw backs to youth, to the choices of a younger artist who was
making their first solo show. My commitment as a now older artist to reproduce that
show as closely as possible was an imitative gesture – a re-presentation. As Bowes
wrote, my performance was doing-it-like-it-used-to-be-done in 2010 within a show
that was also about doing-it-like-it-used-to-be-done on the video I had taken in 2005.

Kieran Hurley has also discussed the difficulty of continuing to perform an
autobiographical piece when it feels as though the self discussed is quite clearly lost
to the past - a re-presentation. Of performing his show *Hitch* (2009) to an audience in
Austin in 2013 he said, "the self in the show is always a bit of a narrative construct
anyway, and as time has passed that distance has become greater. My way around it
is that I've written in a line at the top of the show where I admit that my 23 year old
self is a bit of a dumbass."[33]

In *The Future Show* I am free from the task of faithfully or genuinely re-
presenting the self, but hampered by the task of pre-presenting the self – a task that is
also loaded with questions around "truth." As one reviewer wrote of *The Future
Show*, "… the pact Pearson makes with her audience is to subscribe to her own
prediction, to enact a future of her own conscious choosing. That, clearly, is an
impossible task…" (Trueman).   For *The Future Show*, fiction or an autobiographical
lie is immediately in the room simply by virtue of the fact that predicting the actual
immediate future undoes it. As Andrew Haydon wrote of one of my predictions at the
performance at the Gate, "She mentions Andy Field giving her a hug and mocking her

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[33] Transcript from the Writer/Performer Panel. Austin, Texas. Fusebox Festival, 23 April 2013.
Included in the appendix.

new haircut. I'm sure he'll go out of his way not to do so now." Whether or not Andy conformed to the prediction I made of him in the performance Haydon reviewed, the genuine action was lost the moment I predicted it while Andy was in the audience. If he had hugged me and mocked my hair this would have been itself a representation – a mimicry of what I had described on stage, meaning that the piece reverses the normal relations between reality and fiction – the shared reality with the audience after the show can only ever become an imitation of the preceding fiction, rather than the story told on stage acting as a partly fictional mediation of a preceding reality. That said, for the strange relationship of truth vs. falsehood in a pre-presentation to be most effective, the predictions I make are bound by Aristotle's advice on *mimesis* and plausibility - "imitation must in every case be one of three things: either the kind of thing that was or is the case; or the kind of thing that is said or thought to be the case; or the kind of thing that ought to be the case" (trans. Heath 42). The more plausible (but now impossible) the fictional future is, the more it highlights the implausibility of predicting our own lives, and the implausibility of being an accurate version of our future or present self on stage.

The act of prediction itself – though pre-presentational, also contains a presentational, non-fictional and to some extent confessional aspect. For the more superstitious in the audience, the act of me predicting something like "I will get pregnant" in public can seem uncomfortable, arrogant or short-sighted in a way that is not mimetic but real. I also clearly state in nearly every version of the show that I have struggled with obsessive compulsive disorder in the past and that I worry that performing the piece is inviting the disorder back. Matt Trueman noticed this in his review and wrote, "it becomes unavoidably apparent that the whole endeavor of mapping out one's future is an obsessive compulsive act." Read in this way – *The*

Future Show is not a story or an attempt to tell or pre-tell a story – it is an action in the vein of performance art –a demonstration of a genuine struggle with OCD and my attempt at "spiking."[34] This said, the audience also do not know if I genuinely have the disorder. I have been asked in the past if this element of the performance is "true." From their perspective, framing the piece as an obsessive compulsive act could be part of the fiction – a portrayal of one of the ways in which some human beings deal with uncertainty.

Regardless of whether or not the precise details of the presentation of myself in the piece are read as fiction or non-fiction, the attempt to pre-present my life through predicting the future is also complicated by how far forward I go into the future. I tell the story of my future until my death, making the piece into the task of attempting to do justice not merely to representing the self on stage, but to representing the entire life span of the self on stage - a lifespan viewed facing forward. "… Tellers and listeners must share some 'deep structure' about the nature of a 'life,' for if the rules of life-telling are altogether arbitrary, tellers and listeners will surely be alienated by a failure to grasp what the other is saying or what he thinks the other is hearing" (Bruner 699). If successful, it should feel like a plausible or recognizable attempt to tell the story of a life, and tap into the 'deep structure' we associate with narrating the rest of our lives to ourselves.

The nature of the task in *The Future Show* – realistically predicting the rest of my life – is intended to act as a kind of semaphore for the difficulty of ever representing the self in performance, or indeed, in life. The piece will not run into controversy in an expectation of being bound to factual accuracy in the way that Mike

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[34] "Spiking" is the term given to aversion therapy in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. This therapy involves forcing oneself to give less power to their obsessions by deliberately disobeying compulsions or rituals.

Daisey is,[35] but an attempt at plausibility is a central tenet of the conceit. The notion

of predicting my future self is sufficiently impossible that imposing obviously

implausible autobiographical details, as Tim Crouch does in most of his work, would

undermine the audacity of predicting. And unlike Brian Lobel and my past piece *Like*

You Were Before, because much of the text changes every performance (the logistics

of which I will cover in more detail later in this chapter), it can never really depict an

outdated version of myself – although arguably one day I may feel as though the

structure or the act itself is an outdated version of my relationship to the future. In

any case, an autobiographical pre-presentation of the self, though immediately

assigned to fiction, is less hampered by "truth" than a re-presentation.

iv. Mediation and the act of writing *The Future Show*

Porter Abbott insists on continuing with the use of the term "re-presentation"

because mediated stories are "involved in re-presentation, conveying a story that at

least *seems* to pre-exist the vehicle of conveyance" (Porter Abbott 15). For him, if a

story appears to have been prepared before being presented, the audience reads that

story as pre-existing the performance. Mediation and design, in that case, *are* the

moment of presentation that the audience watches *re*created. The illusion of a story

pre-existing a narrative is one that an audience member of an early sharing of *The*

Future Show in April 2012 shared, when they anonymously commented on Andrew

Haydon's blog, "It's weird how Deborah's piece on the future seemed to engage with

the past so much. And how, by predicting these moments in the future, she managed

to create some sort of nostalgia to me as a spectator, probably because by saying these

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[35] Although in one case in Kinsale, Ireland, audience members went looking for me in the locations I
had claimed I would go to after the piece ended – as though the performance would continue after the
curtain call if they could somehow keep up with me.

things she made them register as 'past.'"[36] The concept of the story pre-existing the

narrative discourse is deliberately confused in *The Future Show*, though to further this

confusion in visual form, the piece is not improvised. I read from a script that sits in a

binder. The audience can see that this script was written – and in this sense (though

only in this sense), as Porter Abbott suggests, the story *seems* to pre-exist its telling.

But when was this script written, and how?

v. Having access to the subject of mimesis: The Immediate Future

The first half of the text for *The Future Show* is consistently rewritten for

every performance. The show begins with an account of the immediate future.   On

the surface, this immediate future may seem quotidian, mundane and simple. Here is

a sample of one set of predictions I made about the audience leaving the Out of the

Blue Drill Hall:

> Many of you will not want to leave, in part because you will be unsure of how
>
> to exit the building with the front doors closed, but you will follow someone
>
> who seems to know where they're going and soon you will find yourself in the
>
> dark grey limestone evening. You will become an unwieldy group of friends,
>
> acquaintances and strangers deciding whether or not to go to a bar. We will
>
> hear the door bang shut and then we will all look at each other like a married
>
> couple who just threw a ten day dinner party and need to do the washing up
>
> (Edinburgh, 25 August 2013).

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[36] Anonymous. "Re: Forest Fringe at the Gate -11." *Postcards from the Gods*. 20
Apr. 2012. Web. 5 Sept. 2013. <http://postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/forest-
fringe-at-gate-11.html>

Although these events are plausible, they are also absolutely bound to both that space and to that day. In the example above I not only reference the fact that the front doors of that venue were closed during the performance, but I reference the end of *Forest Fringe*, the performance festival that was presenting the piece, and that the audience presumably know I co-direct. When performing this piece as part of another festival in Kinsale in July 2013, for example, an entirely different set of details applied to the audience and my experience following the show, and the immediate future read very differently.

Specificity is what allows the contract with the audience – the notion that I am going to pre-present the future – to exist. The specificity of the first part of the show, in which I begin by narrating the end of the piece and the micro-events of that evening, ideally allows the audience to anticipate this final moment – when the show ends and the future begins. In the actual performance I speak the last words of the performance and the audience applauds – it is at this point that the space becomes destabilized by expectations. The story becomes unreliable the moment that the performance ends. As Nicholas Ridout points out in his book *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, in even the most conventional curtain call "it is not at all clear that the machinery of representation has really been switched off" (162), but in the case of *The Future Show*, the curtain call is in some senses the beginning of the re-presentation, or put more simply the presentation. It is the moment when the story I just told both does and does not begin.

In an early performance in January at Battersea Arts Centre I began the *Future Show* like I always do, by describing the curtain call in which I would stand up and walk in front of the table where I would bow. Twenty minutes into the performance my foot began to fall asleep. I became very aware that I was about to unwittingly

break the contract I had made with the audience – if my foot did not wake up I would not be able to walk in front of the table in the way that I had described myself doing because I would be unexpectedly limping. The end of the show was the beginning of a performative site – the future – and part of the pleasure in watching the unreliability of this narration would come from a gradual, rather than immediate, deviation between this predicted site and reality. This was not, as Ridout describes of curtain calls, "a situation that moves momentarily outside the economies of representation" (166) – rather the curtain call would be under the representational microscope, and I did not want the spell to be broken too early. Being able to comfortably walk in front of the table as I had predicted, in view of the audience, seemed integral to the success of the piece because to reveal my narration as unreliable too quickly would rob the piece of the subtler and more gradual differences between the pre-presentation and reality. My foot has since fallen asleep in nearly every performance, and a new line has been introduced into the beginning of the piece: "I will appear to be hobbling slightly as I walk because my foot will fall asleep during this performance."

What I had not predicted when I conceived of a "pre-presentation" was that *The Future Show* would never be finished. Due to the nature of the future, which always changes by increments, subtly, sometimes without us noticing, this is a script that continues to change performance by performance, and continuously needs rewriting.

At the outset this approach seemed unnecessary. The very first versions featured me telling the audience the story of the rest of that night. I would begin with the end of the performance, and then finish before going to bed, attempting to infer the themes of anxiety, hope, awe, and expectation into a micro-narrative. The most

successful and lengthy of these was staged at the Gate as part of the Forest Fringe microfestival in April 2012. It was my last performance in the United Kingdom before going to Canada for five months, a fact which Andy Field announced to the audience before I came on stage. I was recently engaged. My personal context seemed full of precarious promises. And most fortuitous of all for the telling of a single night, I had double booked the performance with the reception of a significant ex partner's wedding, at which my fiancé was best man. I had been at the ceremony earlier, and I was leaving the performance to go straight back to an emotionally fraught but satisfying and interesting event – an ex's wedding. The event also had the peculiar quality of being mired in the past – our long ago relationship – and the future – his new marriage and my upcoming wedding.   Below is a short excerpt from this particular version of the script:

> Richard will say, "Your fiancé's speech was really great. Short but sweet. Michael cried." I will be glad. But I will also wonder if Richard knows how we know Michael. I will be angry that nobody ever seems to remember how we know Michael. I will remember the time that my fiancé practised his speech in front of me and when he spoke about the first time he met Michael and what he thought of him I became so upset I had to leave the room – because I did not like his necessary omissions. I will feel like the only keeper of the past. These thoughts will be a feeling that is long winded to describe, but will come over me very suddenly and be pushed down just as suddenly. At bottom, I will be very proud of my fiancé for doing such a good job on the speech. I will be relieved that I didn't have to be there to watch it.

In Andrew Haydon's review of this early version he picked up on the peculiarly appropriate nature of the event I described myself attending. He wrote

> If it is all completely true, then to my mind this show either a) has a very short shelf life indeed, b) will never be "true" again, or c) will involve an awful lot of work before any future showings, where Pearson will have to describe whatever she's *actually* likely to be doing after each and every time she performs it.

I was also unsure, at this early point in the development of the piece, whether the show would have a short shelf life, whether it would continue to be the same piece I performed that night but become "fictional," or whether I would consistently rewrite the piece to fit whatever I had planned for that evening. As I was about to leave the project and the country for several months, I postponed deciding if this narratively rich future – which was only "true" for that night (or at least true in terms of being as truthful a prediction as I was able to make in that moment) and now permanently fictional, would continue to be the first act for this show, even though the wedding was over and the piece was no longer, if not "real", then plausible or recognizably possible.

The question of fiction vs. reality for a pre-presentation touches on the possible worlds theories, posited in literary study as possible-not-actual-worlds by Marie Laure Ryan among others. Possible worlds are a philosophical concept, used to express modal realism. In philosophy a possible world is any world (including the actual world) where anything that is in the realm of possibilities happens or has happened - for example one possible world that Ryan describes would be a world where Al Gore became president in 2001. There is a great deal of dissonance on "the

realness" of possible worlds in philosophical writing – with philosopher David Lewis arguing that although possible worlds, by their definition (because they are an alternative to the actual world) do not exist from a spatial standpoint, they are real, though populated by our counter-parts as opposed to us.[37] According to Lewis' counterparts theory, the Al Gore who was president would not be the same Al Gore who exists in our actual world. He would be an Al Gore counterpart.   Saul Kripke's "The Humphrey Objection" disagrees with this counterpart theory, also using a presidential election as his example, but focusing on candidate Herbert Humphrey who ran in the election against Richard Nixon.[38] He points out that in a possible world where Herbert Humphrey won the election instead of Richard Nixon, it does not make sense to claim that these are a different Herbert Humphrey and Richard Nixon, a counterpart or possible-world composite, as names are rigid designators. As commentators have pointed out, it is impossible for the actual world to emotionally invest in the success of such a counterpart in a way that would explain his (or others) feelings of regret when the actual Herbert Humphrey lost the election.[39] Marie Laure Ryan applies these theories to literary studies, pointing out that fictional worlds created by authors are also possible-not-actual-worlds.

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[37] "Your counterparts resemble you closely in content and context in important respects. They resemble you more closely than do other things in their worlds. But they are not really you. For each of them is in his own world, and only you are here in the actual world. Indeed, we might say, speaking casually, that your counterparts are you in other worlds, that they and you are the same; but this sameness is no more a literal identity than the sameness between you today and you tomorrow. It would be better to say that your counterparts are men you *would have been*, had the world been otherwise" (Lewis 114-115).

[38] "…I will argue, intuitively, that proper names are rigid designators, for although the man (Nixon) might not have been the President, it is not the case that he might not have been Nixon (though he might not have been *called* 'Nixon'). Those who have argued that to make sense of the notion of rigid resignator, we must antecedently make sense of 'criteria of transworld identity' have precisely reversed the cart and the horse; it is *because* we can refer (rigidly) to Nixon, and stipulate that we are speaking of what might have happened to *him* (under certain circumstances), that 'transworld identifications' are unproblematic in such cases" (Kripke 200).

[39] "'Another Earth' and the Humphrey Objection Explained." *Philosophy Tube.* 31 October, 2014. Youtube Video. Web. Accessed 21 December, 2015.

The Future Show creates a possible world for the audience live on stage, making it manifest in an autobiographical sense. By writing these possible-not-actual-worlds down and then reading them out to an audience, I ensure that these visions of the future will always remain exactly that – possible worlds that will never be actual. My own possible not actual world, when I returned from Canada, revealed itself as one that would consistently need re-creating.   But how would I sustain re-creating or updating that world so that the piece did not have the short shelf life Andrew Haydon predicted? This became the true task of developing *The Future Show* – not the task of re-writing a script, but the task of creating a permanent and sustainable narrative structure for a pre-presentation that I could comfortably write into.

vi. Representing a lifespan facing forward – Structuring *The Future Show*

Chart: The Future Show Structure

Approx 7,000 words total
3,000 words do not change

First and last line of the show:
"The length of a breath"

My death

My grandfather
(past tense)

Story vs.
Reality shared
With audience

After-life
(2nd person
Present tense)

Immediate
Future

Get
Shown
An
animal

Abstract
Future List
Age 50-70

Audience's
future

Next day -
(Rewriting
The show)

End of
The night

Abstract Future List
Age 31 - 50

The box
(location
flexible)

*Almost
Set Script
From this
Point on*

Day planner
And that year

Fig. 4. Pearson, Deborah. *The Future Show*. London: Oberon, 2015. Print, 137.

The Future Show is split into several sections, each of which serves a
particular function with reference to the rest of the piece. The first section is the

immediate future – the section that is most potent in pre-presentation because of its similarity and dissimilarity to the future I share with the audience. The immediate future must be rewritten in detail from performance to performance. There are several traits that every version of the immediate future share. First – nearly every detail I narrate, while being recognizable and specific to the venue and date, should also relate to the overall concept of time, or be interesting in reference to the future. I often begin by explaining that I will look in the mirror and notice that I have a wrinkle, for example. In Texas I referenced myself listening to a real Austin radio station and hearing an old song that reminded me of myself as a teenager, looking forward to high school being over (Pearson 20). There are also events that happen in nearly every version – I always meet an audience member who points out a structural flaw in the show, and I always meet a person who I do not recognize who says, "So, you think you know about the future" and then looks as though they're reaching for a gun in their coat pocket but pulls out something that teeters on the edge of magic realism. In the very first version of *The Future Show* this was a banana, but it has since been a pigeon, a bat, a mouse and a dead pheasant. The object or animal changes from performance to performance.

An unexpected difficulty came in finding a structure for the immediate future that would always include an explanation of the process of re-writing the show. During the initial three night run of the full version at Battersea Arts Centre, for the first two performances I explained myself rewriting the show – a moment that always got a good response from the audience as they suddenly realized that the script I was reading from would only exist in that version for that night.

I will not be able to stop thinking about all of the other scripts, just like this one, that I have already written. I will notice the places where I re-used particularly well written sentences. I will be very aware of the fact that I could just leave it as is. I will think of how I will also wake up at BAC on Saturday, I will think of how Friday's audience will not know if I rewrote or not. I will think, this is a stupid idea for the show. I will go up to "file", scroll down to "Save As" and Click, and then I will elegantly swing the arrow up to the box that will pop up and I will click the scroll that reads "BAC 2 the Future" – adding the word Friday. I will feel like I don't know if I can do this. I will wonder why I am doing this. I will think about how I once showed promise as a writer, and I will wonder if this project is my attempt to kill that promise once and all, to really burn myself out on a project that never ends that nobody will read that the audience may even at times find boring. I will press "Save". I will look at this script, which is now an old script and needs to be made new. I will begin deleting.

When the last performance of the run arrived and I began writing for it, I realized that because there was not another script to write in the immediate future, I would lose what had become a very important structural section of the piece. With this section removed, the piece took on a very different feel – it became less playful, less about its concept and form and more meditative, and the audience reacted accordingly. In later versions of the piece I dealt with this structural problem for the last performance of a run by including a moment in which someone who has already seen the piece repeats the omitted text back to me. I have claimed this person to be a friend, a fellow artist or a technician operating the show. Below is the most recent version of this section, performed on the last night of the Edinburgh Festival:

I will walk next to Alex to the bar. He is teching the show right now and he also teched the show on Wednesday night. He will say, "It's too bad this was the last performance of the festival, because I guess you couldn't include the stuff about how you had to rewrite the show for the next performance, right? So you lost all that material where you pointed out to the audience in a meta textual way how much work the show actually is, the bit where you said you once showed promise as a writer, but maybe this concept was an attempt to really kill that promise once and for all, to really burn yourself out on a project that never ends and that you have to rewrite over and over again and nobody reads and that the audience may even at times find a little boring. It was too bad you couldn't put that part in. I liked that part." And I will agree, it was too bad I couldn't put that part in. I also like that part.

Interestingly enough, this moment also serves as the "structural flaw" that an audience member is welcome to point out to me. When I agree that it is "too bad" that I did not include that section, it is the only moment in *The Future Show* where the script deviates from the reality I purport to be predicting, where I do not acknowledge that everything I had said would happen does in fact happen in the future exactly as I had said it would.

By assigning this section to a "character" – a person who would share this future with me, I am able to maintain the important moment of letting the audience in on the concept – of allowing them to realize that the rest of the binder I read from is filled with other scripts, different but in some ways identical to the one being performed that night. This is a key element in how the audience reads the show, and of course it is also important to me as a performer. When I have created a piece that

requires constant rewriting in order to maintain the illusion of a "pre-presentation", it is cathartic for me to hear the audience laugh out loud as I explain the concept. It is a moment that I know they are either appreciating or pitying my attempt not on a fictional level, but in reality – in a piece about re-presentation, this pity and appreciation register for me as "real" and in some sense allow me to keep going.

A more detailed examination of later sections of *The Future Show* will be covered in consequent chapters of this thesis – in particular the "Objective" of writing *The Future Show* as symbolically resolving a conflict against the self, and the ending of *The Future Show* as addressing our association with endings as a kind of death.

vii. Conclusion

I ask the audience to invest in a story-world that begins in the room and the venue. The character they invest in shares my name, looks like me, and is sitting in front of them. Immediately following the show we will be briefly together and the audience can compare my predictions of the immediate future against what will actually be happening. They are given direct access to the story world which I attempt to replicate, though that access follows the performance. It is somewhat like describing a painting in detail before showing it to an audience – but even I have not seen the painting – I can only guess at its shape.

In David Edgar's book *How Plays Work* he addresses mimesis in dramatic action. He analyses several canonical plays and then concludes that they all "address, in different ways, the gap between the ideal and the real, expressed in a twist. In that, they're a model for the formulation of dramatic action" (25). This notion of the gap between the ideal and the real is reminiscent of the Richard Bauman quote which

refs to a double-consciousness in performance.[40] Where contemporary performance

differs perhaps, is not in expressing the gap, but in questioning the very notion of an

"ideal." While Edgar is referring to a character's motivations, to their desire for

perfection or goodness to come about as a result of their actions, Bauman seems to be

referring to a Platonic formal ideal – to the "real deal." The performances examined

herein question both. There is nothing good or perfect about Tim Crouch's account of

pedophilia, Brian Lobel's 20 year old account of cancer, Mike Daisey's condemnation

of Apple factories, or indeed my own invented future – but equally, Crouch, Lobel,

Daisey and myself do not present an ideal in the sense of the "real," but rather gesture

towards the ways in which this "realness" will always be absent. They are not better

or worse than how they are presented on stage, but they are different. They are also

not quite what stands before the audience, and this *not quite* is the unique way in

which contemporary performance handles notions of representation. This

demonstrates, as Heddon and Milling point out, "the overriding concern in

contemporary devised performances with both the status of theatre, and the status of

'reality', a concern played out in explorations of the relationship between them.

Many performances explore the mechanisms of theatre as a representational medium

and, simultaneously, the representations that serve to construct our social worlds"

(204). None of the pieces explored in this chapter successfully re-create their pre-

existing narrative, but in resisting re-creation they also resist the idea that there was

anything static, truthful or ideal to imitate in the first place.

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[40] "According to Bauman, all performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action. Normally this comparison is made by an observer of the action – the theatre public, the school's teacher, the scientist – but the double consciousness, not the external observation, is what is most central… Performance is always a performance *for* someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as a performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self" (Carlson 150).

The Future Show takes Porter Abbott's definition of narrative as the "representation of an event" as its catalyst, focusing specifically on the pre-fix *re* within the word "re-presentation." Through unpacking the term's possible origins in Plato and Aristotle's use of the word "mimesis," and contextualizing this purportedly autobiographical piece within a tradition of contemporary performance work that elides the notion of "re-presenting" the self, this chapter has attempted to unpack the deep connection between representation and any straightforward relationship to a fictional world on stage, particularly as it refers to time, questioning whether or not a fictional account always need to come after the event it allegedly describes.

As Aristotle writes, "So much then, for tragedy and imitation on the stage" (trans. Kenny 47).

Chapter 2 - Conflict

Of all forms of action, narrative theorist Marie Laure Ryan writes that what she calls "conflict solving moves" are the focus of narrative interest (130). When David Edgar describes our conventional expectations while watching a play, he writes that audiences "suspect – and in a way, demand – that hopes will be dashed, true love will face obstacles, rituals will be disrupted, and victory will come at a price" (Edgar 9). Porter Abbott writes, "The agon, or conflict, has been so central a feature of narrative throughout its recorded history that it is reasonable to assume that it serves important cultural purposes" (55). Conflict – a disruption of the status quo - is arguably the focus of many conventional western narratives, particularly films and plays. The question of how to contain a conflict in reality, however, is often found on the lips of politicians, so perhaps it is not surprising that it is also a problematic quantity in narrative theory. In this chapter I am going to examine conflict, or strategies for imaging we can contain conflict, as a narrative preoccupation in several contemporary performances. Before doing this, however, I will specifically interrogate the terms, elucidating on what I mean by "conflict" in contemporary performance.   I do this by canvassing conflict as a narrative preoccupation whose most significant associations do not originate in Aristotle's *Poetics,* but in the work of the later thinker Georg Wilhem Friedrich Hegel.

In *Poetics* Aristotle writes extensively about the importance of the "mimesis of a praxis" (one possible, if problematic translation discussed in chapter 1 is "the representation of an action"), and when describing the praxis/action to be represented, Aristotle is quite specific about the fact that the action needs to somehow feel complete or unified. He writes, "…the imitation is unified if it imitates a single

object, so too the plot, as the imitation of an action, should imitate a single, unified action – and one that is also a whole" (trans. Heath 15). Earlier in the text, Aristotle specifies what he means by a whole. He writes "A *whole* is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end" (ibid 13). It is my assertion that this description of unity, as having a beginning, middle and end, is a problematic way to conceive of conflict, though conflict is certainly a narrative pre-occupation. Conflicts in modern narratives frequently appear to begin and end somewhere, though in reality conflicts are by their very nature disruptive, running counter to reason – they can feel confusing, nebulous and ongoing. They are moments of disharmony, of disturbance that can arise from misunderstandings (with historical, personal or other roots), long-term power imbalances, unexpected events, and mysterious sources which are sometimes never pinpointed. In *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict Since Aristotle*, Michelle Gellrich suggests that attempting to discuss conflict philosophically exposes the limits of systematic and theoretical approaches to life and art in general. She writes, "Not everything is susceptible to philosophical understanding. At the margins of methodical thought are recalcitrant wonders, accidents, and indeterminacies that cannot be approached through reason'" (4).

According to Gellrich, theories interrogating conflict as a dramatic tool are a relatively recent phenomenon. She argues that for many years conflict was a lacuna for theorists discussing drama. She describes how from the very outset of theoretical approaches to Tragedy, Aristotle ignores discussions of conflict in *Poetics* in response to Plato's attack on the mimetic arts in *The Republic*. In Books II and III of Plato's *Republic,* Socrates discusses the dangers of portraying conflict in the mimetic arts, particularly divine conflict, suggesting that it sets a bad example for citizens. "(Plato's) point is that the future guardians of the state … should not be exposed to

poetry in which strife is featured, especially divine strife, for if they are, they will

follow the example of superiors and fall in the ways of the characters depicted"

(Gellrich 97). Gellrich surveys discussion of conflict in tragedy throughout the

Renaissance, and she concludes that the first impartial theoretical discussion of

conflict in drama was introduced by Hegel in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* (Gellrich 9).

She writes, "I am not suggesting that for centuries no one talks about struggle in

tragedy […] Comments on tragic conflict appear as far back as Plato, though they are

typically in the form of polemical attacks and rejections" (12). According to Gellrich,

the contribution to narrative theory of an impartial analysis of conflict in drama began

with Hegel, who discusses the importance of what he calls "Collision." While

discussing tragedy, Hegel describes collision as a moment of chaos leading to a

greater moment of unity. He states:

> The full seriousness and weighty import of a situation can only begin when we
>
> find in it the element of disruption, where the determination itself exposes an
>
> essential aspect of difference, and by its opposition to something else becomes
>
> the source of a collision. The collision arises, as we are now considering it, in
>
> an act of violation, which is unable to retain its character as such, but is
>
> compelled to find a new principle of unity; it is a change in the previously
>
> existent condition of harmony, a change which is still in progress (Hegel 113).

Hegel quite specifically characterizes collision as running counter to principles

of organization or unity. He first describes collision as an "element of disruption,"

which suggests a moment that disturbs and subverts reason or an accepted pattern (the

status quo.) He does suggest a beginning to the collision, through "an act of

violation," but once this act has taken place he writes that the collision is "unable to retain its character" suggesting a lack of shape, or structure, and points out that the collision is not unified, but is compelled to search for or to find "a new unity." He is quite specific about the fact that collision is not a moment of harmony, reason or unity, but instead searches out a new moment of harmony, reason or unity. Throughout his work, however, Hegel also reframed history itself as a dialectical process. He posits that successive historical conflicts are not without reason, but are all leading towards a moment of realization in which the Geist (the "spirit" or collective unconscious) becomes self-aware and reorders reality as opposed to feeling alienated by it. This is all to say that Hegel's discussion of conflict is not impartial. Hegel discusses conflict without resorting to a polemical attack or rejection because he understands conflict as a positive and productive quantity – successive conflicts for Hegel may seem violent or horrific while they are happening, but they ultimately lead towards self-knowledge. He is quite literally moralizing conflict in that he finds a moral to the story of successive conflicts, and that moral is that the chaos and violence of conflict is retrospectively justified by "a new principle of unity" – i.e. the dialectical process.

In this chapter I examine the ways in which several contemporary performance artists and companies have addressed the narrative preoccupation with conflict, and our attempts in narrative to create structures that can contain and represent a conflict as a unified action. My assertion is that conflict is problematic to represent in and of itself because it cannot necessarily be contained or reasoned with, and is very difficult (even for Hegel) to avoid assigning "positive" or "negative" value judgments to because conflicts can be, by their very nature, disruptive to our lives. Instead, what is frequently represented in theatre and narratives, rather than conflict

itself, are the strategies we use to contain and diffuse conflict –strategies such as contests and arguments.

This chapter examines contemporary performance pieces that represent and explore three different strategies for containing conflict – contests, objectives, and arguments. In the section exploring contest I will be using Fredric Jameson's writing about "contradiction" in *The Political Unconscious*, and considering three contemporary performance pieces that parody, explore and subvert the notion of conflict-as-contest under late capitalism – Made in China's *Gym Party* (2013), Theatre Replacement's *Winners and Losers* (2013) and Action Hero's *Slap Talk* (2014). I contrast the conflict-as-contest with Hegel's notion of conflict-as-collision, or of conflict as being in aid of a dialectical process, and Marx's later interpretations of Hegel's dialectics. This section posits that conflict-as-contest is also impacted by the difficulty of believing in a dialectics of history under late capitalism. The second strategy for containing conflict considered in this chapter focuses on conflicts with the self, which are contained and symbolically overcome through setting goals or what I call "Objectives". Here I focus on Bootworks' piece *30 Days to Space* (2010) and return briefly to my own piece *The Future Show*. The third and final strategy for containing conflict that I examine is dialogue (as opposed to argument). I examine two pieces that seem to set up the frame for an argument, and then quite deliberately resist argument through something like dialogue, by acknowledging on-going conflicts without attempting to resolve or contain them. The pieces I examine in relation to dialogue are Tim Crouch and Andy Smith's *What Happens to the Hope at the End of the Evening* (2014) and my relational one-on-one performance research project *Drifting Right* (2014).

This chapter considers the unregulated and unquantifiable nature of conflict, the ways in which we attempt to contain, frame and represent conflict in life and in narratives, by examining contemporary performance pieces that both construct and point to the limits of structures for containing conflict. These are pieces that reconstruct the cages we build to contain conflicts, but they reconstruct these cages not to contain the conflicts, but to watch and point to how they escape.

i.   The Agon – Conflict-as-Contest, Contest-as-Capitalism

A dominant strategy that narratives take towards containing and representing conflict is to liken conflict with the ancient Greek term *Agon*, which translates as contest, usually of an athletic kind. In his *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott writes, "The ancient Greek word for conflict (actually "contest" is closer) is agon, and how the agon played out formed the spine of Greek tragedy" (55). Although this association between conflict and agon is common in narrative theory, there is only one appearance of the word agon in Aristotle's *Poetics*, at 1451b37, in which Aristotle discusses badly written plots, which he attributes to the stress a dramatist feels when engaging in a playwriting "competition" (ἀγών-ισμα).[41] The term *agon* does not appear at all in the sections of Plato's *Republic* that address mimesis and tragedy. Nonetheless, the term agon (or "contest" as Porter Abbott puts it) is frequently associated and even synonymized with conflict in modern narrative theory.

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[41] "Of 'simple'[5] plots and actions the worst are those which are 'episodic.' By this I mean a plot in which the episodes do not follow each other probably or inevitably. Bad poets write such plays because they cannot help it, and good poets write them to please the actors. Writing as they do for *competition*, they often strain a plot beyond its capacity and are thus obliged to sacrifice continuity" (Trans. Fyfe 1451 b 37. Italics added for emphasis of the use of the term "agon").

According to the Classicist Bernard Knox, in Ancient Greece athletic competitions (or *agones*) had a direct relationship to containing political conflicts. He writes of Ancient Greece, "this competitive spirit had its roots in the disparate nature of their political organization, the cities all vying for territory, for predominance" (Knox 13). He characterizes Greek society as an inherently competitive atmosphere, and writes, "It could be said, with very little exaggeration, that Greeks of the free city-state era looked on life itself as an agon" (5). In ancient Greece, competitions and contests were a dominant strategy for dealing with and containing conflicts. The term agon also referred to trials, and apparently ancient Greece was an exceptionally litigious society. As Knox writes, "Trials were strictly regulated, like athletic events; in the usual type of civil case each side made two speeches… timed by a water clock" (12). Accordingly, the basic tenets of agon can be characterized by i) being subject to regulations, ii) being subject to a time limit, and iii) resulting in a judgment or outcome which chooses a winner. Taking these tenets into consideration, agon is certainly not synonymous with conflict, but creates a regulated strategy to diffuse conflict. This strategy may or may not be successful in the long term, but it allows the body overseeing the contest (be it children in a schoolyard, a jury, a state, or an audience) to decide that in official terms, the conflict has been put to rest.

Agon is a strategy that takes on particular resonance in a late capitalist context. Just as Knox describes the popularity of agon in Ancient Greek society as endemic of a constant struggle for land as a result of porous ill-defined borders (7), in 2014 contests happen concurrent with a belief that the health of our economy thrives on competition, and the pervasive narrative of competition under late capitalism affects how we regard contests. The theatre companies Made in China and Theatre Replacement and Action Hero have all made shows in the last two years (*Gym Party*,

Winners and Losers, and *Slap Talk* respectively) which take contests as their starting point in terms of form. These disparate pieces about competition also all become reflections and critiques of the period that Jameson refers to as "late capitalism".

In Lévi-Strauss' essay "The Structural Study of Myth" he writes that "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction" and goes on to point out that this is "an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real" (229). Fredric Jameson recognizes our desire to resolve conflicts through narrative, and takes Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis a step further in his book *The Political Unconscious*. He historically locates Strauss' idea of "overcoming a contradiction," suggesting that these contradictions (or conflicts in need of resolution) are historical and social contradictions. Likes myths, the contest-based pieces that these three companies have created use the narrative structure of a contest to resolve the societal contradiction of endless competition and endless capitalism. Jameson, Slavoj Žižek and Mark Fisher have all written that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.[42] Made in China's *Gym Party* (2013), Theatre Replacement's *Winners and Losers* (2013) and Action Hero's *Slap Talk* (2014) all use the frame of a contest to explore the seeming endlessness of capitalism. A contest as a frame provides a regulated and timed strategy for containing conflict, but ironically the frame of the "contest" also represents the endless competitions engendered by the capitalist market. The societal contradiction of infinite capitalism is only reinforced by the frame of a contest, rather than resolved.

Gym Party by Made in China begins with Jess Latowicki coming onto the stage, speaking into a microphone and explaining exactly how she wants to win. She

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[42] Jameson, Fredric. "Future City." *New Left Review 21*, May-June 2003. Web. Accessed 18 October 2014; Zizek, Slavoj. *Zizek!* Zeitgeist Films, 2005. Film; Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* London: Zero, 2009. Print.

says, "I want to be successful. I want to be the best there can be. I want to be photographed by Terry Richardson and Juergen Teller. I want to headline Coachella and go to special parties on boats and win the Palme D'Or. I want the world to care who I am dating and how much I weigh." Success is synonymous with fame – being photographed by a famous photographer, headlining a music festival, winning awards and being written about in gossip columns. The focus of the contest in *Gym Party* is on getting attention – an appropriate aim in a contest that is also a performance in front of an audience – and in this sense the contest judges who of the performers on stage is best at doing their job – a reflection on their success under a capitalist system. In a monologue at the Gate at Forest Fringe in 2012, Latowicki said, "I do a certain job and I resent the success of those who do the same job as me, who're in the same field as me within the wider category of job that we do and yes often these people are infuriatingly younger than me, but not exclusively."[43]

In *Gym Party* there are three "contestants" who are also the three performers. The three performers (Chris, Jess and Ira) refer to themselves and each other using their real names, and are very honest with the audience about being in both a theatrical and a competitive situation. There is a script, but the results of the competition are not scripted. In this sense they are not "playing at" a game, but playing a game, live in front of an audience. From the very beginning of the show, they address the audience, learn some of their names, and Christopher Brett Bailey says he's going to compete in the performance/competition because the audience paid to watch that happen. There are three competitive rounds between the performers, interspersed with monologues and a direct address to the audience that is shared between the three performers but spoken in one tone, seeming more like a single

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[43] Latowicki, Jess. Email Correspondence. 19 October 2014. Included in the appendix.

manifesto on competition with sentences shared between the three performers. Following every competitive round, we hear an offstage voice through a loudspeaker (written as "Tim" in the script, the member of Made in China who collaboratively writes scripts but does not appear on stage), announcing how many points have been awarded, the winner of that round, and asking contestants to take their places for what they call "penalizations." The competitive rounds are playful and entertaining, while the penalizations feel violent and demeaning. In the first round the three performers compete at very child-like games – a marshmallow-eating contest, dizzy racing, etc. The penalization is that the losers must self-flagellate for the duration of the winner's victory speech. In the second round the performers ask the audience to vote on which performer they think is richest, most attractive, most likely to have cheated on a partner in the past, and on which performer they would save, if given the chance, from certain death. The penalization for the losers is to critique each other's personality and appearance live in front of the audience. In the third and final round, the performers wait for an audience member to come up on stage and to choose one performer to slow dance with. The winner of this round is awarded the most points, and ultimately chooses the winner of the entire piece. The final penalization for the losers is something similar to water boarding, followed by appearing to beat each other with golf clubs. The winner of the rounds and the show are not pre-scripted, but are genuinely decided upon by the audience at each performance.

Of making the show, Jess Latowicki said,

We were really obsessed with the ridiculous Cameron speech where he talked about privilege, he says that everyone can be privileged which is impossible because privilege by definition is exclusive, in that it doesn't exist without

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something being lesser than it. It's the same with winning- we can't all be winners, there have to be losers for there to be a winner. This is a problem when something that isn't inherently competitive begins to become competitive. And losers, in capitalism and life, are punished for not winning.[44]

In this sense the show is a competition of who is the most engaging performer, or "best at their job," because the final round is the most valuable round, and it is also the most explicitly theatrical moment in the show. In the final round, the playing space is transformed into a school disco. It is signposted by a monologue that Chris gives early in the show about failing to dance with a girl whom he wants to "get to second base with" at a school dance. He says, "I see some friends on the other side of the gymnasium by the snacks. I walk towards them, across the dance floor, on which a single couple dance: a giant girl in a puffy pink dress, and a tiny boy who's wearing his father's suit" (15). This text reminds us of the competitive arena in which school dances happen – a school gymnasium – the three performers are also wearing school gym uniforms and the show itself, of course, is called *Gym Party*. But the purportedly autobiographical monologue takes on a cinematic tone with this image of the giant girl in the puffy pink dress and a tiny boy in his father's suit. This image is primarily recognizable from American films about high school. This is the first note of fiction, a reminder of more conventional representative stories, that creeps into a performance teasing the boundaries between fiction and reality. This addition lays the foundation for the last round of the performance, which is nearly a snapshot of a conventional fourth wall theatre piece in a very unconventional show – all three performers pretend to be at a school dance - but it is a snapshot which is also asking the audience to puncture and disrupt it – an audience member must come on stage and

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[44] Latowicki, Jess. Email Correspondence. 19 October 2014. Included in the appendix.

choose a performer to dance with, to end or resolve the competition. The audience is judging which theatrical performer they believe the most. The winner then wins based not merely on who is worthiest of our attention as an audience, but on which performer can elicit real empathy in a fictional or theatrical situation. These three performers are being judged, according to the rules set out by capitalism, on who is best at their actual job.

This moment, where capitalism and the contest become one, is foreshadowed by a shared direct address monologue that comes directly before, where the performers reference the end of dialectics and the on-going (though without dialectics, infinite and aimless) tendency to compete. As Chris says in reference to competition, "We do what we've always done because we don't know what else to do." Ira says that idealism is passé, and Chris quips that he threw out his Che Guevara t-shirt in 2009 – suggesting that the dream of Marxism, both in Cuba and elsewhere, is all but over and disproved, and yet the game continues. *Gym Party* is here pointing out that this kind of contest – *what they always do* – is a meaningless repetition which will not lead anywhere; this strategy for containing conflict is dialectically inanimate.

As Peter Singer points out, Marx later took Hegel's dialectic model of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, and applied it not to what he considered the abstractions of reality and the Geist, but to material reality. Hegel suggested that the Geist feels alienated and powerless in the face of certain elements of reality until a point where it becomes self-aware and realizes that it creates reality and can order it. Accordingly, Marx argued that the proletariat feels alienated and powerless in the face of the economy, until through education it will become self-aware and realize that it controls the economy and can reorder it to suit its own purposes. This process of self-

actualization and taking control of what appears to be alien comes about gradually through the dialectical process of history – a series of conflicts that eventually lead to self-knowledge.

On a very basic level, the moment of self-knowledge or self-actualization of either Marx's economy or Hegel's spirit has not only not been meaningfully achieved, but under late capitalism, as evidenced in the popularity of the quote about the end of the world, the hope that it will ever be achieved has been abandoned wholesale by many Marxist theorists. Made in China's *Gym Party*, whether deliberately or accidentally, references this endemic contemporary attitude towards dialectics both in the overall form of their piece – it is a real competition for professional performers, but one that will repeat itself ad infinitum regardless of who won last time or how many times they won, for as long as the show is booked. For as long as the show remains a viable product, they will continue to sell the spectacle of competition itself, without the expectation that those competitions are building to anything but more of the same.

Canadian company Theatre Replacement's *Winners and Losers* is conceptually extremely similar to *Gym Party*, though they were developed and premiered on two different continents six months apart from each other. *Winners and Losers* begins with performers and co-writers Marcus Youssef and James Long drawing a large box around themselves in chalk, demarcating the playing area, and then, as in *Gym Party*, standing in front of an audience, introducing themselves using their own names, and proceeding to perform a show that is both a performance and a contest which happens live in front of the audience. For the first twenty minutes of the show Youssef and Long sit across from each other at a table presenting facts about themselves competitively, while also going through a series of concepts, people and

nouns, and assigning those things the role of "winner" or "loser." They both have a bell that they use to signal a decision about whether or not a particular topic is a winner or a loser. They frequently argue – one argues for Sylvia Plath to be a winner while the other argues for her to be a loser, for example, and they often do not reach a consensus. The beginning of the piece feels as though they are debating in an improvised fashion, reminiscent of high school debates, while contextualizing this debate as a play or a piece of theatre. In a sense this reverse engineers the notion of conflict (or agon) as a narrative preoccupation. In a piece that seems so much like a debate on a variety of topics, narrative becomes the audience's theatrical preoccupation, and the audience begins to wonder how and if this debate will reveal something more personal about the people or characters taking part in it. Like Made in China, Long and Youssef appear to be keeping some kind of score based on the audience's reactions. Several times in the performance, they comment that someone in the audience agrees with them in their assessment of winner or loser if one of their arguments elicits laughter.

A slightly jarring though playful aspect of the piece is that though they debate in a very convincingly off-the-cuff style, the majority of the arguments are pre-scripted. Youssef and Long play with this several times in the piece. After Youssef finishes describing his relationship with his father, he tells Long it is his turn to talk about his father. Long asks if that's the rule, and Youssef comments that they are making the rules up as they go. The audience suddenly questions what kind of game this is – but in fact, sticking to the script itself is its own rule. On June 27th, 2014, Theatre Replacement performed the piece at Berliner Festspiele in Germany and experimented with an on-book version where they read directly from the script, to

explicitly let the audience in on which sections were pre-scripted and which were improvised, reinforcing the relationship between the rules, the time limit, and the text.

In the actual scripted debates that ensue (peppered with some moments of improvisation with the audience, allowing them to suggest topics to assign the category of "Winner" or "Loser" to), we soon understand that "Winners" are not morally superior to losers – the notion of winning vs. losing is more elusive. The First Nations people in Canada, for example, are quickly singled out as losers, though James Long points that they are winners on "the moral high ground." Youssef then says, "They win that, they get that one. It's not the best podium to ascend" (Long and Youssef 5). In the performance I saw, the audience suggested Goldman Sachs as a topic, and they were called an "ugly winner." On other topics, however, "moral high ground" does seem to count for something. Long argues that Marilyn Monroe is a winner because she had such a sad life that she breaks his heart, for instance, and yet Mother Teresa is a loser (27).

The piece soon exposes itself not as a competitive game between two friends live in front of an audience, but as an agonistic discussion about class. Starting with a reference to microwaves in which James Long argues that he likes them while Marcus Youssef suggests using a gas stove, Long positions himself as something of a representative for those who grew up poor, and Youssef becomes representative of a person who grew up rich. While the debate or competition begins by skirting around their respective upbringings and focusing on debating for or against external topics, in the final half hour the "contest" abandons these external topics wholesale, and Long and Youssef engage in an extended attack on each other's socio-economic positions. Youssef accuses Long of being uneducated about global politics and of spending too

much money on his jeans, and Long accuses Youssef of being a "tourist" rather than an artist, because he will eventually inherit a large amount of money.

Youssef and Long, in their personal contest, frame having money or privilege as characteristic of a loser rather than a winner. Poverty becomes the real mark of authenticity in the context of a competition between two men who work in theatre.

> J: …whenever your dad dies – whether you guys are best friends or not when he does, you get to do whatever whenever you want. And that has made you a perpetual loser. Shitty for you maybe, but really not that shitty. But when I turn sixty-five and I am hobbled because of my bad hips, I'm exhausted from working too much, I get to keep on working. I don't ever get to stop. And even if I do find a way to slow down, chances are I'm going to be living in the same shitty little apartment worrying about how I'm going to survive the next year.
>
> M: You live in a very nice apartment.
>
> J: Not compared to your house thanks.[45]

Although earlier in the show the country Mexico was judged a "loser" based on its economic situation, and Goldman Sachs was the "ugly winner", Long and Youssef employ the self-made-man rhetoric of politicians to imply paradoxically that the less entitled they are, the more entitled they are. The audience is reminded of the illusion those in power put forward of having *won* capital in a *fair fight*, and therefore deserving their privilege. This is the irony of competition in modern capitalism. We use the language of conflict and contest when discussing capitalism ideologically, but

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[45] Long and Youssef 30.

Capitalism is not actually a contest, it is a system, and the winners are no more deserving than the losers.

The text of *Winners and Losers* also spends time contrasting Youssef's political commitments as a volunteer and activist with Long's political apathy. It specifically focuses on the Occupy movement, in a moment that feels quite reminiscent of Made in China's text in which Ira says that idealism is passé and Chris comments that he threw away his Guevara t-shirt. When deciding whether or not the Occupy movement was a winner or a loser, James Long argues that it was a loser because Youssef cannot name five things it has changed, while Youssef argues that because of the language of the 99%, it was a winner.

Marcus: I think that it is a new way of us collectively understanding like who owns what and how few people own that, right?

Jamie: Collectively, that's great. Cause you know what the problem with the 99%, 1% thing is? It allows you to lump yourself in with a Mexican migrant lady, and that's not true, that's a bit dangerous there.

Marcus: Right, I'm quite aware that I'm not a Mexican migrant laborer, as very few of us in this room are, but isn't that the point, Jamie? It creates solidarity, across… Cause as you know the 1% has amassed more wealth in the last thirty years than it ever has previously and it creates solidarity…

Jamie: But there is no solidarity, right? And that's why it's failing. And that's why it's a loser[46].

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[46] Transcript from live performance, January 2013, Vancouver. This text is slightly different from the text in the company's script.

With Long's conclusion that there is no solidarity among the 99%, the Occupy movement is passed over as a loser. The notion that Occupy was a loser because of a lack of solidarity reinforces a sense of the end of idealism or the end of conceiving of capitalism as a dialectical process in a Marxist sense. Fredric Jameson recently referred to the lack of historicity in post-modernity, and what he called "dialectical ambivalence." He describes an age in which we both cannot conceive of our past or our future, and characterizes post-modern political movements, Occupy included, as being demonstrative of this end to dialectic historicity. He says,

> It's to be found in the new flash crowds enabled by cell phones and texting, the new mass demonstrations of Seattle and Eastern Europe, of Tahrir Square, of Wisconsin and of course of Occupy. These truly mark the emergence of what my friends Michael Hart and Tony Negri call "multitude" but they're no longer the politics of duration. They're the politics of the instant, of the present, of what Negri himself has called "constitutive power", as opposed to constituted power. Post modernity in general is characterized by this new kind of present time – a reduction to the present, a reduction to the body. In this new dialectic of omnipresent space, history, historicity is the loser. The past is gone, we can no longer imagine the future.[47]

Jameson himself characterizes historicity, in reference to Occupy, as the loser. Occupy was not merely a movement without solidarity, as Long points out, but without history – according to Jameson, it is not rooted in either the past or the future.

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[47] Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity: Time and Event in Postmodernity." Georg Forster Lecture, 2012. Available on Youtube. Web. Accessed 10 October 2014.

The contest being played by Youssef and Long devolves past the point where a winner could be declared, becoming an unstructured argument or mutual attack over the inequity of capitalism – a kind of pure, unregulated conflict. Unlike *Gym Party*, as they lack a character like "Tim", the external moderator, the piece does not end with the declaration of a winner, but with Marcus Youssef pointing out to James Long, "I don't have a million dollars in my bank account, and yeah at some point I might, like a few people in this audience right now who would never say it or admit it, because people like you would attack them…" Long looks at Youssef and says, "Who's attacking" and Youssef replies, "Go fuck yourself." The cordial, friendly contest has devolved to enacting its key conflict – that conflict being money, privilege, and capitalism, and the piece acknowledges the fact that it cannot contain or resolve it. When discussing making the piece, Marcus Youssef explained his and Long's inspiration for the work:

> … what first got us going was a half-spam mass email a good friend of ours (successful artist, dad, about our age, great guy) sent to many of us, wanting us to invest in a pyramid scheme personal fulfillment program that he (seemingly for real) felt was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for him - and all of us - to realize our true potential. There's a whole lot of capitalism in that, on a few different levels, and that's what got us going. But at that stage we didn't talk about it in terms of capitalism - we talked about winning and losing, and how it surprised us that our friend clearly felt like he was losing (unfulfilled), and also how acutely Jamie and I felt a competitive dynamic between ourselves (fear of

failure), even though we have a huge amount of respect and love for each other, and each other's work.[48]

This is a piece that is about the victory of capitalism and, in a sense, the failure of cordiality and friendship in the face of money. In the last exchange in the piece, the performers look at each other and say, "That's it?" / "That's it."/ "We're done."/ (to audience) "We're done." This final line of course perhaps also has the double meaning of capitalism not simply undoing and ending the contest without any firm resolution, but perhaps the prophesy that all of us (we, the audience, everyone) are almost done. The game of choosing winners and losers does not lead anywhere but here, to this question of inherent privilege, inequity and mistrust between the working class and the upper middle class. It is not a dialectic – it is a sticking point that cannot be gotten over.

Taking competition-based performance a step further in terms of physical strain on both performers and audience, Bristol based company Action Hero's 2014 piece *Slap Talk* is a durational performance, taking place over six hours, in which James Stenhouse and Gemma Paintin hurl insults at each other. They stand on opposite sides of the playing space, nominally facing each other, but in fact each facing a video camera and a teleprompter off of which they read a rolling script which, depending on the sightlines, is partially visible to the audience. The camera films their faces in close up, and their faces are shown on two television monitors. They play to the camera lens, occasionally sitting far away from it, and occasionally coming very close to it so that their eyes fill the screen. Unlike one of Forced Entertainment's durational shows which are semi-improvised, throughout the piece

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[48] Youssef, Marcus. Email Correspondence. 21 October 2014. Included in the appendix.

they read from a rolling and fixed pre-written text, which in its word document form

is over two hundred pages long.   They read a series of threats directed at each other

off of the teleprompters, but the position of the monitors and the video cameras makes

it clear that they are unlikely to make physical contact. This said, the first lines of the

show are a suggestion that the audience are about to watch them physically fight.

> 1: Come on then. Come on then. Come on then. Hit me in the face. I
> want you to hit me in the face.
>
> 2: Shut up.
>
> 1: I want you to hit me in the face.
>
> 2: I said shut up.
>
> 1: I'm telling you to hit me in the face.
>
> 2: No. (Action Hero 133).

Fig. 5. Action Hero, *Slap Talk*, 2014. Photo Credit: James Stenhouse.

There are elements of this piece that feel like a contest - the language is consistently agonistic. In a sense durational performances frequently engage a competitive spirit for both performers and audience members to remain alert over a long period of time – they are the long-distance running of theatregoing, relying on stamina. Past the inherently competitive nature of this form, the name *Slap Talk* is expressive of the fact that the combative language explored at such length in the performance does not appear to be leading anywhere, and yet it also leads everywhere. Over the course of six hours they invite each other over for a barbeque, they introduce products in an infomercial, and they talk about the environment. Because of the frame, the language is always combative, but it feels relentlessly fluid – it does not appear to be leading to any set objective. If there is an objective, given the durational frame, it seems to be that they both keep going. As the durational

performance continues, we see Paintin and Stenhouse blinking frequently, struggling to keep reading from their respective teleprompters. Because the script appears on teleprompters which show only a few words at a time, the audience has no sense of how long they have been reading or performing for, and of how much longer they will need to read for. The piece ends with one of the performers reading out a long list in the first person, ending with the lines, "I'm the chronic pain you're feeling/ I'm the chronic pain" (Action Hero 164). By ending the piece with the words "Chronic Pain" Action Hero point to the horrific endlessness of violence and conflict in language, overshadowing any sense of achievement the audience may feel on the part of the company or of themselves for having performed for six hours.

Stenhouse said of the piece:

…the show started off as an exercise about the rhetoric, poetry and language that surrounds contest and competition, then as the piece grew and evolved that started to mean more things and it became more generally about the way violence exists in language and in the ways we communicate, how language can maybe act as a proxy for actual physical violence, and then that evolved to be about capitalism and the ways capitalism communicates to us via mass media, advertising and 24 hour news channels, and the violence of that relentless communication.[49]

The notion of unrelenting communication as violence ("the chronic pain") is perhaps the most apt image for the end of dialectics in history and the endlessness of capitalism which these shows illuminate by taking contest or competition as their

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[49] Stenhouse, James. Email Correspondence. 10 October 2014. Included in the appendix.

starting point for dealing with conflict. To paraphrase the opening of Made in

China's *Gym Party*, we compete because we always have, and because we don't

know what else to do.

ii.   The Objective – Symbolically overcoming a conflict with the self

Conflict needs not always involve multiple agents – some of the most

complicated and deep seated conflicts both in narratives and in life are with the self.

Performer and writer Andy Smith said, "I have often talked about collaborating with

myself, being in conversation and dialogue with myself. As an artist and a person."[50]

This notion of collaboration is necessitated by conflict – a conflict with the self. Just

as I wrote that a contest or agon can be defined by i) regulations, ii) a time limit and

iii) the judgment of a winner, in this section I examine a strategy for symbolically

overcoming conflicts with ourselves.   I identify this symbolic attempt as the

Objective. (Other terms for it could be goal, task, challenge, aim, deadline or

milestone.) Objectives are similar to contests in that they may have a regulated

structure, they sometimes have time limits, and they work towards some kind of final

judgment, similar to choosing a winner, of having attained an objective or failed at it.

Perhaps one of the most famous examples of a narrative in which we watch a

character conflicting with themselves in order to achieve an objective is *Hamlet*. I

employ this example cognisant that, similar to the discussion of Duchamp's *Fountain*

in the introduction, *Hamlet* is likely one of the most written-about texts in the western

world. My own reading is intentionally a modern intervention in the play, and would

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[50] Smith, Andy. Email Correspondence. 12 September 2014. Included in the appendix.

certainly meet with reasonable objections from new historicists and others who have reasonably disputed 'psychologising' readings of Hamlet. Nonetheless, the ubiquity of *Hamlet* makes it an ideal and obvious example to employ in a discussion of a conflict against the self and mine is intended to be a demonstrative rather than historical reading. After meeting his father's ghost, Hamlet understands that he needs to avenge his father's murder, and creates the objective of killing his uncle. He deliberates over it, deciding whether or not the ghost is telling the truth, deciding not to kill his uncle while he is praying, and having moments of pure fear and existential angst. We watch Hamlet's struggle with himself play out through his soliloquies, and eventually, Hamlet does attain his objective, though he is also killed in the process. Some commentators have argued that Hamlet delayed his revenge as a result of an acute depressive illness, a very familiar struggle with the self in the modern world.[51] In either case, the struggle with the self portrayed in *Hamlet* through his soliloquies are representative of the nebulous, explosive and irrational nature of conflict, even when contained within a single person. Hamlet's aim or objective –killing his uncle – in reality will perhaps not solve his problems, but he stakes it as an action that will allow him to symbolically overcome the struggle with himself.

In contemporary performance, the notion of setting oneself an objective as a means of temporarily quelling a conflict or struggle with the self is often portrayed though durational or body-based work. James Baker of the company Bootworks, for example, enacted a piece called *30 Days to Space* (2010) in the foyer of Forest Fringe where, having realized that he was now too old to ever become an astronaut, Baker calculated the amount of times he would need to climb up a ladder in order to reach space. He climbed up a ladder diligently for several hours a day every day for a

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[51] Shaw, A. B. "Depressive illness delayed Hamlet's revenge." *Med Humanities* 2002; 28: 92-96. Web. Accessed 19 October 2014.

month, and by the end of a month, he achieved his objective, and won a Total Theatre Award for Innovation on the same day[52]. The irreconcilable conflict between wishing to be an astronaut and being too old to be an astronaut was somehow marked and symbolically contained through Baker's tedious and diligent climb up the ladder.

Perhaps it is useful to briefly outline what differentiates an objective from a task. An objective can be a task, but not all tasks are objectives. The term "objective," as I am using it here, is a task which a person or company assign themselves to symbolically resolve or contain a conflict – and the task hinges entirely on being successfully completed in some way. To take the example of James Baker's piece, if Bootworks had announced that Baker was climbing up a ladder for the duration of the Edinburgh festival, this would be a very challenging task. The task refines itself into an objective, however, when the task has been set by the same agent who will undertake it, and the symbolic resolution of a conflict against the self hinges on its completion. Climbing up a ladder is not simply a task but an objective because James is attempting to reach space as a resolution of his failure to have become an astronaut, and it is also an objective because he set the task for himself. An objective is a task that was set by the same person to undertake it, and its completion marks a meaningful collaboration with the self.

The Future Show is in one sense an objective or aim – it is a task that I have set myself, and its performance symbolically resolves elements of my relationship with anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder and procrastination. This said, in terms of hinging on completion, *The Future Show* is an on-going objective that can perhaps never be completed. Because *The Future Show* has a script which is rewritten on the day of the performance for every performance, every time I accept a new engagement

[52] Gardner, Lyn. "James Baker's conquest of space – by ladder." *The Guardian Theatre Blog*, 8 August 2010. Web. 19 December 2015.

for the piece, I have rekindled a conflict between my own abilities as a writer and the difficulty of successfully rewriting the future. There is a section in *The Future Show* in which I describe myself rewriting the script for the following evening's performance, or, if that performance is the final night of the run, I have someone who saw a past version of the show speak this section. At the final performance in Lisbon, on 27 September 2014, the section[53] read as follows:

> Andy will say, "I guess it's tricky when you do it on the last night of a run because you can't include all that stuff about how you have to rewrite the show the following day for the next performance, right? So you lose all that material where you point out to the audience in a meta-textual way just how much work the show actually is. That bit where you say you once showed promise as a writer, but maybe this concept is an attempt to really kill that promise once and for all, to really burn yourself out on a project that never ends and that you have to rewrite over and over again and that nobody reads and that the audience may even at times find a little boring."

The run-on sentence, in which either I suggest, or I have someone who has already seen the show suggest, that the performance is not merely difficult, but an attempt to kill any promise I have as a writer, serves a double function. In one sense, it re-contextualizes the piece as almost an act of psychic self harm, a play on performance practices rooted in bloodletting, such as Franko B's work. In a recent interview with Culturebot, my Forest Fringe co-director Andy Field said of the show: "Deborah described it as an attempt to destroy her writing career forever. […] That she very

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[53] A very similar quote from the 8 August 2013 script, with the dialogue attributed to a technician named Alex rather than to my fellow co-performer Andy, was referenced in Chapter 1.

much comes from the background of an aspiring Canadian playwright and has very much moved towards being a conceptual artist. This is a piece of very fiercely rich live art concealed as storytelling."[54] The show read in this lens becomes an act of violence, a struggle or conflict between the "aspiring Canadian playwright" and the "conceptual artist." But *The Future Show* is not merely a struggle between two artistic identities, but a more general conflict and collaboration with myself.

The run-on sentence describing me "killing that promise once and for all" is hyperbole, but it is also written as a run-on sentence to achieve a kind of rambling quality associated with a spin into anxiety that often accompanies moments of severe self-doubt. It is written to mimic the whining and pathetic tone of a child complaining about their first day of school: "Nobody likes me and the teacher was mean and she wouldn't let me draw in class except when she said I could and I can't believe I have to do this until I'm 18 years old and I'm never going there ever again ever etc." This is the tone of a person with a job to do, who is not sure they are capable of doing it, which was Hamlet's problem as well. Unlike the very specific professional self-conflict between writer and conceptual artist which Andy Field points out, a conflict which is perhaps unfamiliar to an average audience member, this is a more familiar and personal conflict – the wrestle with oneself to write anything, to do anything, to achieve anything. The moment when we would rather not even try. The very existence of the script belies the winner of this struggle – the productive self has won and is displaying the spoils of victory to an audience. But this moment in the script, past "meta-textually" giving the audience a sense of appreciation for the work

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[54] Field, Andy. Interviewed by Jeremy M. Barker. "Chatting with Andy Field, Co-director of the Forest Fringe." *Culturebot.* 1 October 2014. Web. Accessed 10 October 2014.

that is involved in writing the script, also serves to frame the process of writing, and the objective of creating a new script, as its own endless struggle against myself.

There is a later section, in the "calendar" portion of the text which at the 27 September performance in Lisbon read as follows:

October 4th, I will be in an office at Abrons Arts Centre rewriting *The Future Show*. The script will be in its incomplete state – notes, highlighted tidbits – which will suddenly seem very ugly and terrifying to me. I will wonder what would happen if I decided not to carry on. Would I have to refund the money to the venue? Would I re-read an old version and hope that no one in New York noticed all the references to Lisbon and the end of September? Would I read out these unpolished fragmentary notes with an air of artistic certainty? I will sit with that feeling, with that fear, for a moment. I will not feel free and I will have no one to blame but myself (Pearson 59).

This section serves to remind the audience that although, by performing on that day, I have "won that round", the conflict against myself in this show has not actually been symbolically resolved by having attained the objective of that day's script and that day's performance. With every future engagement there is a future possibility of failure, referenced by the double meaning of the show's title – *The Future Show* is, of course, a show about the future, but it is also a show which constantly references the question of sustainability for the concept by gesturing towards the next script, the *future* (or upcoming) show or script, whose completion will decide whether or not the project is able to continue . *The Future Show* is not a dialectical process, it is a boulder being continually pushed up a hill. Although the piece moves forward in time, the structural focus of the future remains the same – a

detailed immediate future, a calendar for the interim future, and an abstract, snapshot-like long term future. The only end-point that the continual conflict of the process of this piece can claim to be leading to is my death, as even a purported retirement of the project (as I now claim has happened) could be short-sighted and contradicted by some future engagement or booking.

In the third section of the show, I write that I will plagiarize my past while doing the show (which I already do), that I will begin to worry that the piece is inviting my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder back, and that I will begin to turn down bookings.   After that line, which on a rough timeline perhaps happens around two to five years in the future, I never mention myself performing the show again. There is a light suggestion in this line that in the long-term struggle between myself (my ability as a writer to constantly reinvent new material, coupled with my mental health problems) and the challenging concept of *The Future Show*, at some point the concept will defeat me. In this sense, the struggle itself is where the show lives. As Andy Smith quotes Alain Badiou in *What Happens to the Hope* as saying that "Love is a successful ongoing struggle against separation", *The Future Show* suggests that life is a successful ongoing struggle against death. Death is final – in that sense perhaps it works well within Hegel's dialectics – after it happens the struggle is over. The conflict enacted by the concept of *The Future Show* is the only sense in which its life continues. Once the struggle has ended the show will also have ended. Equally, our lives and ongoing futures are a struggle against death. One audience member described *The Future Show* as having the feeling of watching a person walk a tightrope – I walk in a straight line from the end of the show to the end of my life, but there is the sense that at any point I could fall. Once the fall happens, (as in *The Future Show* it literally does – I "die" by falling and hitting my head on the kitchen

counter) I am reading from the last page of a large binder. This is clearly visible to the audience – the performance ends at the same moment as my life ends, and they can visually keep tabs on how much time we have left together by observing how many pages are left in the binder. In this sense, there is not a feeling of surprise linked with my death, although it does happen by accident. Instead there is a sense of inevitability – the struggle to remain alive is over, as is the struggle to achieve the objective of constantly predicting the future. As I write in the show: "I'm done with the future and it's done with me."

iii.   Dialogue as a strategy for containing conflict

A frequently employed strategy for containing or expressing conflict is having an argument. This is quite unlike a contest or an objective in that arguments do not have rules, do not have time limits, and do not choose winners. That said, an argument can also give way to a dialogue or a conversation – a less antagonistic, but equally flexible means of acknowledging conflict without necessarily resolving it. Although Gellrich asserts that Aristotle does not discuss conflict in *Poetics*, he does refer to *Dianoia* as "the speech which the agents use to argue a case or put forward an opinion" (trans. Heath 11.) "Arguing a case" or "putting forward an opinion" could be said to describe an argument, but it could also be said to describe a dialogue, depending on the tone in which the opinion is put forward. Plato refers to the more antagonistic version of *Dianoia*, the term *Makhomai* in Book III of his *Republic*, as an example of why the mimetic arts could set a bad example for citizens of the republic. Paul Storey translates this verb as "to quarrel." Argument, reasoning and the notion of a fight that is not necessarily physical in modern English can arguably be used

synonymously, though in these contexts when Aristotle refers to *Dianoia* and Plato refers to *Makhomai* they mean very different things. This poses the question, is it possible to "argue a case or put forward an opinion" without having an argument? This section examines contemporary performance pieces that represent the strategy for containing conflict that can so easily fluctuate between argument and dialogue.

A show which employs argument and dialogue to examine not only the possibility of containing a conflict not only between two friends, but between fictional and non-fictional modes of theatrical presentation is *What Happens to the Hope at the End of the Evening*. In Tim Crouch and Andy Smith's show, performer Andy Smith, very early on in the script, describes going to a church sermon with his friend, the friend he is "waiting for," Tim Crouch, who is already on stage at this point in the production. Andy says that at the moment in the church sermon when the congregation were asked to turn to each other, shake hands, and say "Peace be with you", his friend misheard this as "Pleased to meet you." He describes his friend shaking hands with strangers and saying to each of them, "Pleased to meet you." After telling this story, Andy suggests that the audience shake hands, and tell each other "Pleased to meet you."

Within this story at the beginning of the piece lies the kernel of the meaning of *What Happens to the Hope at the End of the Evening*. The play ripples with suggestions of conflict - a conflict between friends who have not seen each other in some time, and conflicting modes of representation. The strategy that the show employs to tackle this conflict, however, is "meeting". Meeting is not competing – it is also not arguing or even having a dialogue. It is unique from a Hegelian dialectic in that a compromise or synthesis does not necessarily need to be reached. A meeting

suggests that all that is needed is acknowledgement, and acknowledgement and co-existing is not a situation that needs to be "resolved" but one that can merely exist.

In *What happens to the Hope* Tim Crouch and Andy Smith are in one sense portraying old friends who have not seen each other in some time. In another sense, however, they are also portraying two modes of performance, two modes of interacting with an audience, and representing what it is to be active. Tim is "acting" – his character puts a set on stage, and he performs in a style that appears actorly – while Andy Smith walks out onto the stage and directly addresses the audience and the stage manager. Tim Crouch does not address anyone but Andy until the end of the piece. The two performers genuinely appear, both in style and content, to be in different productions. In this sense, from early on, the audience could sense some conflict in their approach to each other, particularly as the naturalist dialogue between them suggests that the two fictional friends are somewhat estranged. Friend (Tim Crouch's character name in the script) pretends to phone Andy and says, "I thought you'd moved or changed your email or gone back to Norway or just that I'd totally fucking offended you in some totally heinous mortal way or that you just hated my guts and never wanted to see me again! Or something had happened, mate, at least. Has something happened? Mate, has it? Are you okay?" Andy replies, "I'm fine. We're fine." Once Friend is acting as though the two friends are in the same room as each other, their opposing performance styles and estranged friendship seem even more at odds. Friend refuses to eat the dinner that Andy has cooked for him. Andy does not drink any of the wine that the Friend has brought as an offering, and declines an invitation to go to a protest.

When Andy declines this invitation the audience are given the impression that he and Friend used to be politically active together. Friend asks, "Do you still get the newsletter? Are you still on the list?" (10) We also see conflicting forms of representing activism beginning to emerge on stage. Tim Crouch's character is politically active, while Andy Smith, who plays himself, is quite passive within the fictional story presented on stage. This said, Tim Crouch proper completely ignores the audience, operating firmly behind the fourth wall (which contains a window that he peers out at repeatedly in the piece, worrying about young kids he says are hanging around outside), while Andy Smith, however, makes a few quiet attempts at galvanizing the audience. He attempts to point out to the audience the fact that they are present and gathered together. He looks out at us and says, "I think that being here has the potential to be radical. I think it could be radical. I think these are the spaces where we can see where we are. Where we can think about where we might be going" (39). This said, neither performer is really engaging in a dialogue, either with each other or the audience. Andy is lecturing to the audience rather than speaking to us, and Friend's character is not interested in talking things through. He will protest, but he avoids conversation.

The piece itself explicitly states, early on, that in spite of its more agonistic elements it is not a contest. Instead it is a show in which two different people and different approaches, related but unique, meet and attempt to occupy the same space. The agonistic elements of the performance are explicitly addressed when the friends begin commenting on each other's appearance. Following a section in which Friend repeatedly asks Andy to come join him on the couch, i.e., in the naturalistic set, and Andy says he's fine where he is, the Friend points out that Andy has gained weight. Andy goes on to point out that the friend is "completely bald now." Friend asks, "Is

this a competition?" and Andy replies, "I think so." The exchange which follows cleverly interweaves both the formal competition - will Andy join the set - and the fictional competition about which character's life is more functional.

> FRIEND You've gone grey. Specially in your beard.
>
> ANDY You've got glasses
>
> FRIEND They're really only for reading, but I think they make me look sexy.
>
> ANDY They do mate. Really sexy.
>
> You're looking good.
>
> FRIEND Thanks, mate. So are you.
>
> ANDY Thanks.
>
> FRIEND (Motioning to the couch and set) Come and join me.
>
> ANDY How is your marriage mate?
>
> FRIEND How's yours?
>
> ANDY I asked first.
>
> FRIEND You look stressed.
>
> ANDY Is this still the competition?
>
> FRIEND I'm just saying. (Crouch and Smith 25).

They continue discussing their lives with each other, with Friend criticizing Andy's parenting. Andy finally replies, "My life is great, mate." Friend somewhat sullenly says, "You win." At this point the Friend begins drinking. He has symbolically surrendered – he soon brings his "couch" next to Andy's chair, attempting to force some closeness, even though they are operating in different spheres. Later in the piece, Friend removes the set, then turns to Andy and asks if he can stay here with him – referring simultaneously to Andy's home and to the non-

naturalistic, presentational style of theatre that Andy is performing in. In a sense he is asking, finally, to have a dialogue with Andy. Andy, however, withdraws, telling Friend it is "not a good time" and going on to ask for a fake cigarette, leaving the set through the pretend kitchen. Although the two friends and performance styles could meet, they could not meaningfully converse, either in naturalism or in the non-fictional realm of contemporary performance. In this piece, form mirrors content, as Crouch and Smith explore the limitations presented by the form of a "meeting" as a vehicle to contain or resolve conflict, and yet, as Crouch sits at the lectern and reads the final lines of the piece out loud, the audience are still left with a shred of hope. Hope being one of the foremost nuggets of positivity nestled at the heart of (and only existent because of) ongoing conflict.

I experienced the limitations and possibilities (the tantalising and seductive feeling of hope) afforded by dialogue or "meeting" as a form for containing conflict through my recent relational piece *Drifting Right* (2014). *Drifting Right* was commissioned by the Next Wave Festival in Australia as a performance research project[55] and was hosted both by that festival and at the ImPossible Futures Festival at Vooruit in Ghent in March of 2015. The concept behind this piece is to take an audience member on a canoe ride and to have an honest conversation with them about politics that does not become an argument. To add a conflicting element to the piece, this audience member is someone who voted for a right-wing party in the last election[56], a party that I feel I would never, if I lived in Australia or Belgium, consider

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[55] To see some video documentation from the Melbourne iteration of this project, visit https://vimeo.com/136515540 and use the password "PhD". To see video documentation for Ghent, visit https://vimeo.com/136529261 and use the password "PhD".

[56] I quickly abandoned the trope of referring to this person as a "conservative" voter, as several of the right wing voters I interviewed, particularly in Belgium, aligned with neo-liberal values, and considered themselves "progressive" and those on the left "conservative" in their overly stringent attachment to social services at the expense of what they saw as economic growth.

voting for. (Confusingly for terminology, the right-leaning party is called the "Liberal Party of Australia" so Australian right-wing voters would have voted "liberal.")

Fig. 6. *Drifting Right*. Next Wave Festival, 6 May 2014. Photo Credit: Jesse Hunniford.

My position as someone who votes for left-leaning parties is made explicit in the piece before the audience member has signed on to take part in the conversation. They know coming into the boat that they will be discussing politics with a person who very likely does not agree with them. My primary interest in this piece is about contrasting this oppositional framework, usually the starting point for an argument, with a co-dependent and relaxing context in which to have a dialogue – a canoe. I have always been interested in what can be achieved by attempting to reason rather than argue across what we frequently perceive of as a political divide or ideological chasm. The form of a shared canoe ride creates an atmosphere of genuine risk. We are really out on the water together, combined with the necessity of trust. We may not share political opinions, but we do share the objective to produce smooth forward movement in the boat.

Boats have a peculiar quality when it comes to engendering dialogue between opposing parties. In 1994, the Austrian arts collective Wochenklausur created a piece

in which a pleasure boat set off for three hours on Lake Zurich, populated by politicians, journalists, sex workers and activists from Zurich. Those engaged in prostitution in the city were facing a homelessness crisis – because they were not accepted by Swiss society, they could not find anywhere to sleep at night and were frequently the subject of violent attacks. The collective gathered together dissonant voices on this issue with one objective – to have a conversation. For several weeks the arts collective organized a series of three-hour conversations about the issue of homelessness for sex workers, and the piece actually ended with a consensus among the groups on the boat. A shelter for Swiss sex workers in Zurich was created as a result of these conversations, and the shelter was still in operation twenty years later.[57]

Although my piece does not set a concrete objective like the Wochenklausur piece, the work shares similarity through an emphasis on dialogue as opposed to argument. Dialogue – which we can here frame in Aristotle and Plato's terms as reasoning without arguing – does not escape the notion of conflict. Kestner asks, "Is it possible to develop a cross-cultural dialogue without sacrificing the unique identities of individual speakers?" (1), and if we are to substitute the words "cross-cultural" for "cross-political", the question is very pertinent to my experience while performing *Drifting Right*. A dialogue without an argument can mean that once *Makhomai* is no longer explicit with the other member of the conversation, it is redirected toward the self, as those engaged in reasoning wonder if they are getting their point across clearly, if they have offended the other person, and if they are compromising their views or pushing them forward too strongly.

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[57] Kester, Grant. "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art." *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985.* Ed. Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung. Blackwell, 2005. Pp. 2. Web. Accessed 19 June 2014.
<http://www.grantkester.net/resources/Conversation+Pieces_+The+Role+of+Dialogue+in+Socially-Engaged+Art.pdf >

Below is a conversational excerpt from *Drifting Right.* D refers to myself, and A refers to the right-wing Australian voter I was speaking with in the canoe. In this case the voter was a female in her late fifties or early sixties:

D: I'm interested in sustainability. How we can have a world that we're not ashamed to present our children with in 25 years' time, as opposed to living as though the world's going to be over in 25 years' time, which I think is the way the economy's going at the moment.

A: Hm… Thank you. Yeah. Well there's really not a lot I'd disagree with what you're saying, really, as to why you want, yeah… It's a similar feeling. That you have to have trust in the people that you are voting for, and you do question that. I'd probably, looking from my angle, I'd still probably have a more optimistic view of your future. Mine is coming more to an end part, yours is just beginning. I'd just probably have an overall trust and optimism that things will work out right.

D: Hm….

A: And it is probably necessary to have. We're lucky to have the fact that we can vote three or four different ways and it will make a difference.

D: Yeah, I think that's true.

A: With yours, it's probably very important that you're coming from your area, as my children would be too. It's a similar age thing. And you're looking at things very differently, your education has been very different, and the times that you've grown up in have been different.[58]

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[58] *Drifting Right*. Audio Recording Transcript. Fairfield Boathouse, Melbourne. Next Wave Festival. 7 May 2014.

Note that the tone of the conversation is one of agreement, while the content of the conversation is one of disagreement. The voter says "Thank you" when I tell her about my economic ethos, and even says "Well there's really not a lot I'd disagree with what you're saying" but then goes on to explicitly disagree by using the word "optimism" in response to the anxiety I've raised about the state of the economy. I also take an opportunity to say "Yeah I think that's true" when she makes a comment about how it's good that we can vote for separate parties, but earlier, when she says that she feels things "will work out right", rather than explicitly disagreeing (which I did), I simply replied with "Hm." Although we are both engaging in what Aristotle would call "the speech which agents use to argue a case or put forward an opinion," we are not necessarily, as Plato would put it, arguing. Nonetheless, conflict is rife in the situation, as we gently put forward our contradicting ideologies, while attempting to use courteous language and words that imply agreement. We struggle to avoid a struggle.

Criticizing Aristotle's silence on conflict, Michelle Gellrich writes that "while the sense-making, organizing operations of dramatic theory serve systematic interests, they also perform a definite cultural function: they so digest tragedy into a form both intelligible and safe so that its threatening, enigmatic aspects are transformed" (Gellrich 11). Gellrich also writes that dramatizing conflict is "problematic for critical approaches based on assumptions of normative order because they are subversive" (10). The concern, of course, with *Drifting Right* was that by relegating political discussion about topics I care deeply about to dialogue rather than argument, the conversation loses its teeth. Because the language we used was cordial, and of agreement, the project could risk having both myself and the voter identify moments of agreement where they do not exist. Though in reality, it was the sense of internal

struggle and conflict that made me feel both more accepting and more critical of ideas and opinions I generally dismiss outright. I began to consider our differences in opinion to be the result of systemic problems, such as biased and conflicting information conveyed through right or left wing media channels, rather than blame the individuals in the canoe for being, in my view, simply wrong or inherently selfish. My hope was that the experience was similar for my canoeing co-pilots. I would argue that *Agon* or Plato's *Makhomai* are the normative order for cross-political conversations. When it comes to talking politics, because the dominant rhetoric is one of binaries, Aristotle's *Dionaia* has come to be subversive.

Conclusion

Hegel likely derived his discussion of conflict in narrative and its consequent relationship to his theory of the process of dialectics from the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander:

Whence things have their origin,

Thence also their destruction happens,

According to necessity;

For they give to each other justice and recompense

For their injustice

In conformity with the ordinance of Time.[59]

This is the very earliest Western philosophical fragment in existence. In this fragment, Anaximander characterizes cosmology itself as a place in which things are created and then "destruction happens/According to necessity" and in which the

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[59] Curd, Patricia. *A Presocratic Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*. London: Hackett, 1996. p. 12.

things which are created then destroyed "give each other justice and recompense/ For their injustice/ In conformity with the ordinance of Time." At this earliest stage in philosophical thinking, even separating the notions of "origin" and "destruction" and then assigning those separate states moral qualities of justice and recompense of injustice was to put them in symbiosis yet at odds with each other – suggesting that the world itself is constantly juggling the opposition between origin and destruction. The final line, assigning this ongoing birth and destruction as that which leads to "the ordinance of time" shows how inevitable and unending this opposition will be – eternally wrestling and exchanging control.

Hegel comes to a similar conclusion and then applies it to history – establishing that history is an ongoing and changing dialectical process in which there is a continual process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis – but unlike Anaximander, he saw a trajectory and goal to these ongoing states of opposition and unity. For him the dialectic process presumably leads to a state of self-knowledge for the Geist (which can be translated as Mind or Spirit – a kind of Collective Consciousness), wherein the Geist will no longer be alienated by reality but will realize that reality forms a part of it, and will take back control through self-knowledge and order reality into a state of rationality. But as was evidenced by the references to a lost Che Guevara t-shirt in *Gym Party*, an ineffectual Occupy movement in *Made in China*, a "chronic pain" in *Slap Talk*, and even a spam folder full of anarchist newsletters in *What Happens to the Hope at the End of the Evening*, under late capitalism, for many contemporary performance makers, a dialectic approach to history feels like wishful thinking.

The pieces examined in this chapter consider three different strategies that we as human beings use to contain the subversive and occasionally irrational quantity known as "conflict." Made in China, Youssef and Long, and Action Hero create

shows which examine the very dominant strategy of contest, or *agon*, but these pieces also use this form to reveal the relationship between containing conflicts as contests, and endless capitalism. *30 Days to Space* and *The Future Show* consider the role of Objectives we set ourselves to deal with and attempt to overcome on-going conflicts against ourselves. Neither show resolves the conflicts at their heart. James Baker may have symbolically gone to space, but NASA will never recognize him as an astronaut. My show can only temporarily resolve my anxiety about the future, as there is always another show coming up that will force me to repeat the challenge, hence it's title – *The Future Show*. Finally I looked at shows that considered the strategy for addressing conflict known as dialogue or meeting – Tim Crouch and Andy Smith's piece *What Happens to the Hope at the End of the Evening* and my conversation based piece *Drifting Right*. Dialogue does not force a resolution, and perhaps does not, as contests do, purport to lead somewhere. Yet, as I pointed out, the pretence of niceties and side stepping agonistic language can lead to other conflicts (the struggle to avoid a struggle) and accidental winners and losers through the resignation of someone who just doesn't feel like talking anymore, as Andy Smith leaves "through the kitchen" at the end of *What Happens to the Hope.*

The performances above all deliberately consider and question the strategies we use as human beings to feel that we have contained or resolved conflict. They employ these frames deliberately, pointing at their inadequacies and moments of success. The conflicts at the heart of these performances do not resolve, but the performances themselves do end, and perhaps it is simply that bare fact, that performances end and we watch them end, which makes theatre an effective and satisfying lens through which to examine and imagine we can abandon conflict.

Chapter 3: Endings

And so we've come to the ending. You felt so aware of the fact that it was coming that ten minutes ago you almost checked your watch. You felt the energy of one of the lead actors dwindle. You felt a kind of momentum slow like watching a ball roll more gradually down a hallway – you knew it was going to halt eventually. And you are waiting for the end – glad for the end – because this ending means that you have indeed witnessed something. Together in the dark, walking through the site, alone in the room, it is only because this has ended that you know it happened at all. It is the end of the piece that makes it an experience, a narrative, and something you can comfortably walk away from as "theatre." Presumably.

In this, my third and final chapter before the conclusion, I will be examining the unique ways in which contemporary performance addresses our narrative preoccupation with endings. There are two important elements to be aware of when considering this preoccupation – the first is that the idea of an ending influences and impacts our experience of time, moments and memory. The fact that a piece begins and ends delineates a performance as a distinct moment in time – a miniature epoch or era – upon which an audience member can then reflect. It demarcates a performance from the seemingly endless march of time, and by staking borders (the curtain goes up, the curtain goes down), it creates a shape and a container for content.

The second element to be aware of when considering our preoccupation with endings is the meaning or moral of the final encounter – the final moment on stage. Endings cannot help but mean something, even in the choice to be devoid of meaning. It is the final image or phrase or snapshot, after which, according to Aristotle's

Poetics, nothing follows.[60] The question of whether or not we can escape the narrative significance posited by the final moments of a piece of contemporary performance pervades this chapter – as do questions around whether or not an "end point" is ever demarcated in some contemporary performances. The ending is indicative of both the structure of a piece in its entirety (now that it's over we can step back and look at what it was), and what that structure was attempting to "prove." As John Yorke writes in his chapter on endings in his book, *Into The Woods* – "Stories work exactly like essays, like lawsuits, and, indeed, like perception itself: they posit an idea, explore it, then come to a conclusion that, if the drama is convincing, is proved true" (Yorke 192).

In keeping with my research method of staking questions as opposed to answers, this chapter will be organized around three questions:

(i)   When does it end?

This section will consider the medium specific nature of endings in the performance situation – the dramaturgical function of applause or "The curtain call," the last moment onstage as written or devised by the artist (contrasting what Forced Entertainment term "the airlock" with what I've termed "the zinger" – see page 121), and Coney's assertion that a performance has not ended for an audience member until they last think or speak about it.

(ii)   Why does it end?

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[60] "A *whole* is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A *beginning* is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an *end* is that which does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it" (Trans. Heath 13).

This section borrows from Frank Kermode's theories of ending as postulated in *The Sense of an Ending* to discuss the desire for endings as being directly linked to the human experience of our own lifespans, and our frustration at being born and dying in the midst of the unfathomable span of history. I go on to contrast this with research into sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder, who frame the desire for an ending or resolution as the desire to undergo a kind of positive transformation. I question whether the former – an ending as a death – is more readily linked with a passive audience experience, while the latter, ending as transformation, is more readily linked with participatory and interactive performances.

(iii)   How does it end?

This section will take into account Laura Cull's theories on "ontological participation" with reference to Allen Kaprow's happenings in the 1960s, to discuss the possibility that endings and beginnings are in fact the same thing, involved in a constant process of "becoming." Discussion of this theory will focus on the ending of Nic Green's 2009 performance piece *Trilogy*, including audience testimonies six years later from women who felt that the ritualistic nature of the ending of this piece marked, in some sense, the beginning of their relationship to feminism.

This chapter will conclude both with a summary of the main arguments and further questions that have been uncovered through theoretical excavation, and with a more general discussion of conclusions – whether or not endings and conclusions are synonymous, and if not, why not?

And now, without further ado, let us begin the endings.

i)   When does it end?

During the applause

Applause, or the curtain call, in the majority of theatre and contemporary performance

pieces, serves as a kind of border or divide. As Bert O. States writes, "the curtain call

is a seam in social nature: actually, a beginning *and* an ending, a return and a

farewell" (371). But for States, and for Nicholas Ridout who writes about curtain

calls in the final chapter of *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*, the

curtain call seems to be directly linked to the relationship between fictional

representation and reality. Ridout writes, "…whether it succeeds or it fails, the

curtain call, for all its gestures beyond the machinery of representation, always takes

place in the place of representation, in the mode of representation, and it can only

operate at all within and after conditions in which representation has most decisively

held sway" (Ridout 166). States goes even further in his connecting applause or the

curtain call quite explicitly with closing off what Ridout refers to as "the machinery

of representation," comparing the experience of applauding to returning to

consciousness. He writes "The return from the play world is like the awakening from

the dream: it is always an abrupt fall into the mundane, fraught with the nostalgia of

exile. And in this respect the living actor is our cushion: he stands before us in the

curtain call as a consolation, a transition and an easement…" (States 374).

Although in many theatrical curtain calls there is a great deal of truth in both

of these comparisons, signalling the ending of a performance with applause does not

exclusively apply to representative narratives. In recent research on applause at music

concerts, for example, where (as in the contemporary performance situations)

musicians are likely engaged in an activity (in this case playing a song) that has been

pre-rehearsed, whilst not pretending to be someone other than who they are, it was

found that there are two modes of applause – *anticipation* applause and *reward*

applause.[61] The applause of anticipation is one that comes from the audience

recognizing something familiar that they have been expecting – the first few notes of

their favourite song, for example, or the entrance of a famous performer. This

approach to applause does not exclusively apply to music. In 2001, I went to see the

Neil Simon play *The Dinner Party* at the Music Box Theatre on Broadway. I had

never been to a Broadway play before, and I can remember my surprise when, around

five minutes into the action, the audience applauded at both the entrances of Henry

Winkler and John Ritter. In those moments, what Barkhuus calls "anticipation

applause" was in full swing - the audience was applauding the reality of two famous

performers on stage – the reality of their reputations, careers, past roles, and the

audience's own excitement at seeing them practise their skills live.

Applause as a reward, as Barkhuus describes, "given after an especially

appreciated song or a musical solo of some kind" (1) is also in display in the theatre.

This most frequently erupts when a performer says something that is so funny that the

audience begins applauding. In this instance, the applause is acknowledging real skill

– similar to the skill of a musician. The audience seems to be collectively signalling

that that particular joke was skilfully written/delivered/directed and wants to reward

the performance for its success.[62]

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[61] In his study "Engaging the Crowd at Concert Events" Barkuus writes, "audience members tend to
applaud and cheer in two situations, when experiencing *anticipation* and to *reward* the performers.
Anticipation applause covers for example when the performer enters the stage and when the audience
hears the first notes of a well-known song. *Reward applause* is given after an especially appreciated
song or a musical solo of some kind as well as of course at the end of the performance" (Barkhuus 1).
[62] Interestingly, applause almost never follows a display of dramatic skill in a tragic situation – a
particularly moving delivery of a Shakespearean soliloquy, for example. This suggests that the
audience understands that there are certain situations in which "reward applause" is appropriate and
inappropriate.

What these two applause tendencies amongst audience members in theatre and performance suggest are that the performance situation is not as straightforward as States' dream analogy would suggest. If it is a dream, then we are consistently both asleep and awake – able to engage in the dream to some extent, whilst also able to recognize all the machinery and artistry in reality that goes into creating this illusion. Ridout writes, "Theatre is a machine that sets out to undo itself. It conceives itself as an apparatus of the production of affect by means of representation, in the expectation that the most powerful affects will be obtained at precisely those moments when the machinery appears to break down" (168). These tendencies to anticipate and reward with applause, however, suggest that perhaps this notion of the machinery "breaking down" is not the only way that theatre can undo itself. Occasionally it is in its most well executed moments, in the virtuosity of certain performances or turns of phrase or directorial innovations, that the audience is reminded of the performance as a display of artistic skill, and applaud as a call from the waking world, to say "we see what you are doing in reality. Thank you for doing it well." If this is the case, what then can be said of the dramaturgical function of the final applause or curtain call as signalling an ending?

Ridout writes about the curtain call as the final signing off of a transactional exchange, questioning whether or not the applause can really be described as a reward, when "The audience's applause does not in practice indicate that the audience feels it has got its money's worth" (Ridout 164). Ridout concludes that instead "The audience is trying to figure itself as the recipient of a gift" (165). However this reading sits awkwardly with the fact that applause is essentially a social convention. It could be argued that the audience is just trying to "act their part" as well as the actors are in giving their bows. They are engaged in a mutual social ritual which

signals the final moments of the performance for all parties. Any audience member who has not particularly felt like applauding after a performance and yet applauds out of a mysterious sense of social obligation or "peer pressure" knows this feeling. In can also be argued that the audience's attention is its own kind of gift to the performer, and in bowing, the performer is acknowledging themselves as the recipient of the audience's notice.

As a social convention, applause is, in a sense, what reminds us of the fact that we have been taking part in a communal rather than private activity, where the performers are present and deserving of acknowledgement. In this sense it acts as a border not simply between the representation and the reality, or the rehearsed and the spontaneous, or the deliberated and the organic, but it acts as a border between the private and the social. While watching the performance we are, if engaged, operating between a simultaneously private, personal and communal sphere, where we might cry or laugh without remembering the other individuals sat next to us, or cry and laugh together as a responsive communal being, back into a sphere that is dictated more clearly by self-consciousness and certain social rituals and expectations, where through our expectations of each other, we are devoid of agency. The applause, however, is also the most acceptable way that the collective in the performance situation can assert its awareness of the risk and skill that was being displayed in the performance. To take another situation in which applause erupts spontaneously as a signal of an ending as a useful comparison - cabins tend to applaud at the end of a particularly bumpy flight. In this sense the applause could be argued to be an audience's last collective act of agency – an act that says "we have had no control, but we have been here, listening, watching, completely dependent on your professional

skills and execution. We want to thank you for handing us back to the real world in safe hands."

J. Hillis Miller in his writing about the nineteenth-century novel, writes about the vogue in the seventeenth century for stories that contained "the pleasure of untying", which he goes on to describe as

> the sudden pleasure felt by one caught in a labyrinthine entanglement of mistaken identity and inextricably knotted narrative lines when suddenly he escapes into the full light of day. It is like the explosive release felt when one sees the point of a joke, or the pleasure of the final *éclaircissement*, the "he done it" at the end of a detective story (Miller 4).

Miller writes about "the combing out of the tangled narrative threads so that they may be clearly seen, shining side by side, all mystery or complexity revealed" (Miller 4).

The pleasure of disentanglement is derived in some sense from the feeling as a spectator or reader, that regardless of how chaotic a plot or story was appearing to become, it was always in the author(s) or artist(s) control – the chaos was never chaos at all, and the fact of having it appear genuinely chaotic and then tightly controlled and resolved becomes a kind of virtuosic feat on the part of the author when viewed in retrospect.

In 2009, on my now long-retired blog, I wrote about the ability that contemporary performance has to allow us to access this space of "controlled chaos" by signalling, through its ending, that what appeared to be chaos was always deliberate and pre-planned.

…theatre to me is anything that asks an audience (of 1 or 1 million) to engage with what it is to be present, with what it is to be here now. (…) According to this definition, my entire vacation to Greece could have been theatre. Falling in love could be theatre. But actually, they aren't. These alive moments come about organically, unpredictably, and they could end at any time. Unlike the feeling of watching great theatre, we never feel as though we're in good or competent hands, because the hands are often our own. It might be this lack of safety that means that in these lived moments we are present, but it's difficult to engage with or reflect on what that present means. We often worry that if we step back or take our eye off the ball for a moment (and the ball is usually called joy), the opponent will walk away and the game will unexpectedly end. I bring up this definition because in what I've seen or helped to make in the last two weeks, the moments that were most effective were those that engaged with the present, reminding me that I am alive, and that seemed to be going for *that* over and above anything else. But past simply making me feel present, the truly transcendent experiences came when there was an exploration and delving into what being present even means. Even when these pieces feel as unpredictable as life itself (and the best often do), there is a kind of competence and design that gives us as humans the space to be both present and aware of and looking into that present-ness.[63]

John Moran's piece *John Moran and his Neighbour Saori* (2007) did just this, by continually creating moments that appeared chaotic and improvised, and then repeating the moments in uncanny detail to reinforce how rehearsed their chaotic

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[63] "If you need me, I'll be here." *Confessions of a Playwright*. 29 November 2009. Web. Accessed 21 December 2015.

appearance had always been. There is virtuosity in this approach to performance, and in this sense it was not surprising that John Moran referred to these pre-rehearsed moments as "musical pieces" and to himself as a "composer." The piece begins with John Moran coming out on stage and appearing to be very confused and disorganized. He talks to the audience in a relatively incoherent way about the fact that the show is starting. He goes back stage to look at a cat he thinks he has seen. As an audience member you might even briefly question whether or not he is sober as his movements are very loose and seem quite unstable. Then the entire sequence repeats, and we realize that he is in fact lip-synching to pre-recorded audio, and that these previously apparently improvised and seemingly unstable movements are in fact tightly choreographed. The divide between the spontaneous and pre-rehearsed suddenly becomes a kind of uncanny valley and John Moran himself changes from a man who seems very disorganized to someone who is frighteningly precise. This approach to careful and obsessively embodied reconstructions of spontaneous moments caught on tape continues throughout the piece, as his Japanese neighbor Saori, who we're told is a dancer, eerily physically reconstructs, through her every movement, facial expression and very precise lip synching, a recording of an American woman working at a fast food chain. The ending of the show is called "A Portrait of Saori", and takes the notion of reconstructing what appears improvised and chaotic to an even further extreme – as it begins with Moran putting on a "record" of *The Goldberg Variations* which he then tells us is not in fact a record but a painstaking recreation of *The Goldberg Variations* which he composed by playing and recording one note at a time on a piano then compiling and arranging them into what would sound like *The Goldberg Variations*. He then goes on to tell us that *The Goldberg Variations* is at 68 beats per minute, and Saori comes out and begins embodying and reconstructing what

sounds like a very random and quite natural recording of an afternoon she spent at Moran's apartment shortly after they'd first met. He then reveals to us that Saori is also speaking and moving at 68 beats per minute. She continues to repeat an embodiment of this five minute recording of being at his apartment on a loop, as *The Goldberg Variations* plays, and Moran then plays a Neil Young song overtop both that is also 68 beats per minute, creating a kind of collage of the absolute control and practice yet sense of life and chaos that is at the heart of musical compositions.

Before playing the Neil Young Song, as Saori is still engaged in this loop, underscored by the reconstructed *Goldberg Variations*, Moran says,

So I had just totally given up and I saw my neighbor and she passed and I had this flash. I knew she was my perfect partner. I knew it. I saw her walking in front of the house. I convinced her to come into the apartment and we found out that we had a wall in between us for like two years, we didn't know it. And I told her on the street, I want to make all my stuff about you from now on. I want to do portraits of her. Because when I saw her walking … her music. I tried to get it because now Bach is at 68 beats per minute, right? Saori is at 68 beats per minute and she's locked into the Goldberg Variations. And I made this portrait of her telling me ("Don't be so angry, you can't do anything with it, right? Right people?) And she's done it thousands of times. That's not theatre. That's my life. And she does it so good. (A phone rings in the recording) The phone gets a little louder when she takes it out of the bag. I get to futz on that. And watch.[64]

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[64] Transcribed from *John Moran… And his Neighbor Saori (The Film)*.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln_3thwwJqU . Web. Accessed 14 December 2015.

As with the disentanglement of the formerly seeming chaotic narrative threads, there is a kind of virtuosity to this approach to contemporary performance – to this ability to create material that seems spontaneous and almost incoherent, and then, like a magician, to reveal to the audience that it was methodically rehearsed and always within the artist's control. But in Moran's case, he calls attention to his own obsessive desire to watch a moment from his life on a loop – to control and relive chaos – and the resulting ending, at 68 beats per minute, implies that as a musician, Moran is not satisfied to attempt to recreate the complexity of Bach – what is really a challenge and joy for him is to attempt to recreate the complexity of another human being.

The applause that follows *John Moran and his Neighbour Saori* (and the applause that punctuates each increasingly technical "song" in the show), shares more in common with the applause at the end of a musical performance, as in a sense the audience are not applauding to put a cap on the representative space created by the show, but to acknowledge the enormous skill of the obsessively "controlled chaos" that the performers were able to recreate repeatedly throughout. In *John Moran and his neighbor Saori* the audience were never lulled into a dreamlike state – all moments of apparent chaos were employed within a frame that seemed to be quite consistently pointing at exactly how and why they were controlled, down to revealing how many beats per minute a lived moment contained.

Before the applause

If we are to consider applause as a kind of paratext to a performance rather than part of the performance itself, then we might consider the ending to be the last moment an artist chooses to feature on stage before the lights go out. One artistic approach to

this form of ending, relatively widespread in plays, is what I have come to term as "the zinger." This is an ending that provides a further revelation, question or argument to undermine or totally forego any sense of resolution in the narrative. In theatre this is followed by a blackout, leaving the audience to sit with and process the new information. These are frequently plays that end with a question. In interview, Tim Etchells' was particularly dismissive and wary of this style of ending. Discussing Forced Entertainment's most recent piece, *The Notebook* (2014)*,* he described the ending of the book, which was very abrupt and revelatory.

> But when you've got the book you can sit with the book in your hands, and you can think about that, and you can read it again and think "Wow, What the fuck." Whereas in the theatre, whenever we did *that* as the ending in the theatre, it felt like there was no space for this kind of contemplation. No space to let that happen. And the idea that we were going to change the lights and demand applause at that point felt so ugly. Everybody that we showed it to in rehearsals who experienced that were just like, "Whoah the end. That was weird." So we became aware that we needed to put a kind of airlock at the end. Which shouldn't have any content, because if it had any content it would unbalance the enormous strength of that trajectory. So what we did was we turn to one of the very first passages of the book, where they describe the grandmother's house.[65]

When further discussing this tendency towards an abrupt and revelatory ending in theatre, Etchells said, "…the dramatic ending seems to stake all on you being traumatised by this last bit of information or a visual image that will stay with you

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[65] Etchells, Tim. Personal Interview. 5 February 2015. Included in the appendix.

forever. Maybe it works. I'm trying to think if I've ever seen a show that ended like

that that was actually any good. […] maybe it would be a good thing to try."[66]

A contemporary performance piece that does employ this technique to great

effect is Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment* (2009). *The Shipment* is a three-act

exploration of the experience of Black Americans, starring an all-Black cast. The first

act is a stand-up comedy routine which is entirely about race, the second act is a

cartoon-like enactment of the life of a rapper who, while in jail, meets the record

producer that will later make him famous. It is in effect a mimicry of a rags-to-riches

story taken from black stereotypes. The third act is "on the surface a straight-up

naturalistic comedy set at a cocktail party" (Isherwood). The "play" features the cast

engaged in an almost boiler plate drama – one character is uncomfortable, the other

feels that he has no friends, one lacks empathy, and the protagonist pretends to have

poisoned everyone's drinks because of his struggle with depression. But as Charles

Isherwood points out in his *New York Times* review, these dramatic machinations are

merely "diversionary" for the genuine import of the section, which is provided by its

last line. In the last line of the piece, after the drama has calmed down and the party

guests begin playing a parlor game to unwind, one character makes a racist joke about

Black Americans, and the cast begin giggling. The "uptight" seeming guest expresses

his discomfort, saying the equivalent of, "I just don't think any of you would have

made that joke if there had been a Black person in the room." There is no "airlock"

after this line – there is a blackout followed by bewildered applause. With this line,

the third act of the show reveals itself to have been a kind of racial drag – the actors

were playing white characters, and what came before is set in a new light for the

audience to untie in the aftermath of the performance. In his *New York Times* review,

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[66] ibid.

Charles Isherwood describes this revelatory ending as "a suckerpunch", writing that "To say more would be to spoil the sucker punch line, but as she does in the best of the material in 'The Shipment,' Ms. Lee sets you thinking about how we unconsciously process experience […] how hard it can be to see the world truly in something other than black and white." By Isherwood's review, it is clear that the "suckerpunch" carries the same weight as a twist, and furnished him with what felt like a theme for the piece.

Young Jean Lee describes herself as initially having brought the ending into rehearsals as "a joke."

> I was writing the show while we were in rehearsals, and one day I brought in that ending as a joke. So the cast was performing the scene, and they were stunned when they got to the surprise ending. They loved it and wanted to keep it, because they felt we needed to give the audience one final slap after allowing them all this freedom from racial discomfort. What worked about it was that it made people re-evaluate everything that had come before, and all the assumptions they'd been making throughout that last scene. A typical train of thought would be, "I did notice those people weren't acting like black people!" and then, "Oh my god, what does it mean to 'act like a black person'—did I really just think that?"[67]

Although the ending is abrupt, and fulfills the brief of "a zinger" or revelatory ending – the revelation itself undermines the form of "well-made plays" in their racial dominance. Lee herself writes that the company interpreted this moment as "a final

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[67] Young Jean Lee, email correspondence. 6 May 2015.

slap", while Isherwood calls it a "suckerpunch" and Etchells' referred to "traumatizing" an audience with this style of ending. There is a sense of violence involved in choosing to end a piece in this way, but in *The Shipment*'s case, as the piece itself is about making its audience aware of racial inequality, perhaps a violent slap to awaken us to our own ingrained racism is exactly what is needed.

After the applause

"The zinger" very much falls into the category of an artist's choice in terms of when the performance ends, but Tassos Stevens of Coney claims that a performance has only truly ended when the audience or participants last think of it. "…I think for any audience with regards to any event, not just the kind of work that we make, their experience of the event begins when they first hear about it and stops if and when they stop talking about it."[68] For Coney there is a sense in which the aftertaste or legacy left by a performance is implanted in the performance itself.

At Battersea Arts Centre's first One-on-One festival in 2010, I "saw" Coney's piece *The Loveliness Principle* (2010). I put "saw" in quotation marks because the piece itself was something of a treasure hunt for one or two people to complete around the building in their own time, and was very far from a passive experience. It required calling and texting several numbers, exploring different corners of the building for hidden codes, and finally being given a secret knock and password which lead me into a room in which Tassos Stevens was sat with a cup of tea. He explained the very ambiguous story of Rabbit to me – a story which lies at the centre of all of the work that Coney do – about a person in the UK who arranged for a stranger to make their friend in the United States a cup of tea and to leave it on their desk with a

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[68] Stevens, Tassos. Personal Interview. 12 March 2015. Included in the appendix.

note that read, "Love from Rabbit." Tassos then took my email address, and explained to me that I was now an "agent of loveliness" and may be asked in the future to do something kind for a stranger through the Coney network. Although I have never received an email or request from Coney in the five years since that cup of tea, the promise or possibility that I one day might does hang in the air, and makes the performance feel both unresolved and, though I encountered it in a performance festival, not very much like a performance.

In my own early piece *Music's Been Ruined by Dating* (2008), I invited four audience members at a time to come into a tent made of bedsheets with me, where they all held a mix cd with a man's name on it and a list of songs, and then were all addressed as my ex-boyfriends and told to pick a song so that I could explain how they had ruined that particular song for me. At the end of the performance, I took everyone's mailing address and told the audience that I would post them a copy of the cd they had held during the show. This remained and remains a broken promise, and three years after the show, one audience member approached me about it. He said that somehow this broken promise meant that for him the show hadn't ended. He'd seen first-hand what it felt like to be disappointed by me, and in this sense, he joked that he understood the perspective of the ex-boyfriends I discuss in the show.

This example is perhaps particularly relevant to Coney's work, as I promised the audience a gift in the future and failed to deliver – and Tassos discusses Coney as a company whose work, he hopes, is always termed in retrospect as a gift, continuing to be useful and to genuinely effect audience members after the performance event has ended.

Coney's piece *A Small Town Anywhere* (2009) is an interactive performance in which thirty audience members, each wearing hats, are assigned different characters

to play in a small town over the course of between two and three hours. The piece

begins with an email being sent by Henri, the town historian, a week before the

performance, to each of the audience members inviting them to begin writing their

own back stories and engaging in the performance. The piece is temporally organized

by a "town crier" who announces when it is day and when it is night. This is also

signalled by lights dimming or getting brighter, so that the two hours play out as

happening over the course of a week. The piece ends with a rise of fascism, in which

audience members are asked to select one of their brethren to be hanged or else face

total destruction of the town. In discussing the end of the piece *A Small Town*

Anywhere, Stevens refers to the fact that the relationships struck up between "a room

full of mostly strangers" over the course of the interactive performance are real,

telling me about a couple who went to the performance as a first date and now have a

child together, and two audience members who discovered they had birthdays on the

same day and continue to send each other birthday cards several years later. He said

that at the end of the performance, they wanted the audience to be aware of the reality

of their interactions with each other. "You just played at being a community and now

look what's happened. Now you are."[69]

ii) Why Does It End?

Eugène Scribe, the 18th century playwright, created a five act structure for a "well-

made play", and wrote of the final act – "Everything is worked out logically so that in

the final scene, the cast assembles and reconciliations take place, and there is an

equitable distribution of prizes in accordance with poetic justice and reinforcing the

morals of the day. Everyone leaves the theatre *bien content*" (Turney qtd. in Yorke

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[69] Tassos Stevens. Personal Interview. 12 March 2015. Included in the appendix.

269). This notion of an "equitable distribution of prizes in accordance with poetic justice and reinforcing the morals of the day" could, if we broaden our understanding of "distribution of prizes" to punishments and lessons, be said to apply to a wide array of novels, films and plays.

Psychologically, human beings seek a sense of resolution or ending in their own memories and ongoing lives. Jennifer L. Pals and Dan P. McAdams discuss this in response to a study on a narrative understanding of post-traumatic growth. The study found that sufferers of trauma tended to make a better recovery in their lives if, rather than minimize the impact of the traumatic experience, they both acknowledge it, and then find some means of assigning it a positive ending or resolution. They write that "…not just any kind of positive ending will do. The ending should affirm and explain how the self has been positively transformed" (Pals and McAdams 66). The success of having found an appropriate ending appears to be key to the sufferers' ability to move on with their lives. They write, "…when a person first acknowledges the challenging impact of the traumatic event on the self, it is possible for the positive ending to become an enduring sense of positive self-transformation within the identity-defining life story" (Pals and McAdams 66).

In *A Sense of an Ending*, however, Frank Kermode explains our interest in endings in literature not as being with the sense of justice and comeuppance that Scribe describes, or the positive transformation that Pals and McAdams reference, but with our preoccupations with our own deaths – which he also argues leads every generation to believe that they are living in apocalyptic times. He describes the frustration that human beings experience by being born *in medias res* and dying *in mediis rebus*- while history is on-going and will pay no attention to the fragment of

time in which we exist. "Men, like poets, rush 'into the middest,' *in media res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to their lives and to poems" (Kermode 6).

It is not surprising, then, that Kermode describes all endings as a figure for our own deaths (ibid). Before embarking on this research, I had a similar premonition about our desire for resolution in narratives being linked to our understanding of death. "…I sometimes wonder if the real reason we need stories originates from the fear that our lives may never find a final resolution in any way that we will be conscious of."[70] Christopher Vogler, in his now notorious eight-page memo summarizing Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, also refers to death as an essential element of endings, but in his case he likens the threat of death as a site for a kind of spiritual or psychic rebirth. He writes, "The initiate is forced to taste death and experience resurrection. You're never more alive than when you think you're going to die."[71]

The Future Show identifies our preoccupation with endings as a kind of death, and ends with a description of my own death. However, as described in Chapter 1, the final words I speak on stage are also the words I began the show predicting I would speak. The show then becomes a kind of time-based loop, where the "reality" of what was described from the beginning (the rest of my life) has begun as the final words of the piece are spoken. But past this game with representation, there is a kind of innate dramaturgical satisfaction in ending a show with a description of the performer's death, and a kind of natural denouement provided by the description of

[70] Pearson, Deborah. "The Necessity of Narrative?" *Exeunt*. 5 March 2011. Web. Accessed 14 December 2015.   http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/the-necessity-of-narrative/2/
[71] Vogler, Christopher. "A Practical Guide to *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*." Web. Accessed 17 April 2015. http://www.cs.uu.nl/docs/vakken/b2go/literature/monomyth.pdf.

ageing. In a review, Matt Trueman notes, "As the text whirs on, it grows soft and serene. Tonally, it's like a retirement on the porch: content and at peace with time's flow." Andrew Haydon comments on the text's deliberately narrow perspective of the future as being entirely filtered through the experience of one person living then dying. He writes, "External events do occasionally play a part ("I buy the last newspaper ever printed"), but mostly we spend time with a fiercely intelligent, independent woman going through her life being every bit as awesome as we ourselves imagine she will be, and so facing her death becomes a genuinely saddening experience."

Within the text, only moments before describing the end of my life, I ask the audience to confront the anxiety Frank Kermode describes of being born and dying *in mediis rebuus*. In the only moment of the show in which I employ both present tense and the second person (the second person future tense is employed earlier and first person is past tense is employed a moment later), I say,

Think about the moment after you die. Take a moment and picture what the world will look like without your life in it. Challenge yourself not to picture your loved ones, not to picture your family, not to picture preparations for your funeral or how sad everyone will be now that you're gone. Picture something else. Picture anything else. Picture a car driving on a highway. Picture a radio dj ordering a burger. Picture teenagers smoking in a parking lot. Picture a mother going to the shop to buy her baby some formula. Picture a person struggling with their mobile phone. Picture people flying on planes, children playing soccer, two old men having an argument, chess pieces scattered on the floor, a woman in a ball under her covers. Two friends getting

drunk over the new skype. Online correspondence with pictures of cats and

happy birthday.   Picture lights flickering on a bridge.

This moment is deliberately placed towards the end of the show so that the

audience, before hearing a prediction of my own death, will be forced to confront

their own mortality. But not merely their own mortality as any real "ending," but the

lack of an ending that any one individual's life can really be. It asks the audience to

acknowledge, regardless of the premise of the show, and before the ending of the

show which is filtered through one person's existence, that the world does not in fact

end when any one individual dies, and from the perspective of living our own lives

within our own conscious experience of the world, we can assume that it may feel that

way. The idea that reality will continue without you (or me) is an existential

cognitive dissonance that is at the heart of every human being's conception of their

life-story which *The Future Show* seeks out to gently illustrate in its final moments.

Tania El Khoury's piece, *Gardens Speak* (2014), is an interactive performance

installation in which ten audience members enter a darkly lit room filled with soil.

They are each given a card, on which the name of a person is written in Arabic, and

they are instructed to find the "tombstone" whose writing matches the card they are

holding. The tombstones are made of plywood, and the audience member, clad in a

see-through protective raincoat which is also eerily reminiscent of a body bag, is told

to search through the soil beneath their gravestone, until they can hear a voice. The

audience member then lies down, putting their head against the soil, and they hear the

true story of a Syrian who was killed during the uprising and has been buried in a

home or public garden rather than a formal cemetery. This has been happening in

Syria since the beginning of the uprising in 2011 for various reasons, particularly to

escape having their corpse further desecrated by the Assad Regime. The piece begins

with an act of mourning, and is the story, for each audience member, of connecting

with one person's death. The enormity of the injustice and sadness of the loss of this

real person's life is at the center of the piece. But the performance ends with an

invitation to write a letter to this person, which can be left on their "grave" and which

will later be sent to their friends and family. This minuscule act of empathy in the

face of so much suffering and trauma feels like a tiny but subversive and radical act,

suggesting that we do not merely need endings to remind us of the finitude our own

and others' deaths, but of the possibility presented by being alive and having the

ability to act against the continuing injustices in Syria and elsewhere. Although this

shares similarities with Vogler's description of a Hollywood-style rebirth, in this

interactive installation, acknowledging that we are still in the middle of history and

can both mourn and act based off of the unjust deaths of others, is not a passive or

easy stance. It is not for others to live with and act based on the knowledge of what

happened to the Syrians in El Khoury's installation, but for us as audience members

to acknowledge our own role and accountability.

Our desire to perceive narratives as events which come to an end is deeply

ingrained, but this very desire for a positive resolution which allows one to move on,

as described by Pals and McAdams in the case of PTSD sufferers, can feel overly

simplistic in work like El Khoury's, which investigates a larger societal trauma where

it is difficult to suggest that there is any kind of positive end in sight. This said,

because the representative approach to social issues is so frequently to end them with

"a zinger" or a lack of resolution, to "traumatize" the audience as Etchells described,

more interactive contemporary pieces dealing with societal traumas in which there is

some move, however small, towards positive change, seem to read as somehow more politically subversive.

Of the letters written in this ending, El Khoury writes:

The letters are incredibly touching. People seem to place themselves in the story by reflecting on their position as people who just learnt about a political and personal reality they weren't aware of. Some admit in writing that they were crying over a stranger's grave. Others reflect on whether they would have been as brave or taken similar decisions to the martyr if they were in their position. The piece starts when the ten audience members walk in together to the "garden" space but ends when the last person leaves the space as each person takes a different amount of time to write the letter. For me as an artist, the piece will end when I share these letters with the surviving family members, I am not sure when this will happen but hopefully when some justice would have been reached in Syria. That way it will feel more like a closure rather than an addition to an already painful wound.[72]

The ways in which we perceive endings in participatory work like El Khoury's is necessarily hugely different from the passive understanding of the representation of an ending in work that requires a passive engagement from the audience, like Lee's *The Shipment*. The fundamental difference may in fact come down to the distinction between life and death.

Although Happenings in the 1960s and contemporary performance work like El Khoury's *Gardens Speak* are by no means the same medium, Laura Cull (whose

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[72] El Khoury, Tania. Email Correspondence. 17 April 2015.

article is discussed at further length on page 133) sheds some interesting light on this distinction when discussing artist Allan Kaprow's participatory practice: "…One of the defining characteristics of participation for Kaprow concerns a process of co-authorship through which an audience is actively 'collaborating in the art making and meaning making process' where 'meaning' is understood by Kaprow as 'lived change' or 'experienced insight' rather than interpretation" (Cull 85). This notion of a "lived change" sits more comfortably with the descriptions of PTSD sufferers who need to regard themselves as "positively transformed" by their trauma. They continue to live with the experience, as El Khoury's audience members embody their experience, and therefore imbue the ending as a transformation rather than a death. In representative situations, however, Kermode's and my own impulse towards watching an ending as being correlative with our fascination with dying makes more sense – as it is only in the representative sphere that we can ever truly contemplate and reflect upon the fact of our own deaths. This is perhaps most explicitly explored in my own practice through the ending of *The Future Show*, where I literally end the performance with reading aloud a fictional representation of my own death.

iii) How Does It End?

In Laura Cull's 2009 article, she describes metaphysical reality as being concurrent in Giles Deleuze's work and Allan Kaprow's happenings, meaning "an indivisible change or what Kaprow calls 'constant metamorphosis'" (Cull 80). She emphasizes "attention" both in Henri Bergson and Giles Deleuze's terms as a condition of ontological participation, and writes that Kaprow's emphasis on heightened attention in the Activities means that the lines between philosophy and

performance blur, so that performance could be seen as "a philosophical activity" (8) and philosophy could "become a score for performance" (80).

Taking the end as a participatory action perhaps even a step further than Tania El Khoury's *Gardens Speak*, Nic Green's *Trilogy* was a 2009 performance interrogating the current state of feminism which happened in three acts. The first act involves a large group of volunteer women Green has worked with dancing naked in violent, powerful and deliberately unflattering gestures. The second act is a choreographed reconstruction of a video of the 1971 "Women's Liberation Debate," chaired by a deeply misogynist Norman Mailer. The third act is a performance lecture, hosted by Laura Bradshaw and Nic Green, in which they call Laura's mother and discussed feminism with her live.

The show begins with an invitation and workshop for a group of volunteer women who will perform Green's choreography live in front of an audience. Through a Facebook callout in April of 2015, I received online correspondence from nine women who participated in this workshop, in a variety of venues and UK cities throughout 2009 and 2010. I requested that women who had felt that Green's performance marked or began their relationship with feminism get in touch, and so in this sense, the very fact of corresponding with me suggested that, according to Tassos Stevens' definition, the effects of the performance were not over as six years later they were still keen to talk about it. All of the respondents referred to the show as being somehow transformative in their own narratives as feminists. Robyn Pawlow, for example, wrote "Trilogy was an excellent catalyst at a very turbulent point in my life which really started to make me ask the right questions to help myself progress and grow. I now absolutely identify as a (capital 'F') Feminist and Egalitarian." Janice Bradshaw wrote, "Having stood up to be counted I find it difficult now not to

respond in some way to things that I may have let go at one time." Abby Watson wrote, "It was the first time I understood and defined myself as a feminist and yeah, was a pretty big milestone in my life."[73] Every response described the performance as having changed them and their perspective to being women. That said, these respondents took part in a lengthy workshop with Green. Some performed for two to three weeks, and before performing, they could understand the performance itself as a kind of "philosophical activity" in Cull's terms – an acknowledgement and public display of a commitment to feminism.

I was particularly interested in responses from women who had not first encountered the piece as performers in the workshop, but rather as either audience members or participants in the exceptionally exposing and radicalized "end moment." *Trilogy* ends with a very bold invitation. Nic Green and Laura Bradshaw, having previously referenced the song "Jerusalem" in their show as an anthem for suffragettes, invite any women from the audience who wish to come on stage to join them, and to take off their clothing and stand naked with them while singing "Jerusalem." The moment is incredibly powerful in that it serves not as an ending but as a possible beginning – the female audience members who have taken the invitation are on stage stood naked in front of their fellow audience members, and by virtue of this action seem to be pledging to take up and continue the mantle of feminism. This is a struggle that the performance has shown us is not finished but ongoing. For many audience members who took part in *Trilogy*, this was not the end of the show, but the beginning of their radicalization as feminists. In her review of the piece for *The Guardian*, Lyn Gardner wrote that when women came on stage at the end of the performance to sing "Jerusalem" naked, "Within the context of the show, it feels like

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[73] All responses can be read in their entirety in the Appendix.

nothing less than a political act." The artist and writer Erin Brubacher, who went on to organize the female volunteers for the show in Edinburgh and to volunteer to perform herself in the first section, first encountered the performance as a female audience member and chose to take off her clothing and sing *Jerusalem* at the end of the performance. Of her decision to get on stage, Erin wrote, "You know, it is a blur. I just know I was tremendously moved and thought there was no good reason at all to say no to these two incredible women." The Fierce Festival co-director Laura McDermott also came on stage at the end of a performance, and wrote that she would "would 100% agree that it solidified my relationship with feminism and affected my subsequent actions and behaviour."

I first saw a work-in-progress performance of the third part of *Trilogy* when we hosted it in Edinburgh at Forest Fringe in 2008. As one of the producers of the work-in-progress showing, Nic Green informed me that the piece would end with female audience members being invited to sing naked with her, and one of my tasks as a producer was to find a quiet and relatively private space outdoors where this could happen. As a result, while watching the piece for the first time, I was aware of the fact that this moment was coming as I had helped to organise it logistically. Because of this, while watching, I soon became very uncomfortable as Nic Green and Laura Bradshaw began making increasingly convincing arguments about feminism. I had gone to see the performance with no intention of taking my clothing off at the end, yet I began to have an inner struggle whilst watching, similarly to Erin, recognising that all of my reasons for not wanting to join in on the final moment were, to some degree, to do with the ways that I felt objectified as a woman. This became most pronounced when, in the work-in-progress, Green and Bradshaw began the lecture on feminism wearing ballerina costumes, then went to the back of the space

whilst showing a slideshow of contemporary women who have been deeply oppressed by sexist power structures (particularly one image of a woman being stoned for adultery), and then both came back on stage to continue the lecture naked. At the time, I remember feeling quite shocked by this, and I suddenly went from being slightly bored by the familiarity of their lecture on feminism to realising how impossible it was for me to look at fellow women naked without somehow objectifying them. My experience of watching then hinged quite heavily on an inner dialogue and struggle throughout their performance over whether or not to join in with the naked female performers. This was only my second year working "professionally" as co-director of the venue where this performance was taking place, and as a young aspiring producer and artist, I knew that all of my male and female professional colleagues would see me naked, and I would have to deal with the possibilities of a power imbalance that this may bring about. The inner dialogue finally resulted in me making the decision to join in, take my clothing off, and sing Jerusalem in the garden that I had sourced for the other women in front of my entire professional community at the time. From my own perspective, I would say that the adrenaline, fear, and public, nearly ritualistic nature of this action, undoubtedly marked the beginning of my relationship to feminism as being much more straightforward and less complicated than it had been previously.

Interestingly, the following year, when I saw the finished version of *Trilogy* at the Arches' Edinburgh venue in St. Stephens' church, I went to see it with a very established male artist who was in the Forest Fringe programme that year. The final performance was three hours long, and during the two intervals before the final invitation to sing *Jerusalem*, the male artist frequently expressed his discomfort and frustration with what he perceived as a degree of technical and political amateurism in

the piece. At this particular performance, accompanying an older male artist who I was working with who had repeatedly criticised both the show's premise and execution, I did not choose to join the other women on stage, as it would have felt like an act of aggression towards the artist that our venue (and by extension that I) was hosting. This said, the action of having sang with other women in 2008 is forever embedded in both and my memory and my politics, as it did not happen in a representational space of fiction, but in a space of reality, where I was really aware of the risk and fear involved in getting naked in front of professional colleagues, and I took the step anyway.

Performance artist Jess Dobkin comments on the effects of embodying as opposed to witnessing a symbolic act of resistance in performance through discussing her own intimate work: "Even if a performance doesn't change the way we relate to the world around us, we will have shared an intimate moment that will impact our relationship. I might see you on a subway platform or waiting at a bus station and I will have wiped your pussy in a bathroom stall, or you will have inserted a pencil inside my vagina…" (qtd. in Zerihan 24).[74] In Nic Green's piece, the extreme nature of the invitation she issues to her female audience members, coupled with the long-term workshops she did with volunteer female performers, made for a legacy for the piece in which she enabled audience members to enter a space of personal transformation and action, the effects of which continue to resonate for many women to this day.

I have seen one other performance attempt a similar "conversion" as its ending. Gary Campbell's piece *Crunch* (2010), which was a lecture on anti-capitalism, in which he invites audience members to come on stage and shred their

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[74] Quote referenced in my own 2015 article, "Unsustainable Acts of Love and Resistance: The Politics of Value and Cost in One-on-One Performances." *Canadian Theatre Review* 162 (2015): 63-67.

money. Although I was one of the audience members who chose to do this, shredding a £5 note, I would not say that the ending of this performance "changed me" in the sense that *Trilogy* did, although its dramaturgical structure was similar. This is likely because, when Gary invited us on stage to shred a bill, I did not feel especially challenged by the invitation, and in fact I framed it for myself within a capitalist rhetoric, thinking that for £5 I could purchase the experience of shredding a £5 note. In the most basic of narrative terms which ironically mirror a transactional approach, the stakes of this moment were much lower, as was my personal experience of the rewards/transformations that came about as an audience member.

Conclusion

On 22 March 2014, I was one of five writers to take part in a durational exercise in criticism for *Exeunt* magazine. Together, we committed to watch the entirety of Forced Entertainment's *And On The Thousandth Night* live stream online, as it was being performed at Culturgest in Portugal. We wrote and responded live, durationally, as the performance was in progress.

And On The Thousandth Night is a loose adaptation of the ancient Arabic folk tales - *One Thousand and One Nights*   In that collection of folk tales compiled during the Islamic Golden Age, the frame narrative consists of a Persian king who, after finding out about his wife's infidelity, has her executed and begins taking a new wife every night, sleeping with her, and then killing her the next day. Eventually his vizier cannot find any new virgins to sacrifice, and his daughter Sheharazad, horrified by the mass murder of women, volunteers to be the king's next wife. She devises to keep herself and the other women in the kingdom alive by telling the king a story on their wedding night which she does not give an ending to. The King keeps her alive night

after night in order to hear the end of the story, but each story morphs into a new tale which also has no ending.

In *And On the Thousandth Night* the company sit on stage wearing long robes and cardboard crowns, a nod to the Persian king. The "game" that they play -as Etchells says, "The fundamental thing in durational performances is that they're all in some sense a game", is "the game of telling stories."[75] The rules of the game are that one speaker begins telling a story with "Once upon a time," and before their story can end another performer says "Stop." After stopping the first story they must then begin telling their own story, opening with "Once Upon a Time" which will also be interrupted before it can end, or in some cases, even properly get started. In the version that we reviewed durationally, the performance went on in this vein for six hours, and the continual frustration of being deprived of resolution to any of the stories created, what I felt at the time, was a fractured rhythm to the piece. I wrote, "Someone just told a story about a light bulb in an empty room flickering on and off. That might be one of the most complete stories I've heard all night."[76]

The image of the light bulb encapsulated the feeling I had in listening to the piece, in that the frequency of a story ending abruptly with a "stop" created a flickering quality, what Daniel B. Yates, who was also durationally blogging on *Exeunt*'s site, termed "Coitus interruptus." About two hours into watching the piece, I wrote, "During the first part of watching this piece, what is wonderful is the question in my mind, which is 'If these stories never end, then what is the point of listening to them?' There is a feeling of listening to math equations without ever hearing the answer" (ibid).

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[75] "Tim Etchells on Durational Performance." Forced Entertainment. 18 October, 2014. Youtube Video. Web. Accessed 21 December 2015.
[76] "1000ththeexeunt." *Exeunt*. 22 March 2014. Web. Accessed 21 December 2015.

What the form or game of *And On the Thousandth Night* seemed to be slowly

illuminating for me by increments were my most conventional desires for certain

kinds of endings while engaging with certain kinds of stories. Yet, in spite of the

didactic nature of the writing about conventional endings, different kinds of stories do

seem to call for different kinds of endings.

In this chapter, conclusions and resolutions are very deliberately not

synonymized with endings. In even the most conventional narrative representations,

audiences are frequently deprived of a resolution or a conclusion, and sometimes, as

with the 2014 film *Inherent Vice*, audiences are given a satisfying conclusion to a plot

thirty minutes before the end of the story.[77] To suggest that endings and resolutions

are different is not a particularly subversive claim. The contemporary performance

narratives referenced in this chapter, however, have endings whose unique qualities

go past a complicated relationship with resolution, if they have a relationship to

resolution at all. Because these performances have a complicated and quite self-

conscious relationship to representation versus reality, we cannot discuss even their

applause in simple terms. As has been discussed repeatedly in this research, there is

not always a clear line in contemporary performance between which actions are

real/spontaneous/organic and which actions are pre-rehearsed and part of the

performance. Regardless of whether or not what takes place in a piece of

contemporary performance can be comfortably described as a representation, the

notion of an ending, if not the fact of ending, is inevitable, and this notion of ending

creates a container of a performance, giving the piece a shape. Kermode writes that

although the ending is perhaps no longer imminent, it always remains immanent (5),

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[77] *Inherent Vice* appears at first to be a detective story, in which a private investigator attempts to locate his ex-girlfriend. 30 minutes before the end of the film, however, the ex girlfriend reappears, and the major plotline is resolved. The film continues, nonetheless, and there is something brilliant in this additional 30 minutes of screentime which is no longer propelled by solving a mystery which already solved itself.

meaning that whether or not the end is coming soon, all things have an end built into their very foundations. Whether or not we accept Coney's premise that a piece has not ended until its legacy is forgotten (and if this is the case, we might say that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has never and perhaps will never end), or whether we think of an ending as that last, sometimes traumatizing and sometimes gentle moment of pre-rehearsed action on stage, or whether we think of an ending as a marked and ritualistic moment for an audience member to become accountable and change, there is a cohesion offered by the immanence of endings.   The notion or belief in an ending opens a space of contemplation, attention and sometimes freedom for those both making and watching a performance.   It allows us to invest, to engage, and, ultimately, to continue. In this sense I argue that the existence of an ending is the primary and most essential element both of narrative shape and meaning, yet wonderfully, no two endings are entirely alike.

Conclusion

My research question was, "In what unique ways can contemporary performance address our preoccupations with narrative?" Over the course of the last three years developing my thinking on this topic, I have spent a great deal of time grappling with which "narrative preoccupations" are both most fundamental and most frequently subverted or "played with" as constraints/possibilities in contemporary performance. I have also spent a great deal of time grappling with which "narrative preoccupations" afforded the greatest possibilities in terms of subversions and in depth exploration through my own practice.

The very first preoccupation which formed the title of Chapter 1 came quite naturally – Representation. A term whose association with narrative is as old as critical discussion of narrative itself, "representation" as a narrative preoccupation was introduced by Socrates as "mimesis" in Plato's *Republic*, and was contested/reclaimed at length by Aristotle in *Poetics*. The insufficiency of the translation of mimesis as "representation" explores what possibilities and boundaries are created by its association with narrative and theatre. The term "representation" is problematized when considered in the context of its association with time (the prefix "re" suggests that the audience is watching a repetition of a previous event rather than an event that is happening live, or is about to happen live), and its association with the truth or realism. I sought to question just this prefix, the "re" of "re-presentation" and question its associations with fiction in theatre through my practice-based piece *The Future Show*, in which I sought to create a "pre-presentation" which told the audience a detailed story of something purportedly true that was *about* to happen, namely the rest of my life. *The Future Show* exists within the context of the genre of

autobiographical performance, and the chapter went on to explore other performers who play with the audience's notions of representation through their autobiographical on-stage personas. It began by exploring the work of Tim Crouch, who frequently uses his own name in aid of challenging the audience's notion of whether or not it is possible to either tell the truth or lie on stage. It then discussed *Ball* by Brian Lobel, who merely purports to represent a version of his past-self on stage, as *Ball* is a show about a body (his body, in the past) which had cancer, and his body is now post-cancer, but does have the scars that serve as an important indicator of the veracity of the text's relationship to its performer. Finally, I discussed Mike Daisey, whose acclaimed theatrical monologue was presented as journalism on *This American Life*, leading to accusations of mis-representation as he told a factually inaccurate story about a trip he took to China to visit Apple Product Factories. This chapter primarily charted, through contextualising the fraught relationship to representing the self in performance, the results of *pre-presenting* rather than *re-presenting* a purportedly true story on stage, a precise and focussed tackle of the term "re-presentation" as a narrative preoccupation in contemporary performance.

The second chapter of this thesis and the second preoccupation researched was "Conflict." Taking the standpoint, derived from Michelle Gellrich's writing about conflict, that part of our obsession with seeing conflict as a contained entity is that, in reality, conflicts do not have a satisfying beginning or conclusion, this chapter explored conflicts as a constant undercurrent or possibility for tension, often based off of ancient causal relationships, and ready to arise back to the surface at any time. In my second chapter I explored the ways in which we attempt to contain and resolve conflicts – beginning with *Agon,* or the contest or trial, going on to what I termed *The Objective* - a goal an individual sets themselves, believing that its completion will

symbolically resolve a conflict against themselves – and ending with dialogue or conversation – the attempt to talk through a conflict. I considered creative approaches to these preoccupations undertaken by the performance companies Made in China, Theatre Replacement, Action Hero, Tim Crouch and Andy Smith, Bootworks, and my own practice-based pieces, *The Future Show* and *Drifting Right*. Discussion of conflict in this chapter in general was underpinned by questions around a neoliberal society's commitment to the illusion of progress, or to a Hegelian dialectic. In this sense, the subversions of our preoccupation with contained conflicts undertaken by the companies discussed are subversions that do not simply undermine or question narrative or performance conventions, but that question and undermine the dominant rhetoric around capitalism itself – that all of these conflicts are leading anywhere – that anything is worth the struggle.

The third and final preoccupation dealt with in chapter form in this dissertation was "Endings." As Beth Hoffmann writes, "Thinking about narrative entails not only thinking about 'story' (i.e., knowing whether there is one) but, more fundamentally, about the possibility that art that exists in time always already works in narrative ways. Narrative can thus refer to any of the means employed by a work to signal its orientation in and movement through time …" (*The Time of Live Art* 55). This final preoccupation addressed the fact that perhaps what most fundamentally asserts something as narrative is the fact that it will end and perhaps has already ended, marking it off as a contained moment, demarcated in time. This chapter considered the ways in which narratives in contemporary performance end, through discussing applause and the curtain call, the final moment on stage (what I term "the zinger", versus Forced Entertainment term the "airlock"), and the legacy that a performance might leave for audience members after the performance. It also

discussed political work, such as Tania El Khoury's *Gardens Speak* and Nic Green's *Trilogy*, which end with a kind of beginning, a desire for the audience to step out of the mediated space of the theatre by taking a real action at the end of the piece which may have real consequences. This chapter found that the narrative preoccupation with endings is at its heart a preoccupation with time, resolution, representation and the mediated or "safe space" of the theatre, and our own mortality, meaning that work which attempts to subvert our narrative preoccupations with endings (if such a subversion is even possible, as everything will eventually end) ends by commenting on narrative structure as a whole, or on the notion of a whole itself.

By splitting this dissertation into three main preoccupations (Representation, Conflict and Endings), the research itself deliberately played within the constraints of its own three act structure, with a beginning, middle and end. Within the categories of representation, conflict and endings I was able to discuss character, authorship, actions, events, tasks, setting, and journey-through-time, all narrative preoccupations which contemporary performance practitioners can and do address (subvert/play with/employ) in their work.

Epilogue and Findings: Understanding leads to Innovation

Ideally, this dissertation will sit within a continuum of wider research into narrative in the performance context that proves useful for other artists and students when structuring their work. The main finding of this research has been that better understanding and questioning narrative pre-occupations is a means of creating cohesive but unconventional feeling dramaturgical structures.

Many years ago, when I still had my heart set on becoming a successful playwright, I was sat at my kitchen table sharing a bottle of wine with a fellow friend

who was also a playwright. The young writer had already experienced an exceptional amount of success, and as a now established writer has gone on to become arguably one of the most successful playwrights in the country. I remember asking them then if they had any tips for writing a "well-made play." Bleary eyed from the wine, the smallest hint of fear in their voice, they told me that that question made them think of the fable about the dancing centipede. They told me the fable about a centipede who could dance wonderfully, until someone asked it to explain how it was dancing. Once the centipede stopped dancing and began to wonder how it was dancing, it stopped being able to dance. This response obviously closed down the conversation, and we moved onto discussing another topic before they went home.   This was a writer who, at a young age, could masterfully employ conventional narrative structures in aid of creating work that did not feel predictable, but did feel satisfying. The same narrative conventions that one could trace upon reflection, but seemed in use so seamlessly and effortlessly in their work, felt limiting and hackneyed when I was taught about them in playwriting workshops and attempted to apply them to my own work. Perhaps this is to say that some writers inherently know how to dance the centipede's most popular dance, and others do not.

Among practitioners who identify as playwrights and practitioners who identify as performance artists or live artists, there has been some historical resistance to spending time thinking or learning about narrative conventions. David Edgar tells an anecdote in the introduction to *How Plays Work* about how much animosity he encountered from other artists in the field, when first teaching a course on playwriting at the University of Birmingham, for example. He writes:

I wrote a piece about new writing in *The Independent*, which provoked a

distinguished British playwright to claim that the real problem with

contemporary drama was the existence of my course. From the beginning, we

were up against the British cult of the crusty amateur: that prejudice which, in

the theatre, is expressed in the belief that while actors can benefit from

training (along with stage managers and other footsoldiers of the craft),

directors and writers are supposed to acquire their skills telepathically; that the

idea of training devalues the status and may indeed stunt the imagination of

the lone artist engaged in isolated struggle with the muse (Edgar xii).

This wary attitude towards artists "overthinking it" may have classical roots.

As Malcolm Heath writes in his translation for Aristotle's *Poetics*, Aristotle likely did

not intend for his text to be treated as a do-it-yourself manual for writing good

tragedies. Aristotle is unresolved in *Poetics* on whether or not Homer was able to

construct masterful plots because of what he called *tekhnê* (most frequently translated

as "skill" or "craft") or by instinct (Heath x). Aristotle did not suppose that to

understand tragedy or the epic was to be able to write one, or that to write tragedy or

an epic was to understand it. Heath writes, "A joiner taught to make a piece of

furniture in a particular way may do it perfectly, even if he does not understand the

reasons why that is the best way to do it; he may even do it better than a colleague

who has more understanding but less manual dexterity" (Heath x). I would argue that

while this may be true for the joiner who is making a recognizable piece of furniture,

this is not true for the designer who is designing an entirely new piece of furniture.

Innovation requires understanding, and by thinking through and understanding our

narrative preoccupations in contemporary performance, we can innovate new ways to structure a piece of performance that will be both satisfying and unrecognizable.

I have conducted this research, in part, to argue for the value of artists thinking deeply about narrative and structure. Those who have taken a course in writing have perhaps heard the old adage "You need to learn the rules in order to break them." My research has sought to replace the word "rule" with "convention," and then to ask a student, critic or artist to think carefully about what narrative *preoccupations* lie behind the convention, and how they might create new strategies (or build their own "rules") through philosophically and creatively engaging with these preoccupations. There is value in a centipede watching the other centipedes dance their unfamiliar and familiar dances, and thinking about why they are dancing, and what indeed even constitutes dancing or what we expect of dancing. After some time spent reflecting on the fundamental preoccupations associated with what we consider dancing (or in the case of this research, narrative), the centipede will begin to dance again. And the dance, inspired by deep critical reflection, will not look like any dance that has ever come before. Thinking philosophically and critically about narrative conventions makes space for a new approach to narrative, leading to structural and dramaturgical innovation.

Appendices

Interviews, Transcripts, Emails and Facebook Messages

These are included in the thesis for reference only. There is no need to read these interviews and emails in their entirety unless the reader or examiner is compelled to do so out of interest.

Transcript: Panel Discussion on "The Writer/Performer"
With Forest Fringe artists at the Fusebox Festival, Austin Texas
23 April 2013

Moderator: Deborah Pearson
Panelists: Brian Lobel, Bryony Kimmings, Kieran Hurley, and Action Hero (Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse)
In attendance: Ron Berry (Fusebox Festival Director) and Dan Koop (Melbourne based artist)

D: Thank you so much for coming to the talk today. We're talking about Writer/Performers. One of the things that is a common thread with a lot of the work but not all of the work of Forest Fringe is that we have a lot of artists who are writers and actually spend quite a lot of time in front of their laptops writing, but wouldn't necessarily call themselves playwrights for the kind of work that they're showing here, even though a lot of the time they spend is writing. Or maybe they wouldn't even think to call themselves writers so much as performance artists. I think that everybody here is a really incredible writer. In a way I feel that all the inventive and innovative things that the artists here do with form, that is definitely an extension of and part of writing. We just wanted to get them all together. Maybe some of you are writer/performers. It would be great to get some of your thoughts about the topic as well. I just wanted to ask some questions of the people who are here.

We are Forest Fringe. We are all individual artists but we've all worked with an organisation called Forest Fringe in the past which I actually co-direct with Andy Field who is also a writer but he's not here today. We try to make space for inventive work at the Edinburgh Festival but that has then ended up extending out to a community of people who have gotten to know each other over the years and who are now taking over this venue as part of Fusebox and showing some work. We're all UK based artists which may not be clear from my accent that I've been living in the UK for seven years and Brian's been living there for six. I beat him by a year.

Brian: It's not a competition.

Audience Member: Says the loser.

Brian: I hate you. I'm just feeling fragile right now.

D: So everybody here is based in the UK and some people are sore losers some people are humble winners, that brings everyone together. Those are the things that we have in common. We all make formally playful work. We all do spend time with our laptops even though that's not necessarily how we're always talked about or seen in the community. I wanted to start by getting everyone to introduce themselves.

G: I'm Gemma and I work with James in a company called Action Hero.

B: I'm Brian Lobel.

D: I'm Debbie Pearson

Br: I'm Bryony Kimmings

K: And I'm Kieron Hurley.

D: But I also think we could talk a bit about the kind of work we make.

Audience member: You say your name's Brian. Can you explain that?

B: It's just what it is.

Br: It's the male version of mine.

B: Brian, Bryony.

D: Why don't you guys talk a little bit about your …

B: Relationship to the writer/performer?

D: Sure.

B: Let's do it. Let's jump in.

D: Talk about that in context of your practice. So we get both at once. Double header.

G: Okay. It's probably quite a recent thing that we had thought about our work in terms of writing. We had been or have been writing for our work right from the beginning. Last year we went on a residency, a writing residency, and we thought, oh I don't know I don't think this is really us, and then it really was us and we were pretending that it's not. I think because we work in collaboration anyway, we never have a process where we sit down and we write a whole long thing from start to finish, but we're always kind of involved in a process of writing pieces of text and those bounce backwards and forwards between the two of us.

J: Yeah, I think that too.

D: You guys have recently, your newest show is a collaboration with someone who identifies as a playwright and who is also a novelist …

G: This new show we're making at the moment and when we went on this writer's residency, we got paired with a "proper writer". He kind of helps you to develop your practice in relation to writing. And he is a guy called Nick Walker who is a novelist but he also writes for radio and television. With this new piece he's helping us with the writing of the text, so we've had much more of a focus in this new piece that we're making on what it might mean to write for performance rather than the writing of a thing. Oh I have to write this down now.

J: The reason we never identified as writers before is I think there's a general association between writing and story and writing and narrative and our shows definitely don't have stories. But we started to realise that there is, if you have a very

broad idea of what narrative is, then our shows have some kind of narrative and we became interested in that. The reason that we ended up working with a writer for this project is that we started to become interested in stories, not because we wanted to tell a story, but we were interested in how dominant story is in our world and why that is, and we wanted to break that down and explore it. So we worked with a writer and we started to tell a story and then we started to now deconstruct that a bit.

D: I should make the point that the new show they're working on is a sort of a reconstruction of sports movies. Like American sports movies. Where story is a really particular thing.

G: Yeah so we were really interested in a particular kind of narrative – going up – like a particular kind of narrative arc and so yeah we felt like we wanted to work with a writer to help us understand that kind of particular formula we're working with.

Ron Berry: Can you talk a little bit about how you found the text that you're performing here?

G: So this piece that we're showing tonight, *Watch Me Fall*, we were really interested in Daredevils, particularly Evil Knievel. So we spent a lot of time watching a lot of video of Evil Knievel and transcribing all of the things he says. It's incredible actually, if you've ever got a free hour, go on YouTube, it's amazing. The way that he talks, the rhythm of his speech is so interesting. So we were interested in using that as a starting point for working with that kind of text and generating more text as a response to the particular rhythms and cadence of his speech.

J: About 70% of this show is just things that were actually said by him all mixed up and edited together and then 30% of it is stuff we've written that kind of sounds the same that we developed through a long period of listening to him and not just him, a lot of different stuntmen, but mainly him because he's the most interesting. Our other show, the first show we made, which some of you might have seen here, called *A Western*, the text from that was generated in a similar way. We watched lots and lots of Westerns, and wrote down what people said in the Westerns, and kind of edited that together into a piece. So again that's why we didn't identify as writers because we were just kind of writing down stuff that someone else had already said or written. But the new show we haven't done that. So we haven't watched sports movies and copied what they've said, so much. We started to write it as if we were writing a Screenplay.

Audience Member: Are you familiar with Anna Deavere Smith's work? She's at Yale. She's put together amazing full length works using nothing but quotations.

G: Oh right.

Audience Member: She did one on the Los Angeles riots and she did one on the healthcare system, and then another. She's absolutely wonderful. She does a one woman show playing every single individual who she's quoting. No word in her plays is not a direct quote and she does it so beautifully. She has a wonderful book for people going into theatre.

Brian: And she's on *Nurse Jackie* also.

D: She's on *Nurse Jackie*?

Audience Member: Yeah she's on *Nurse Jackie*.

K: One of the things that's really interesting about Action Hero's work in relation to that question "Are you a writer or not" is it asks really interesting questions, if you ask it through that lens, of "Is this writing?" it asks really interesting questions about what writing is. So it's not just generating content, but there's a dramaturgical job of work in piecing together this collage of different texts, and that's very much a writer's job as well. And Yeah, Anna Deavere Smith and a whole bunch of verbatim theatre speaks to that too.

D: Um, Brian did you want to say a little bit about your relationship to writing?

B: Sure. My name is Brian. I actually started as a writer and performer and now I've actually moved kind of far away from it. But I think for a number of different reasons. When I was diagnosed with cancer 13 years ago I started taking notes about it. I took a lot of notes and suddenly I quickly realised that I had a solo performance. I had never really heard of solo performance. I studied with Holly Hughes who was one of the fire brands of the culture wars. Part of the MEA 4. But I didn't consciously write. I was more like, "All of these weird things are happening to me. I should just jot the notes down" just as if you were writing something interesting that Evil Knievel said, my nurses and doctors weren't celebrities, but I was like, "That's weird that they keep using these words over and over again." So I just started noting them down and then I had a show called *Ball* about testicular cancer. And the way writing goes, I thought that writing goes that it starts with a diagnosis of cancer, and then ends with finishing the cancer. So I wrote that show. It's really good. I perform it for medical students still which I feel really old doing. I wrote this show. An hour long show, and then I was really uncomfortable with the fact that I had this really concise narrative that starts like this and ends like this, because illness is not really like that, and thinking about bodies and drawing from a lot of disability discourses about normative bodies and changing bodies, I was really uncomfortable with something starting and something finishing. Which is why I wrote a cancer sequel called *Other Funny Stories About Cancer* which came five years after I had cancer. But I still had stories to tell, the stories that were cut out of the first cancer story in order to make it a nice story that I could share with my parents and that felt neat. Then I wrote a third story nine years after I had cancer, and I felt like, "I shouldn't really still be talking about this" because I don't think about it in my day to day life really, so much. But what happened then was that I was 28 and performing material I wrote when I was 20 and I was really uncomfortable because what happens with the writing is that it gets stopped. Like it stops writing. And if you were a filmmaker it would be considered totally okay that you made something when you were 20 and then you made something when you were 30 and they were different, but when it's your body that performs it, my 29 year old self, I'm 31 now, but my 29 year old self couldn't really perform 20 year old self, because I was like now kind of like Out Queer, and a lot of the work had to do with fertility, and I was kind of like playing this game of hide and seek inside of it. And that was kind of the clearest thing that had changed, but actually my opinions towards mortality and my body and my

relationship with my parents was also really different. So I thought, "Oh I could change the stuff about sexuality, but then I'd have to change the stuff about mortality, and then I'd have to change the stuff about my family", so now what I do is when I perform that work together, I have an introduction. I perform all three pieces next to each other and try to make it very obvious to the audience that I'm trying to do this task of performing my 20 year old self and those 20 year old opinions. And then growing up with it. I only say that because the performance I'm doing here for the festival, which is called *Carpe Minutae Prima* which starts tomorrow, which is an installation, is also a piece about illness, but in a really discreet way. But it's really just about asking people to have conversations about how they spend their time and about the pressure placed on people after an illness to spend their time wisely, and to earn every minute and use it well. You hear all this bullshit. I mean Lance Armstrong was obviously one of the most notorious people in this way about saying we had to value everything, which was based on this whole thing. So as a performer I think my experience of having these different scripts has made me a little bit less interested in scripts and more interested in raw conversations. So now I find that the script I have for this piece is actually three sentences long and that's all that is there. But I guess it's important that those three sentences are firmly done because I think that they're good sentences to start the conversation. Like the specific language starts the conversation. But that is my relationship to writing in performance.

D: You said so many good things.

B: So many

D: I wanted to ask you one brief question before we move on. You said that thing about the raw conversation. Do you ever feel that in the course of those conversations there is a kind of gentle dramaturgy that happens from your end of trying to create a certain arc to the conversation or have a certain …

B: Yes and no, in that… It's more that I have rules about what the show is. So I'm paying people on the street to make a video, and they have to sign a contract. And then they know that video will be made into a single DVD and sold to someone else for the price of a dollar. So it's kind of like my dramaturgy is in the rules that I set. We can talk about many things, but we have to always come back to this contract. I try to keep it open enough because I'm collecting 60 minutes, but over 15 hours, and if I were really hardcore about it, I could collect 250. But one is technical considerations – I can't actually make that many DVDs in a three day span, but more importantly what I'd like to do is I'd like to have the dramaturgy open enough that if someone sits with me for twenty minutes and has a really open conversation about, "I don't really want to sit on video. I'm uncomfortable" then actually, they can decide not go through with the project and that's not a failure of the piece, but instead I've had a nice conversation with someone for twenty minutes about how they spend their time, and how they decided they don't want to sell me a minute of their life because they have signed a contract, and it's quite Mephistophelian, is that the word? But that's kind of exciting to me that they go, "No, there's no way that I'm doing that to you, for you, I'm not interested, this totally freaks me out." But as long as I can have that conversation with them, and I try to then pull at that conversation, what is that about, cause otherwise it would be too leading. It would say, "Oh the only way for

success is for you to do this" so instead the success is just that we've had that conversation.

D: Bryony has to go! Bryony can you say anything before you go?

Br: Yeah, of course I can. Goodbye. Okay, so I approach writing differently. When I first started making solo performance I felt like I didn't have anything to say, but I knew that I wanted to do solo performance, that I had a talent for writing or for performing, but I didn't want to be in plays, so I decided to always base my practice around going and finding something out or investigating something, or going on a journey of some kind to then have something to write about, because I felt like a bit of a fraud if I kind of went, "Listen to me!" and then I didn't really have anything to say. So most of my work starts with a question. The one that's here, *Sex Idiot*, starts with the receipt of an STI test that was positive, and having been an idiot all my life and never having a sexual health test, I had to go retrace all my sexual footsteps and find out which person had given it to me, which was kind of an emotional journey, and then write a show about that. I made pieces of work for the people that had helped me, so the show is made up tributes to the people that helped me and the story of what happened. My next show was to investigate or to prove to my alcoholic friend that alcohol had no direct relationship to her creativity, which seemed to be one of the reasons that she couldn't go through rehab. So I worked with lots of scientists to kind of help me and I spent seven days drunk under constant supervision and tried to disprove the theory that alcohol is good for creativity but unfortunately didn't, it's really good for creativity. But at the same time as me doing that it proved to my housemate that someone cared about them enough to try and sort of do that so she went through rehab and the centre of the story is the experiment plus her rehab. And then my new show is about my niece telling me she wants to be on the Kardashians when she's older, she's nine, or the Essex equivalent, and me saying to her, "That's not acceptable. I'll get famous as a pop star that has a different value system and I'll prove to you that not everyone has to have big boobs and talk about (…) all the time it can be something more wholesome," and that's what I'm doing at the moment, so please buy my track. So I do something that I find kind of exhilarating or thrilling or out of the ordinary and then make work about it, so the narrative is driven by what happens and then there's creative writing around that. But I also make audio work, and I make very very story based work that is very narrative driven, has a total arc, and I've been commissioned as a playwright before. *7 Day Drunk*, the drinking show, I was in a room with ten other playwrights commissioned, the same amount of money as a playwright, which is unheard of, to write a play. But that was a situation where everyone would go "So Bryony's 'Play'" Yeah, they'd go like that *(Bryony makes quotation marks)* And they'd be like, can we have your script? And I'd be like, "There's no script." It's all from here, it all comes from here, you know, it's written on the walls, I don't know. That was Soho Theatre and then Southbank Centre's commissioned a new one. And again, they call me a writer, I'm totally like – if someone calls me a writer I'm like "Yeah" and if someone calls me a performance artist I'm like, "Yeah." I don't really, or comedian a lot. I don't really … Anyway Bye! *(Bryony leaves to go to her tech.)*

D: You can come see Bryony's show tomorrow night and then you can at least have an answer to the STD question even if you'd like to ask other questions. That was

super interesting. Very good, very concise, very good writing in a way. The mark of a good writer. Kieran did you want to talk a bit about your practice?

K: Sure.

D: Come on over. Come to Bryony's seat.

K: So I do unashamedly call myself a writer and I'm really preoccupied with stories and recently even call myself a playwright and feel okay with that, although that's a more recent development. The piece that I'm going to be showing in there tomorrow night will just be me telling a story for an hour. It's an auto-biographical story. It's about me hitch hiking across Europe to get to a No G8 protest in Italy a few years ago. I didn't set out to make a play when I made that piece. It's an old show for me. It's about three and a half years old. I didn't really set out to make a play. I didn't really know that what I was doing was being a playwright when I made it. I came through a background of making a lot of really collaborative contemporary theatre work, and my route into that practice was always kind of as someone who was offering up text in that process as well as performing. And then everyone who I was working with regularly either jacked it in or like left to do it somewhere else, so I thought, make a solo show. But then people started calling it a play. And I kind of resisted that at first. But for me the direction my work has gone in, I've found that I'm asking myself a more interesting set of questions, if I accept the sort of, if I accept the framework of considering what I'm doing as being the work of a playwright, and that's maybe asking more interesting questions of plays than if I try to opt out of that conversation. For other people whose work is more resistant to story or less driven by it then I guess that's just more of a redundant conversation. Like, "Why would you?" But for me that's actually become an interesting thing to think about myself as a playwright. Like my work often involves me performing it but not always. I've started writing slightly more straight plays as well. But that's always still informed by my route into making work that has a concern for liveness and for a relationship with its audience. And so, so yeah, so what else? I made another show more recently called *Beats* which is a fictional story, that's an autobiographical piece, *Hitch*, and it's my only autobiographical piece. I share some of, it was interesting hearing Brian talk about the distance between the self in the show and the self in the moment of performing the show. That's become an increasing tension for me in that piece, because the self in the show is always a bit of a narrative construct anyway, and as time has passed that distance has become greater. My way around it is that I've written in a line at the top of the show where I admit that my 23 year old self is a bit of a dumbass. I have a much less sophisticated approach to dealing with those problems than Brian. But there you go. So for this other piece that was also a monologue piece called *Beats* it was a piece about this mid-90s free party rave sub-culture in the UK. It's an entirely fictional monologue that I deliver from a desk, Spalding Gray style, while a DJ that joins me on stage soundtracks the whole thing as a set. So that was fun. And I guess I work a lot with musicians in my work if I'm performing it as well. I work with artists from other disciplines in that way. But sometimes in writing something that looks a lot more like a straight play, it has come out of a quite collaborative process that is quite dialogical with other artists, and quite often I'll find myself credited as a co-writer. It's always stories. In many ways I think the route of what I'm doing in my work is actually quite old fashioned and traditional, with just enough of a sort of contemporary edge on it to buy me the right

to hang out with people that are more contemporary and interesting and cooler than I am. And that's kind of that's it really.

Ron Berry: And you're working with National Theatre of Scotland on something?

K: Yeah, actually the whole "playwright" thing in the last year or so has sort of taken off a bit and people have been interested in my work in that way because as a playwright they find it interesting. That's kind of what I mean about it asking some more interesting formal questions of what a play is. So I just finished making a piece with the National Theatre of Scotland that I made with three other performers, two of which were musicians, but there wasn't like a piece being performed by these two actor writers and these two musicians, it was kind of like just a piece driven by storytelling and music, and it felt a bit like a folk music session in its informality, and it was lots of fragments of stories and songs and that's a piece that I just finished making with them. But I'm also this year in attachment to them as an organisation as a young writer in residence kind of thing and under commission to write a new play. So Bryony was talking about the money aspect. I mean I say that it's about asking more interesting questions. I also realised that if I tried to do exactly the same things I was doing anyway, but called myself a playwright, I could get paid a lot better. And that makes a lot of sense. It's like, "But if you're a playwright, we give you a playwriting commission, we'll pay you this, and if you're making new work then we won't." And I'm like, "Okay, where do I sign."

Audience Member: What's the difference in terms of money?

K: Well a commission for a, there are sort of agreed contract rates depending on the size of the venue and also the length of the play. So, uh …

D: Cause playwrights basically have a union and fought for …

G: Yeah, yeah

K: Have a really strong (union). And I'm a member of the Scottish society of playwrights which is the union in Scotland, and I've kind of taken it upon myself in that context to try and loosen things up a little so that we can, so that as a union we can get better at representing people who work with text and performance but for quite necessary aesthetic reasons don't identify as playwrights. And it's an interesting difficult conversation. I nearly got somewhere with it then got it vetoed by Scotland's poet laureate at the AGM. And I was like, "Oh cool, well thanks guys. Back to square one." So I'm kind of trying to loosen things up a bit so that unionised, so that all that job of work of unionising actually doesn't get lost in a seachange around the different kind of work. So that we can carry on with the kind of really useful interesting developments and conversations about where theatre might be going, but not lose a whole bunch of useful groundwork that's been put in place to make sure that artists don't get exploited. But in terms of the question about rates, so… it kind of all depends on whether you finish the show. For a full length play, it's considered to be a ninety minute play, which is weird because who determines that that's a full length play, who determines that.

Audience Member: Put in a blank page.

D: Lots of silences and pauses, exactly …

K: Most of my work comes in about sixty or seventy minutes. The work of the type that I'll be presenting tonight. So for like a sixty to eighty five minute play that's sort of like a band 2 commission, and it comes in three instalments. So the first instalment is they give you about two and a half thousand pounds to write a first draft. And then they'll give you another fee of about a similar amount if they agree to a second draft. But they can pull out at that stage. They can say, "We don't want it." And then you're left with your play. Is someone giggling at "Pull out"? Is that what happened? And then um and then you get a third more nominal fee if it goes to production. So the weird thing is you don't know if your work's going to go on.

Dan Koop: But the other difference is that they kind of buy the product. So they get receipt of something and they will then decide. When you're making your own work you're kind of making your own decisions about how it (…)

D: But then you have *7 Day Drunk* which Bryony got the playwriting commission for … Like Bryony *has* to perform that show. You know what I mean? Like there is also the thing of writing a script that can be performed by other people, but Bryony has to perform the show because it's about her being drunk for seven days, and if somebody else performs it it's a totally different thing.

B: My cancer trilogy got published last year by Oberon which does, they're related to a publisher in the U.S. also. They do a lot of plays, and the way that they really make their money is they do performance rights for plays. So at all the theatres in the UK, if there's a touring show they'll offer to sell you a script, but the goal with that is that actually other people will perform it and then they'll get the rights for the show. Which is weird for me. I was laughing because of how much money it is and I was thinking I'm really in the wrong business. Which I know is a bad conversation to have about work.

K: No, no, no. It's part of it.

B: It's a bad thing to say about it. But I was, um, it's funny because now the rights to perform my cancer show, which is very much about the scars that I have on my actual body, and like, my singular testicle, are available

K: For purchase

B: For purchase, and a few years ago, two kids from the States both asked me if they could perform it for Forensics Competitions. Is Forensics big in Texas? Is it?

Ron: Yep.

B: It's more in the West than it is where I'm from in New York. Which is like these speech competitions. It's like they go and they give a monologue. When I was joking and I was like, "I prepared my one minute comedic monologue today" that's what they do. And for the National competitions. And it was weird. Because one I was really uncomfortable with him performing it, I didn't know why. Neither of them

had had cancer. But the other one was like twenty and from his Facebook page looked really gay and asked in this really shy like frightened way that I felt like I really connected with, and I was like, "Oh I felt really comfortable with that person performing this voice, that boy." But the other person, I'm really not comfortable, I mean I let him do it, because who cares? I mean I'm not so precious about anything that, y'know, but there was something weird about the story of my body

D: And how much you could identify with the person in a way.

B: Yeah.

D: Who was doing it I guess,

Dan Koop: You were kind of making a casting decision.

D: Yeah, you were casting it.

B: They did a nice thing to ask me about my opinion. The first script had been on the Forensics circle, cycle, circuit? Circuit for a few years, but only from a photocopy that I'd given someone once. And, so it was nice that they asked properly, but weird. It's weird.

K: What you were saying about them sort of buying a product, it's true that that does bring up a whole bunch of interesting tensions about what I can and can't do. So I can say it, but if I keep doing what I'm doing and just call myself a playwright so I get paid better for it, but inevitably I enter a whole set of expectations about the kind of work that you might then produce, and the conversations I've been having to have have actually been kind of around trying to reassure people that the thing they might think that they want me to make I actually have no track record making. They're actually much better off if they pay me the money they have to do something that I know I can do. Which is this weird thing. It's like, "But now it's a writing commission so you do a play for three characters, yeah you've grown up now, right?" And that's sort of interesting. Part of me has an itch I want to scratch there as well. I am writing in those ways as well, and that's out of a genuine desire to sort of stretch the parameters of my work as a storyteller, in directions that are new and interesting for me. Slightly more outwardly, more conventional and traditional. But it does leave open interesting questions about who owns the direction of the practice.

Audience Member: I wanted to bring Last night with Tony Kushner to some of the things you've said. Um, he went to see Steven Spielberg and he said he couldn't do the Lincoln play at a certain point, he's too much, he's not an expert and all that. And so Steven Spielberg organised with the twenty greatest Lincoln scholars available, and so he sat at table with them for six hours while he asked them questions, and Spielberg said, "Well now do you think you can do it?" and he said, "No. But it was the best afternoon of my life."

K: But he wrote it in the end?

Audience Member: Yes he did, but it was about the possibility of having support.

K: Absolutely.

Audience: Of having the support of people who are invested in what you're writing.

K: Absolutely. And actually NTS, the National Theatre of Scotland, who you mentioned, have been really good in saying, like, don't make, "We commission a lot of young writers and then they think they have to write a national theatre play, and then it's kind of shit actually and doesn't go on", so, like" they've been really good in reminding me just to do my thing. It's others that have been maybe slightly less useful in that way.

Audience Member: And then about someone performing what you wrote. He said, he made an impassioned speech at the end. He was sort of interviewed and he got driven into talking about his parable horror and disappointment in politics for almost the whole time, and finally at the end he started talking about theatre, and he got very passionate cause he was finally getting to talk about theatre, and he said, "Theatre is better than anything else in the world because every performance is singular, and maybe there's an actor, maybe there was something in the newspaper about acting, or maybe the audience isn't gonna pay attention." It's the variations on one performance to another that exhilarates him, and he said more about, oh yes, about someone else performing the person who wrote it – that nothing else trains the mind as well as theatre to be simultaneously sceptical and involved. Committed and sceptical. Because you know, he specifically said, you know that the person you are watching is not the one who had the cancer and is experiencing that. It's because you know that, and yet he is trying to convince you that he is the one, and because your brain has to keep going back and forth between those two, that is theatre.

Brian: Which I guess is why I'm interested in not necessarily thinking of the show as theatre, because I think it is important that people see the scar that is on a body. So for me there's an essential quality about it.

Audience member: You want a relationship with your audience in a more personal way.

B: I had a question. *(To Action Hero).* I wanted to ask you guys a question about the script that you write, and just thinking about Kieran's, how Kieran was talking… Is there a script that gets written, and if so, could someone else perform that work, do you think? Has it come up or would it come up, do you think?

G: We do end up with a script because we have to,

B: For tech

Gemma: Yeah, you know.

James: Well we have to learn it sometimes. And then

Gemma: But it always kind of ends up with, different, what we always kind of end up with is like different chunks. So there's this bit, which is maybe half a page.

There's this thing, there's this thing, there's this thing, and some of those things might be text, and some of those things might be actions and then they sort of shuffling

James: That's the thing, I'm not

Gemma: And then it sort of settles into an order.

James: Like this show, a lot of what happens, there is no text. So there might be a stage direction. So in a conventional text there'd be probably a lengthy stage direction saying what's happening but actually we don't do that, cause we know what that action is. So it just says, "Jim, do the like thing, flame thing."

D: Flame thing!

K: So it's a diagram of the show for your purposes.

J: Yeah, but we got asked to - There's a couple of times where the guy from Denver wanted to put on our show. He wanted to put on *Watch Me Fall* and he said he couldn't afford to fly us over so he was gonna get somebody else to perform it and we said No, we didn't want other people to perform it. And that got us to ask that question of ourselves about why that was, and that's been a kind of ongoing conversation between us.

G: And our work's not autobiographical at all.

J: Well the thing is we, it kind of is.

G: Maybe it is.

J: In a weird way. Like it's not at all. It's about. This show's about stunt men.

Audience Member: Do you have scars?

J: Well the thing is it's very much about us two on stage together.

G: We make, because we are always in this collaborative process as well. Which is this thing about being a playwright. We probably wouldn't fit into that category because we're always working in this collaborative way. Is that we're always making, I'm always making something that I know that *I'm* gonna do. Or if I'm writing something that I know that James is gonna do it. So I'm always making it for us. So there's something funny about if someone else was to do it, I just wouldn't be happy.

K: The analogy I think that I would find more helpful is like to think of you guys not as co-playwrights, it's more analogous to a band. If someone else was to perform *Watch Me Fall* it would be like watching a cover band. It's like, okay, that's *Watch Me Fall* but it's by these weird guys that aren't actually you, and it's consequently a bit of a strange and redundant event.

J: But why that is is a really interesting question which we never quite got to the bottom of. Why that is the case. Because in a way there is a fiction there. We're not playing ourselves, but we kind of are. Our body, my body is a really …

G: Yeah it's important it's James' body.

J: It's really important to it. I guess because of the way the piece grows – the piece grows from our bodies and our relationship

G: It's very much out of our relationship

J: And I think that collaborative thing is a really important point as well. I was thinking about, one of my frustrations with stories or with plays is that they're often, because they're often written by one person they often have, it kind of has one idea, and it says "This is what I think" and it kind of has a neat – it always has this, it doesn't always, it can often have a neat ending. It says, "This is what I think and here it is." And like, Brian, you're saying about your work, I feel like real life's not like that, and real life's way more ambiguous. We've been watching a lot of these sport films, because they're a really perfect example of like the really extreme end of story where everything gets really wrapped up. So at the end of these sports films the quarterback at the end of his high school football thing, the end of his life basically, is when he did that. And then they have the thing of "Where are they now?" It's like one sentence. I watched one last night and it was so frustrating, this is a documentary one but it still had the same storyline, and the coach, it just goes, "Coach still works with kids." That was the rest of his life. And I was like, "What? What's he actually? What?" And of course the rest of his life would have been as spectacular and as mundane as everyone else's lives, but I just kind of –

Audience Member: But sometimes that becomes not true.

J: Yeah, yeah.

Audience Member: Like he dies.

D: Yeah he won't always work with kids.

Audience member: Or he could stop working.

D: Yeah that's true.

G: But I'm really interested in that neatness of narrative. So for this new show that we're making, which is about the simultaneous desire or when you watch those kinds of things, like the neatness of that narrative and it feels so fulfilling, like emotionally it gets me every single time. So the desire for that, but also wanting to pick it apart. Simultaneously saying, "Oh we're not interested in that in our work…"

J: But we love it.

G: But we actually really are. But in a way that sort of wants to, we want to kind of stab at it, but we also want to have it as well.

J: A collaborative way of working means that because we don't agree on everything 100% because we're two different people, everything is kind of like an open question or a bit like Brian's saying, it's the start of a conversation. It's like, "This is a conversation we're having and now we're having it with you, and it's something we don't quite understand. We love this thing, we hate this thing, we don't know what it is." Rather than "This is what I think."

G: But I can imagine writing something for someone else.

J: Yeah.

G: But I think I would have to really clearly be making something for someone else to perform. I think I would have to do that.

D: I actually recently had a, because I started as a playwright, and now I kind of make performance, I make work. And somebody who knew that asked me to come in and said, "I'd be really interested in having you write something for us, but this is a performance piece that is for other performers." And I had this moment of thinking, "How would I do that? What would I do?" And then I thought like, "Oh I could just write a piece for all people I know where I put them into situations and they play themselves and I make them do what I think they would do in that situation." And then I couldn't really figure out what that was or why that would be interesting. For some reason I was like, but for some reason it felt like there was something odd to me about pretending people, I don't know, suddenly I was like, "Well if I'm gonna have all of these people but I have to, I have to acknowledge who they are" and like I don't know, suddenly I felt like I couldn't just like blindly write for other people if it was going to be a performance piece because there's something about the consciousness, the consciousness that comes with that, that felt off.

Dan Koop: Isn't that kind of like the weird mythology of theatre anyway? It's like, we go to Shakespeare text, and we think it's canonical, and it's just written so well, but it might have just been written for his favourite actor at the time.

K: Well it was!

Dan Koop: And it was! And we don't know anymore, we're just ignorant. So actually some of that kind of mysticism is just ignorance, and we receive a play text from 30 years ago, and we think what a wonderful, living thing beats in there, but then we go, no it was alive once, really. (…) It's just afterwards.

G: That's probably why there's so much wrangling in the UK around text, because the legacy of our, cultural like, you know theatre history is so, you just can't separate it from the notion of

D: One writer.

G: Yeah like one writer but even that has become totally mythologised and so I don't think there's any reason why James and I couldn't be considered playwrights, but, but we write together, and it doesn't fit into that kind of one mode. But I don't know, it's

become quite a narrative. For Kieran, calling yourself a playwright and feeling like you can expand that place a little bit is really exciting, but also, I don't know, I think you have to be ready for the fright of it.

K: Yeah absolutely.

J: You know Chris Goode. We had a conversation with Chris Goode who is a British artist who writes and he's kind of on that edge as well and we had this long conversation with him once cause we often identified as live artists and he gets identified as a theatremaker or a playwright, and we were having this conversation about the benefits of each. And his work can be identified as live art, and he's saying the reason he doesn't call it live art is because he wants to have that conversation and that battle, and he wants theatre to be a bigger thing. And I totally agree with that and we consider what we do to be theatre but, you end up having to have these kind of battles all the time. So when we tour the UK we tour like theatres that are used to plays. Even just talking to the technicians, there's a little battle that goes on where they don't really know what we're talking about, and we don't really know what they're talking about, and then the audience come in and they're expecting something and it's not that, and the conversation happens again. If you're doing that for two or three months at a time it becomes this mini battle every time. And it's a good thing, I'm glad we do it, but sometimes just calling yourself a live artist and doing weird shit in the basement is like easier.

D: I think this is a super interesting conversation that we're gonna have to wrap up soonish because we've been going for a while. So maybe if we wanted to have one more question to put out to people so that if someone has a burning question that they want to ask…

K: No pressure or anything. Like a really good question.

D: Not a really good question.

Audience Member: I've got a question. Have any of y'all ever worked with writing or incorporated writing in your performances that was actually meant to be read by the audience instead of heard by the audience?

B: Well there was that Iranian performer in Edinburgh with that piece *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*

D: Yeah I was in a piece like that. Well it was a piece, It's called *Red Rabbit White Rabbit*, and it was written by an Iranian playwright who can't leave Iran and who has to be very careful about how his play is marketed because he could get into quite a lot of trouble for having written this play. But the play is basically sent to countries that aren't Iran and a performer comes up on stage and opens up the script and then reads the entire script live in front of an audience, and the script is basically his script about his experience, very purposely being read by someone else, about the fact that he can't leave, because he doesn't have a passport, like it's. Yeah, it's a really interesting piece. And then at the end you possibly poison yourself, but you don't. But you don't know if you're poisoning yourself or not. I was pretty sure I wasn't,

but, but uh, yeah, I did it once. Every performer who does it has to know nothing about the show.

K: So none of you can ever do it now. It's gone.

D: Yeah, sorry guys.

B: Was that what you meant by the question? That was the first thing I thought when I heard that but

Audience Member: Well it still sounds like the audience are hearing and weren't looking at the text themselves.

D: Yeah, well Tania who is coming over later today, and she's going to be performing with her group Dictaphone Group, they did a piece in Lebanon that was about the fact that none of the beaches in Lebanon are public or owned publicly because they were all pretty much illegally sold off by the government to hotels and stuff like that. So they do the entire piece on a boat in the Mediterranean and they have the audience read out the transcripts on this boat of what happened, with the land being sold off. So I think it is a tool in the toolbox that if you want to use it can make sense sometimes. And Ant Hampton's here as well. He's got a piece called *OK OK* which is basically a play reading. It's really fun. Two male audience members and two female audience members all holding a script and reading a play, doing a play reading about how they don't really know what's going on and why they're doing this play reading. I think the great thing about writing for live art or theatre or performance or this wider thing is that text has so many possibilities. There are so many things you can do with writing. That once you stop thinking like it has to be this thing, it suddenly explodes. And of course it can be all those other things. It should be all those other things. And it should sometimes be the conventional thing when that's done well too.

K: I've only done that once before and I'd forgotten about it until just then when you started describing Ant Hamptons' piece, which is last year at the Edinburgh Festival Forest Fringe didn't have a physical space because Forest Café where it's normally based is sort of under threat and stuff so what you guys did was this thing called *Paper Stages* which was a little booklet of different artists that were associated with Forest Fringe in some way sort of contributed a two page performance or a book. And so sometimes it was prompts for performative actions, or sometimes it was a series of invitations to a particular interaction with a particular space. And mine was just a script for two people with the instruction that they don't read it until they go to a specific place which was the top of the hill in Arthur's Seat and then just read parts A and B together, and it's a piece about two people meeting at the top of a hill in Arthur's Seat. So they're the audience, but they also sort of become co-performers in that moment. And so there was something nice about being invited to create a piece of work for a context that explicitly demanded something like that. Like if it's going to be an interaction between characters then it's going to have to navigate that in quite an interesting way. So it's the one and only time I've done that.

Audience Member: Are there any copies of that book still?

K: I think there might be.

D: Yeah there are but they're in the UK. Actually we've all contributed to it but I don't know where they are right now. They're in a store house in the UK. But maybe we can send some – Brian contributed to it too – everybody, we pretty much worked with everybody who we work with regularly for Forest Fringe contributed a DIY performance, a recipe book of performances.

Audience Member: I would love to see that.

D: Guys thank you so much for coming to this discussion. It was really interesting for us, I hope it was interesting for you as well.

Tim Crouch Interview Transcript
Interviewed by Deborah Pearson
2 February 2013
The Cultch, Vancouver, Canada
In the seats of the auditorium for *I, Malvolio* at the PuSh Festival
Duration: 59m 23s.

I saw *The Author* twice, first at the Royal Court, and then at the Traverse. I'm interested in the moment at the Traverse when you told the audience that we were sitting in the Royal Court.

I always feel that in principle when *The Author* was at the Royal Court it was weaker, by being literally in the place that it's set in. And so I'd always hoped that when it moved outside the Royal Court it would gain a metaphorical resonance that I thought would help an audience understand the fiction of the piece. I hoped the audience would understand that there's a signal being given – that we are not here. And if we are not here then maybe I am not me and maybe there will be a domino effect of understanding and enlightenment. "Okay, so this is a hypothesis, it's not a real thing. These things didn't really happen, but I'm being invited to invest in them as if they had." But then we went from the Royal Court and we opened at the Traverse and we had a preview there where over 10% of the audience left during the course of the show, and all my principled ideological positioning fell apart because I realised, "Oh, well you still think this is real." I've just had a conversation with an Australian guy who would love to have the production brought there and he was concerned that the discourse around the Royal Court Theatre and the theatre in the Royal Court, the plays, those violent plays, those abusive plays, that discourse wouldn't read in Australia. He started to think about theatres in Australia that we could set the play in. I kind of held him back on that slightly because I hope it's not necessary to know the history or the canon of plays at the Royal Court theatre. I think most people understand a body of work or a style of work that that play refers to. I argued for keeping it at the Royal Court even if nobody's ever heard of the Royal Court. It's just another theatre. It's a fictional location, like *Macbeth* is in Scotland, *The Author* is set in the Royal Court Theatre. It's not a big deal although I think some people have a real difficulty with that.

In terms of the staging of the piece, does the audience become complicit in that representation or fiction?

There's always that playful aspect of any play – there are two locations to any play. There is the location in which the play is set and then there is the location of the theatre. In *The Author* that's the same. Similarly there are two locations for Tim Crouch. One is fictional and one is in the body of Tim Crouch. The site of the character and the site of the location. Even if I come out on stage and say "I'm Tim Crouch" and then talk about my life, there is still the emergence of a character of sorts.

You are sitting among the audience. Are the audience acting the audience at the Royal Court?

Yeah they are, but they don't have to do anything. In (David Greig's play) *Prudencia Hart* we play the crowd in the pub. We clapped along, we sang songs. There was an activity connected to our identification. In *The Author* you are characterised as an audience. In *I, Malvolio* as well, you are characterised as an audience. You don't have to do anything to achieve that characterisation. It's a role that is placed on top of you. In *The Author*, I talk to someone sitting at my side and on one level I am talking to that person, but on a fictional level I am talking to an audience member in a different theatre. Which is very exciting for me and quite hard to untangle. When I talk I am talking both as me and as the fictional representation of a person of *a* me. The audience are invited to be both an audience in the theatre that we're in and to assume the role of an audience. The layers are so indivisible. They are so tightly packed. That notion of fourth wall – there isn't one. There isn't a divorce or a distinction between me and the other me, there isn't a distinction between the theatre audience in the Traverse and the fictional audience that are sitting in the Royal Court. On one level that doesn't feel like a difficult request. You would, when you see a classical play, the playwright says, "How far is call to forers" you wouldn't say, "Wait a minute, what are you talking about? We're actually in Vancouver." We just accept that it can be two places. But of course I understand that *The Author* is really fucking with that. Because my name is Tim Crouch, because we are in a theatre.

We could make it very easy. When the audience walk in we could have lights "The Royal Court" – we could have that fluorescent tubing of "The Author by Tim Crouch, The Royal Court Theatre" – if we wanted to we could have ushers in Royal Court t-shirts. And similarly I could wear something different to what I wear, or talk differently to how I talk or put on a false moustache or something. There would be an easily identifiable code of difference, but I wasn't interested in easily identifiable codes. That's why I say it's such an adult play. Such a difficult adult play. Because it doesn't help you. I think the codes and the signals are there. You come and there is a poster, there is a copy of the text, there are signs saying "The play contains disturbing material", you are disoriented because the seating configuration is different, but it's not super different. It's not like Punchdrunk where you are in the dark, or a piece where you are blindfolded. It's not like that. It's not whole scale disorientation which is a kind of physical disorientation.

It doesn't feel like I am attempting to pull the wool over anyone's eyes in an aggressive way. Maybe I am pulling the wool over your eyes in a non-negotiable way to some degree. If people as they have done say "This isn't the Royal Court", we don't engage with that discussion. We had people in L.A. go "This is L.A! This is L.A!" and you accept anything that anybody says but you try not to engage in a debate about it. That hangs – that challenge to the reality of the space hangs in the space and with the piece, but the piece keeps moving on. Which makes it very hard. You want to just go "You're right it's in L.A."

We had it once in the Bristol Old Vic. A woman was just so insistent that we had to stop. She said, "Are you Tim Crouch? ARE you Tim Crouch? ARE YOU TIM CROUCH? ARE YOU TIM CROUCH?" It just went on and on and on. I stopped and I said, "I am Tim Crouch, that's Vic Llewellyn, this is Chris Goode, that's Esther Smith, and every word that we're saying is scripted, and we're performing a play that's set in the Royal Court Theatre." And then for the rest of the piece the audience

were puppies. They were docile, understanding, getting it, they got it. Of course they got it. So have I made the job more difficult than it needs to be? Why don't I just do that? Why don't I telegraph that more clearly? But that kind of wasn't the purpose of the piece.

Do you want the audience to be docile puppies?

No. Particularly there. I want them to have to work it out. That play is all about audience responsibility. The corollary of the responsibility is in the final speech, which is, "You are responsible for whether you watch that stuff or if you don't. And if you watch it then in fact you are responsible for that stuff, and therefore you are committing a criminal act." But nobody is going to be with you. You have to make that call yourself. In the same way that abusers or paedophiles – I don't think that Tim Crouch in that play is a paedophile, necessarily, he's just an idiot – an unthinking idiot. But they look like me and you and they talk like you and me. If I'd made it really distinguishable that I was somebody else and that I was being somebody else who had a twisted and perverted view of the world then it would lessen the impact of the piece, because the audience could then just place that character somewhere outside of themselves. I don't want them to do that. I want it to be a very direct relationship. It was very difficult to sit next to people. There are sequences when the music plays and the audience just talks. In the Traverse was the hardest time of all where I'd made connections and made friendships and I knew that I was going to really abuse that trust by putting us all in a very difficult position. I would always think about rewriting the final speech in the course of the performance because it was very difficult. I never did rewrite it, but I wanted to. Because it was horrible. And not just for me but for the audience. And I know it was horrible. It was not a thing I was particularly proud of, but I also feel that the play does something that needs to be done.

Do you have a moral stance on fiction?

Not really. Jules, my wife, is mentioned in *The Author* quite a lot. The topography of that play is our house in Brighton. The most disturbing line in the play is that after I've done what I've done I curl round Jules and I kiss her back. I'm asleep within seconds. And she was the first person to read that play. I checked in with her if that was alright. In the piece I'm making with Andy Smith, I think there will be a similar elision between me and a fictional version of me. I think there will be a Tim Crouch in that piece and I am excited about using myself as the stage for an exploration of a character of myself. That's really interesting for me. To be another I don't have to alter myself. I don't have to display otherness for me to be other. And if I do display otherness then I am kind of removing some of the work that I want the audience to do. I want the audience to recognise otherness rather than have the job taken off their hands by a performer.

It's ironic because in *I, Malvolio* there couldn't be a clearer definition of otherness in terms of Malvolio, because it's for young people, so it's really important that I can telegraph all that stuff. They're going to put a noose around my neck so I can't really do what I do in *The Author* for a group of twelve year olds.

I think in that moment the reality of you as a person who is alive and could be hanged is there.

Yeah, so that's enough, that's fine, it's there. I had an extraordinary situation in New York where a woman's daughter was helping with the hanging and the woman was shaking her head and beckoning for the child to come away from the stage and to come and sit back down again. Malvolio engaged with that woman in a debate about what the purpose of theatre was – which was to take the audience to an extreme place safely – and didn't she have any trust? Very uncharacteristic of Malvolio, but he talked about trust to try and allay her anxiety that her daughter might be involved in something. The woman was trying to control the situation, which of course I understand, but the situation is actually super controlled.

In *An Oak Tree* are you playing a persona of Tim Crouch?

I'm very conscious of when I do "acting" in *An Oak Tree*.

In *An Oak Tree* I walk on stage, I go "Ladies and gentlemen my name is Tim Crouch, welcome to this theatre." And then I invite the second actor up and I say, "This is so and so, they will be performing in this play tonight that they have neither seen or read. So and so and I met up about an hour ago. I've given so and so a number of suggestions, I've suggested that they enjoy themselves." We read a piece of text – it's a naturalism text of me asking how they are and they read it – and then I ask them to look at me and to ask me what I'm being. So the second actor asks me "What are you being?" and I say, "I'm being a hypnotist, look." And I have a swirly waist coast and some horrible slacks. I'm kind of dressed like a hypnotist. And then I say, "I'm forty-eight years old, with a bald head, a red face and bony shoulders." So I identify myself. "And I'm wearing these clothes, look," is the next line. I then say to the other actor, "Ask who you are. Say, and me?" So the actor then says, "And me?" This is man or woman, any age. And I then say, "You're a father. Your name's Andy. You're 48 years old, you're six foot two, your lips are cracked and your finger nails are dirty. You're wearing a crumpled Gore-Tex jacket. Your trousers are muddy. Your shoes are muddy. You have tremors, you're unshaven, your hair is grey and you have a bloodshot eye." And then I say to them, "That's great. You're doing really well." So it's like a philosophical setting up of the stall. I will look like who I say I am, you will not look like what I say you are. If the actor is quite similar to that physical description I will change the description so there is a disparity between them. I slide in between.

There is a scene where me and the second actor discuss the experience that the second actor is having in the play. But every word is scripted. I give them a clipboard and I say, "Are you okay?" And often they think I am really asking them if they are okay, so if they get confused I ask them to look at the script. And then I ask, "Are you okay?" and they say "Yes." And I say, "Are you embarrassed?" and they say, "A little." And I say, "You should have said, we could have stopped." And they say, "It's okay." And I say, "Are you still nervous?" And they say, "A little" And I say, "It doesn't show." And that moment is possible because the second actor and the character they play are very similar – they both volunteer for a show. One is the grieving father of the dead child who volunteers for the hypnotist show, and one is an actor who volunteers for *An Oak Tree*. I can slip between those two dynamics and ask

questions that could be interpreted both ways. Either Tim Crouch asking the actor or the hypnotist asking the father. I don't feel like we need to make any distinction there. If a universe changes we go from Tim Crouch and actor to hypnotist and father. I don't need to make any material change to that. That's for an audience to work out.

It's very playful and the themes are there from when I started to write really. *The Author* is just an extension, as is *England* the gallery piece that I'm doing this year again. Because there, Hannah Ringham and I play the same character, and it's never determined whether that character is male or female. We have a first person narrative in the first act that just says "I" and talks about an American boyfriend, so the character is either gay or is straight, and if you make a decision about whether that character is male or female, that's entirely up to you. You won't get a clue from the text. Lyn Gardner said it was about a woman at the time. Which is great.

The second act of the show is really nice for me because the audience are characterised again. They are the grieving veiled widow of a man whose heart is now in the body of the protagonist from the first act, and they slowly get to understand that's what they are. Because Hannah was that character in the first act and now she is an interpreter. We swap so we retain that genderless quality. We talk directly to members of the audience and Hannah translates. It's all spoken in English. And the audience learn what is happening and who they are by the tiniest inflection. A long silence and then I say, "I have a tissue" so they're crying. And then they start to talk bigly. They tell a story about their husband being murdered in effect. And all of what they say, the audience, is relayed through Hannah, their interpreter, or me, I'm the interpreter by that point. The less material there is in the space, the more capable it is to do that stuff. That's why Malvolio's kind of weird because there's not a lot of material but there is a lot of material. All my children's shows are like that. My Peaseblossom – I am a character.

Is it deliberate that that happens in the children's shows and not in the adult shows?

It was never conceived. I started doing this in 2003 when I started to write. I do think I have an honour to some degree to the characters from Shakespeare's plays. It's interesting that Shakespeare was the beginning of an idea of character – psychologically motivated character – western character – literary character. On that level, I only do what I think Shakespeare's Malvolio would do in this play. I want to give the audience an understanding of the character in the context of the other play. I wouldn't want to do a deconstructed neutralised performance of Malvolio. If it was for an adult audience, maybe I would do that. Maybe I would place it in a very different setting. Or find a very distant in into that character. But I don't want to do that for a young audience. I want them to meet the character from Shakespeare's play. But I never stick to it. Tim Crouch is coming through Malvolio all the time.

Last night I went off – they started to clap – I came back in and I said, "I don't think you fully understand. You're going to sit here, I'm going to come back in again, and you stay here exactly how you are." I went and I got changed and when I came back in the curtain rail and the table were on opposite sides of the stage to where they had been before. The audience had activated themselves to fuck with Malvolio thinking that Malvolio was coming back, which is such a perfect thing. In New York I told the

young audience, and I went and got changed, took make up off, washed and dressed, and they were still sitting and waiting, and then for a post-show discussion, Tim Crouch walked into the space, and you could see the audience having to refocus. To work out because the author of the fiction had entered the fiction kind of. So questions of authenticity are really interesting I think.

How do you feel the word "representation" sits within your practice?

In the new piece, the Almeida piece, Andy presents and I represent. We're placing two forms side by side on stage in that piece. We're talking about an evening when Andy and I meet in Lancaster. The telling of the story of that evening will be told through two different forms. Andy's form is presentational in that Andy Smith is only ever Andy Smith, even though in his latterly texts he's still Andy Smith but he's just beginning to think about otherness or the metaphor that exists in the theatre. He says, "A place like this, a person like me." Similar territory for me, but I think I do it representationally in a way. *The Author* you could really think was like an Andy Smith piece – I tell you about a play that we did – but that's not me talking. I'm representing someone else through me. It's just very slippery because the person I'm representing speaks like me, looks like me, and has my name, and almost has my role, my character in every respect, but isn't me. I think the same thing will happen in the evening with Andy. The title might just be *Life Forms*. There's a form of life. There are forms in how we tell a story and how we place ourselves in a story and how dishonest we can be in the telling of a story, which we can extrapolate on a global scale. On a socio-political scale. In terms of how stories are told, and in how dishonest we are in the telling of stories about ourselves and about our relationship to those stories.

Do you think you would ever make a show that does tell an honest story about you?

No. *My Arm* is the beginning, which is the story of me living with one arm above my hand told totally autobiographically – totally authentically. I think in 2002 when I wrote it there were people doing autobiographical pieces, people like Guy Dartnell, and I always thought it was more interesting if you were going to tell a story about yourself, tell one that isn't true, and then something more interesting about yourself will come out. In *My Arm* I tell the story auto-biographically to the point of my death, and at no point do I ever raise my arm above my head. That was the big philosophical tenet of the piece is don't ever raise your arm above you head. Talk as if you're dying from it. Talk as though it's absolutely there. Your arm is necrotising in that play because the blood is going. At one point I show this finger and I say, "I had this finger removed because it was dead." That's a really important moment for me, but that piece was written very quickly in a subconscious blur, but all the work that went into that piece was kind of unpicking those things about authenticity and about representation.

Has anybody else ever done one of your pieces and could they?

Yeah they have. All of them have been done elsewhere. I kind of don't want to see them. I always say "I'm really busy, I'm so sorry." I always say, "Great, yes" because I think it's really important. They are ideological pieces and I'm not Brecht

and I'm not Beckett (I would that I were!) and so I don't want to control what happens to an idea. You should never control what happens to an idea. We have approached the idea and dealt with it this way. Of course in an ideal world, that's how we did it, we solved the problems of the idea this way. And I can't go, "Actually you should do it this way." In the script of *My Arm* it does say that the actor never raises their arm above their head. But we said that partly because there was a production in Zurich where they had some special device that held the actor's arm above their head. And they went with an idea, not the idea that I had in my mind when I wrote that play. There have been two productions of *The Author*, one in Athens and one in Korea. I had a friend who saw the production in Athens. It says in the play, "The names of the characters must be the names of the actors playing them, apart from the character of Tim Crouch who should always be called Tim Crouch." Partly because I want the author to be named, the person who wrote it to be named. I find it quite odd when a playwright is not there. The delegation of your voice I find quite weird. So even *Prudencia Hart*, I know that David Greig Facebooked me today, and I know he's somewhere else, but he's also in there (in the theatre where Crouch saw the production in Vancouver.) It feels important for me that in that play Tim Crouch exists. So Tim Crouch has those lines. Tim Crouch says those horrible things. But it didn't quite work in Greece because there was Dimitrius and Yannis and Tim Crouch. We're having to think about that. If anyone ever wants to do that show again maybe I have to think differently. The principle is always really clear, and of course they get muddied when they hit reality.

I'd be interested to see how *The Author* works when somebody else is representing Tim Crouch.

It should theoretically be fine. My anxiety often is that people try and do too much. Simplicity is what we all strive for and it's so interesting how often it's never achieved in shows because people don't trust it. We rehearsed *The Author* for ages. I wanted to name Andy and Carl partly because they never get credited as directors. Although beautifully at the Abbey Theatre they are credited as having directed *I, Peaseblossom* and I don't think either of them have ever seen the show. But I'm happy to credit them because they are amazing people. So it says at the dinner party "Jules and I were there, the two actors from the show, Esther had brought her husband and the baby, Vic had brought his girlfriend, and of course Andy and Carl who directed this." Then it says that Carl went back to Richmond and Andy crashed out on the sofa. And that's almost a deliberate mind fuck really.

Are you pushing yourself by writing so figuratively about yourself but as a persona?

Jules was once on *Masterchef*, and she got kicked off on the first episode because she fucked the rice up. She's a great cook. And my social life often revolves around our kitchen table and Andy and Carl, friends sitting around our kitchen table. And they would have been there. But of course they wouldn't have been there because that moment never happened. But they were there for my 40th birthday. We had slow roast lamb with pomegranate. We had that meal that is described, and a bottle of malt whiskey. The more rooted in my life, the more authentic it was. But Andy and Carl in terms of simplicity and rehearsals – people said, "Nobody directed *The Author* did they?" And of the answer was, "Yes, yes, *Really* yes." Even though we sit and we

talk, the depth and the agony and the detail of how we obtained the tone for that and a quality, and the talking directly to somebody. Every week we would perform to an audience. Even in the first week of rehearsal we had people in. We worked really hard on it. We didn't do blocking or theatre-y stuff. It's a different kind of theatre-y stuff that I'm interested in. It's amazing how they can make a car with a windscreen wiper and two lights and that's what they do in *Prudencia Hart* but I'm not interested in that. I think I did all that stuff in the 20s in a way. I don't mean I did *that*, that was brilliant. But when I was devising in a company we did lots of physical problem solving and I'm less interested in that. I still enjoy it but I'm less interested in it.

What are you interested in?

I'm going to use the word "conceptual" or "dematerialised." A "dematerialised theatre" is what Andy and I talk about. We've talked about it for nearly the last ten years. A dematerialised theatre that doesn't exist just here (he motions to the theatre seats where we are sitting conducting the interview) but the cliché is that for site specific theatre the site is always the audience. That's where theatre happens. So the less you do here (motions to the theatre), the less material you present here, the more material I feel is here (motions to us) is required here. So if it's dematerialised that's alright. If it's incomplete by traditional standards here (in the theatre space) that's okay because this (motioning to us) will complete it. The audience are active, they are ethically involved in some way, they are completing the picture, and that feels better. I'm not interested in a theatre that relies upon technical virtuosity because I worry then that the audience will go, "Well that's something an actor can do and I can't do it." If I want a transformation to take place, I want it to take place in the audience. And here I am in *I, Malvolio* transformed up to the hilt. But also not, also loosely in and out of me. But it's very important that there's nothing else in this show. There's a table and a clothes rail and there is a relationship between me and the audience and the audience is absolutely characterised in this piece. So they are the second character in the play rather like in *England*. They dialogue with me. They don't have to say anything to me but they dialogue with me in their behaviour and in the manifestation of their presence and in all their humanity, which Malvolio has such a problem with. The transformation that takes place in *I, Malvolio* is not on me. It takes place on the audience. The audience becomes transformed into the thing Malvolio perceives them to be. They become Toby Belch. They become unruly and ill-disciplined. Even if they are just sitting still watching the show, Malvolio will still give them that role. What's lovely like last night is they will sometimes really take that role and move things around.

You've discussed figurative vs. non-figurative as terminology for your work - can you elaborate on that?

That's really important terminology for my work. Figurative is making the thing look like what it is. Figurative is "I'm going to paint a picture of a tree and I'm going to try and make the picture look as much like a tree as I possibly can." And I kind of yawn. Because that's not where the art dynamic lies for me, or what Marcel Duchamp called "the art co-efficient." There's a beautiful essay on creativity by Marcel Duchamp. He talks about the art co-efficient exists between the "unexpressed but intended" and the "unintentionally expressed." A beautiful phrase. It's about all the space, all the things you can't control, all the other stuff, the spaces. You should

aim for something in the knowledge that you won't get there. That for me is much more exciting than trying to pin something to perfection. If you do that, there's nothing for us as an audience to contribute. We can either marvel at your technical expertise or we can sit and enjoy the spectacle. Theatre is not about that. Theatre is about what is unintended but expressed. The thing that wasn't intended and what's come out first. *I, Malvolio* is different every time and my job as a performer is to be open. Similarly even in *The Author*, and with *An Oak Tree* it's an actor who doesn't know the play, so it can only be Marcel Duchamp. It can only be a living expression of that thing. Because I intend something and every time it's never what I intended. And if what I intended was that it should never be, ever, what I might have imagined it would be once. I legislate things into *An Oak Tree* that legislate it from ever being right. It can't ever be right because the actor will always fuck the lines up, or the rhythm, or the cadence, but that's never a fuck up, that's always a success. Even if the second actor is just a block of wood and it's really hard. Even if people are furious, I still say the show is a success. Because it's based on an ideology, and ideology defies the smallness of a critical reception. You can't kill an idea. The idea is strongly expressed. If you don't like the idea, don't bother me. That's fine. Put a counter-idea to that idea, but your criticism of the idea can't hurt me. Because I know the idea exists and will exist independent of me or the critic.

Would you say that *An Oak Tree* or *The Author* are as flexible as *I, Malvolio*?

No. Not at all. With *An Oak Tree* you think that it's ad-libbed, but what is beautiful is the actor with the clip board reading what just looks like a conversation. There's a symbol that shows the audience that it is scripted. The mission is never to ad-lib a single word in *An Oak Tree* and never to ad-lib or add a word to *The Author*. It's really hard. So if you say, "It is okay if we carry on, do you want me to stop?" If people say "Yes" – i.e. – stop – we just carry on. Usually in the script if that question gets asked, another character starts speaking, so that I am able to stay with the person who I've asked the question to, and the play continues. There's a little contracted moment between me and the person and then we go back to the play. We don't want the work to be harsh or to hate the audience. Quite the opposite. It's driven from a great respect for the audience or a belief in the audience. That they're the future. They're the only thing that will change the world. It won't be theatre. It will be the audience. And we are also in the audience. So no ad-lib.

Is there a connection between its inflexibility and its ellision of fiction?

Yes, very much so. It is complete form. I want to honour the complete form from beginning to end of the form. When the form is complete. Please let's debate the form. Let's talk about it, let's have a post-show, let's sit in the theatre with an iPhone and talk about it. But whilst it's running, we won't contribute anything more, and the audience will, but we won't stop the show because of you, because the form is in place. People have said with *An Oak Tree*, "It's very controlling of you, Tim, to make the actor only say the words that you've written. Why don't you just at one point give them a section of the play where they can say whatever they want." Well on one level, it doesn't feel very controlling when you bring someone who doesn't know the play into your play and they do whatever they want to do with it. They stay to the words. I stay to the words, they stay to the words. It's also not that kind of play where the actor just does whatever they want, and that notion of freedom is

totally spurious in my opinion, because we are honouring a text that knows about the beginning, knows about the end and the middle, and there is an argument that runs through it and has a complex of quite tightly pulled strings that run through it. If it would suddenly break and go, "Now just do whatever you want" people might interpret that as an act of creative freedom. I would interpret that as an act of creative incompetence in a way. The deal is you find your freedom inside the form. And you stick to the discipline of the form. It's like you write a sonnet – you don't then go – "Ah the sonnet form." The sonnet makes very clear demands on you in terms of metre and form and then your job as an artist is to find what you want to say within the confines of that form. That's art, innit. Otherwise, if it was just, "I want to say what I want to say and I'll say it however I want to say it." Art arrives with form. Art arrives with form.

Would you say that all of your work is narrative?

Yes. So that's funny isn't it? I think I said that about Action Hero. I loved the form of it but I wanted it to take me somewhere more constructed narratively. From first, *My Arm* is the story of a boy who puts his arm above his head, all my plays, the Andy Smith piece and my piece is about an evening spent together – the story of that evening. The new piece that's a commission from the Royal Court and this theatre in America that I think will open next year that I'm not in, the big thing has been bashing out a story. I can't tell you how important I think it is to know the story you want to tell. And then go far away from it if you want to. But I personally feel you need to know what it is so you can fuck with it.

Do you think content and form are two separate things or are they the same thing?

I think they should – I sound like I know my opinion on everything. It's rubbish. A complete dialogue should exist between content and form. In *An Oak Tree* the thing that came first were ideas around hypnosis, around suggestion and around loss, then a story came, about two people meeting to grieve the death of a child. There was a lot of work on that story, a huge amount of work. And then I asked Andy Smith if I could write the part of the father in that story for him, because I didn't want an actor to play the part, and in the conversation that Andy and I had, together we hit on the idea, based on *My Arm*, that instead of taking objects, *My Arm* uses objects, we would use people. We'd bring a different actor in. So we would only do that if we interrogated it and it was always found to be deepening and supporting the telling of the story. The form and the content of *An Oak Tree* are really important for me. There's a character – a father who is lost to grief – played by an actor who is lost on the stage. You could say, "Why did you do that, it's just a gimmick?" If it had just been a formal gimmick, so would not have done that. Similarly *England* is about a heart transplant. It's about a disease taking someone to the end of their life, then their life being saved by the unethical harvesting of a heart in a developing country and the heart being placed inside the body of a Westerner, and the Westerner returning to that developing country with a very expensive work of Western Art to give to the wife of the person whose heart is now inside them. Transplant came from the form, which was that I was commissioned to make a piece for the Fruitmarket Gallery. (In Edinburgh.) And it was like, "I'm not a visual artist, I'm a theatre maker. So if I put a piece of theatre inside a gallery, well there's a transplant." What happens to the

organ and what happens to the host? No need to answer those questions but what would happen? That led to the story. Let's tell a story about an organ being taken and placed in another host and what are the consequences of that? There is always a negotiation around form and content, story and form. The Royal Court piece is about attempting to represent a real person, a person who existed. In this case it's on film. There's no film in the show but it's about an actor travelling to meet the partner of a famous artist who is dead, but that actor is playing her in a film, in an attempt to find an authenticity to that representation of the person. The form that is accompanying that piece is absolutely in connection to the impossibility of becoming somebody else. I'm slowly getting very close to knowing exactly what that piece is. Form and content – I understand they are taking popular culture images and beautifully subverting them, and we're in a bar, and the moments where we're in a bar in the bar make a lot of sense for me, and then there are moments that made less sense. Because I want to know, this fractured form, what are you saying about the western form? Lots of questions about that. But I do often see pieces where I think "You're using that form because at drama school you were taught it. Or because you know you can do it. You know you can do physical theatre – hoo let's put physical theatre into this." When actually the story requires two people sitting on chairs facing the audience. If you interrogate the story, that's the form for the story. But actually, no, there's a fucking accordion, and there's Lecoq clowning, so that's the biggest maturation for an artist, to go "It's not about what I can do, and what I can't do. It's about what's needed for the thing we're attempting." And to take that to the extreme where you can remove everything. All you've ever learned and though you could do or would do. Don't do it because the story doesn't need you to do it. Going back to that simplicity idea again.

Hey Debbie,

When are you coming to Shoreditch do you think? If you let us know we can put a comp on for you... and yeah bring loads of people!!!

Slap Talk-wise its interesting because the show started off as an exercise about the rhetoric, poetry and language that surrounds contest and competition, then as the piece grew and evolved that started to mean more things and it became more generally, about the way violence exists in language and in the ways we communicate, how language can maybe act as a proxy for actual physical violence, and then that evolved to be about capitalism and the ways capitalism communicates to us via mass media, advertising and 24 hour news channels, and the violence of that relentless communication. Its interesting because it evolved very naturally that way. The frame of Slap Talk is perhaps a contest/a competition but its a very loose frame, I think, or at least its a frame that allows for a lot to be contained within it, and as a show it ends up not being about conflict or competition but just about violence and all the ways it manifests in culture. Capitalism reveals itself in the piece as a kind of common factor behind a large amount of this violence. Its also interesting how the choice to use autocues and TV screens very quickly led to content more explicitly about capitalism, probably because thats the predominant way capitalism communicates with us...

Hope thats helpful!

Jim xxx

James Stenhouse
Co-artistic Director, Action Hero

Hey Deborah

Nice to hear from you - sounds like things are going well.

For me it clearly started as an exploration about competition, but even inside of that our inspirations were overtly related to capitalism or money in one way or another. As we may have said elsewhere what first got us going was a half-spam mass email a good friend of ours (successful artist, dad, about our age, great guy) sent to many of us, wanting us to invest in a pyramid scheme personal fulfillment program that he (seemingly for real) felt was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for him - and all of us - to realize our true potential. There's a whole lot of capitalism in that, on a few different levels, and that's what got us going. But at that stage we didn't talk about it in terms of capitalism - we talked about winning and losing, and how it surprised us that our friend clearly felt like he was losing (unfulfilled), and also how acutely Jamie and I felt a competitive dynamic between ourselves (fear of failure), even though we have a huge amount of respect and love for each other, and each other's work.

At the same time we were discussing all this we were rooting around the back of the Russian Hall in Vancouer and uncovering dozens of reels of 16mm films sent from the Soviet Union in the 70s extolling the virtues and triumphs of Soviet Socialism (with titles like: Health Care, Moscow at Night, Brezhnev, etc.). They're gorgeous - beautifully made - and their tirumphalism (and sometimes accuracy? the health care looks pretty damn good …) also felt hugely interesting in relationship to the question winning/losing, and how bad they lost. So again, nothing explicit at this point re. capitalism - but if that isn't about capitalism, or what claimed to oppose it, I don't know what is.

And then …. further along in the process … there was the decision to make the piece turn on the question of privilege, which I guess is what makes us throw around the capitalism thing a lot now. That connection is explicit, and obvious. In it I think there's a bit of an assumption in our thinking that the binary dynamic of contest/competition is embedded in capitalism as a whole - in order for one to have, another must have not. No doubt many Milton Friedman/trickledowners would dispute this … I dunno …I'm no economic theorist … but reading Piketty, looking at history of neo-liberalism over last 30 years etc. it's not hard to feel like even the most basic leveling of playing fields goes against the instincts of the winners in the capitalism game. For me there's also something about the way the conflict is triggered in the play: how even a relatively perceived scarcity (in this case "Jamie's" sense of being more economically vulnerable than "Marcus", which he is, but at the same time better off than the vast majority of the world's people) leads to attack / conflict. There's something right about that, says me. (Friends have criticized this for being uber-bourgeous - "you really want to do winners and losers, put one of you two up against a homeless person … they *exist, you know"* . Which I get, but also kind of misses this point … narcissism of small differences was something another friend pointed to … that makes sense to me.

That said, I'm equally interested in how the contest idea plays out in so-called democracy - the sham of parliamentary question periods, the fakery of political party spin doctoring/message control … all seem to me to reflect a similar relationship to the question of the game, the contest, doing what you have to do to come out on top ….

hm. don't know if that's of any use/answers yer question, but that's what came out …

all best

Hi Debbie!
Yes, of course we can give you a quote.

I think when we were making Gym Party we were really preoccupied with the fact that we felt/feel like we are so encouraged to constantly be competing in situations that maybe we should be encouraged to actually work together and commune with each other. And i'm not sure we're even aware that we are doing it half the time. The free-market system is set up so that if you stop being competitive you fail and that system has been pushed forward into every single crevice of society.
We were really obsessed with the ridiculous Cameron speech where he talked about privilege, he says that everyone can be privileged which is impossible because privilege by definition is exclusive, in that it doesn't exist without something being lesser than it. Its the same with winning- we can't all be winners, there have to be losers for there to be a winner. This is a problem when something that isn't inherently competitive begins to become competitive. And losers, in capitalism and life, are punished for not winning. Its very linear.
So, the contests are really there to implicate the audience in creating losers who are punished. Its a manipulative choice we made. And the punishments get worse depending on how much the audience is involved with creating the winner...

Does any of that sound good?
I've also attached an article we wrote about action in the theatre (which was never published) and a piece of writing i did about feeling competitive about things like Facebook photos and weddings.

xx

Attachments:

i. Guardian Article

How do you get an audience to participate in, never mind turn up to, a show

that's bold/naïve enough to think it can change the world? The idea of theatre as

tool for social change is always in danger of making people run a mile. Any

sense of social-political rallying cry often seems likely to turn the majority of our

savvy, cynical generation off.

We see live shows as microcosms of the wider world - both a hopeful and

depressing conception. So often we experience the world as passive spectators

and expert consumers; knowing lots, buying lots but doing little. And when it

comes to performance, audiences often expect the show to do the work for them. They've paid their money, travelled all this way - they want to be entertained and moved, goddammit! If entertainment's a given for Made In China, we're more wary of the desire to move. Audiences should feel lots and relates lots, absolutely- but if you want to facilitate change, catharsis can be better denied, or delayed.

We don't see much performance that does this at the moment. We see theatre catering to passive spectatorship: intensely emotional, super-cathartic, ultimately selfish, inactive experiences. And people cry, and feel good about themselves because they cried. And then they leave the same as they came in - except slightly dehydrated. Lots of our art has become as complacent as lots of our society. Passive art for passive audiences. This is a problem!

For us, the act of theatre, people gathering and experiencing something live together, is political. Our latest show Gym Party - wigs, marshmallow-eating contests, goofy dances and silly humour and all- tries to move the audience to take action not inside the theatre but outside. Not in the little manipulated reality we share with them for an hour, but in the much bigger, more surreptitiously manipulated reality of society. This may be a difficult, self-important, even hubristic aim. But its what we want to do.

Gym Party casts competition as the unimpeachable ruling religion in our passive consumerist society. It's a game-show style contest between three performers. Each tries to get their name up in lights by winning rounds played in front of, judged by, and finally with, the audience. The winner takes the glory, the losers get punished. So go the rules of the game, so goes life. Right?

We wanted to satirise this dog-eat-dog-fest and mobilise the audience to be

witnesses. Not easy, and not least when negotiating that question of catharsis: if the audience acts in the theatre, does that lessen the chances of them acting outside? This becomes a particularly interesting question when you're hell-bent on ending the show with the winner smashing a golf ball out of a loser's mouth, into the audience, as we were.

Gym Party had several work-in-progress performances during it's creation. The material changed radically each time as the show grew and ideas morphed. But the golf-ball-out-of-mouth-smash remained a constant across all the showings. It was a crowd-pleaser, inherently climactic. And we were tangled up in too many ideas and shredded nerves, because, despite us not knowing the show's arse from it's elbow yet, random people were paying to see it! The golf-smash, bizarrely, was our safety blanket.

We previewed Gym Party at the Almeida Theatre with an ending where the performers played a game of violent one-upmanship, culminating in the golf smash. We now see this as the theatrical equivalant of meeting someone at a bar and having brief, retrospectively unsatisfying, but kind of thrilling in the moment sex in the toilet. Which wasn't really what we were going for.

But it was thrilling in the moment. As we set up the golf-hit, whole audiences debated and shouted whether the violence should continue, and there were mass walk-outs protesting against audience members who were egging us on. This very pretend violence was getting more of a reaction than any of the genuinely punishing things we've done in other shows. So in a last-gasp rewrite, we changed Gym Party in a way that - we hope - encourages audiences to save their outrage and debate for the world outside. We want them to act not for our sake, because we might get pretend-hit in the head with a golf club, but for their

sake, because they're tired of being egged-on to compete harder with each other in an 'aspiration nation' while society is dismantled around them.

We were surprised that audiences acted physically, vocally in the previews. We need them to act in the final version, but tenderly rather than in protest. But we set the audience up now: their tenderness determines the winner and (so goes the game, so goes life…) triggers penalisations. They become willing participants, denied the chance to protest inside the theatre. Gym Party manipulates audiences into sham consensuses, cooperation with a violent system that often seems oh-so-fun, so benign. We hope this makes people angry and unfulfilled, aware of the parallels we're drawing with the world outside. We hope they take their chance to protest out there.

ii. Jess Latowicki's Gate Piece

My timeline.

I cannot play an instrument. I cannot play an instrument because I was told when I was a child I wasn't very musical. I cannot play the guitar or drums or double bass or sousaphone or tambourine or triangle chimes. I played the violin and flute when I was 9 and 10 respecitively but I wasn't very good. I cannot sing a song because I am scared.

I cannot speak another language. I cannot speak another language because I am not good at languages and I think I am too old now to not know another language and I am too embarrassed to go to a class.

I like to put myself in situations where I feel like I'm in control. By in control, it means that I have a handle on what is going on and have some sense of what the outcome will be. I like to know where I am going to land. I don't need to win but I don't like to lose. This is a control thing.

There are things that I am sure of. There are some things that I am sure of that I

am sure that I will never be the most beautiful woman in the room or the smartest

person in the class or the most likely to succeed. These are things that I am sure

of. These are things that I have always been sure of.

There are things that I am sure of that I am sure that I do things and see things in

the way I see them is my best quality that allows me to always be in control.

I am 30, or nearly 30 or just turned 30. I am 30 I am 5 I am 15.

I have never outgrown feeling left out. I have never outgrown feeling jealous. I

have never outgrown feeling superior and lonely.

I try I fail I try I fail I try I fail.

That's the pattern of things. Try, fail, try, fail. The true pattern. True because I

don't try hard enough. True because I don't try hard enough or because I am

trying to do things that I will never do well at. That I will always fail at. I like to fail

because it gives me something to feel bad about so that I don't just feel bad.

Because I just feel bad about things. I just feel bad about the world and my life

and my guilt and my behavior but mostly I just feel bad for no real concrete

reason mostly I feel bad because I never outgrew things that other adults transfer

into following that particular path towards what their parents did and their parents

before them that path of success and happiness measured by shifts so slight

each generation feels they are rebelling and hurtling towards something totally

new when in reality they are just repeating the history of the generations before

them the history of houses and children and marriage and the aging shift towards

conservatism and small mindedness that comes with small town life that is

different than community. The oppressive need to outdo your neighbor to covet

your neighbor's life as they covet your life your wife your house your job their car

their holidays and clothing and mistress and lover and successful children. Try, fail, try, fail. This pattern is false because I don't try hard enough to win at those particular things because I haven't transferred the importance I would need to in order to care about these things.

The thing about that pattern is its false. The thing about that pattern is that it is false because often I don't want to try.

Often I don't want to try because often I don't want to change because often I believe I am right. I am often right. And I don't like to waste my time.

Try, fail, try, fail, try. Fail.

The thing about that pattern is that it is false. It is false because often I don't fail. Mostly I don't fail. Mostly I play games where I win and when I don't want to win I play games where I lose and the deliberation the deliberateness the deliberate controlled nature of my loss contributes to the narrative web I am spinning for the story of my life I want to live and if I don't want to play or I don't want to win or I lose or I want to lose it can make my life seem to me to you to the world around me and you and us that particular way I want to write my story and control my story and if I lose it gives me ammunition to win whereas if I just win I just win I just win I just win its already hard enough to like me its always been hard enough to like me and if I just win then I am impossible to like whereas if I lose I am relatable people can relate to me people like me feel bad for me feel like they want to take care of me if I lose sometimes and win sometimes.

I do a certain job and I resent the success of those who do the same job as me, who're in the same field as me within the wider category of job that we do and yes often these people are infuriantingly younger than me, but not exclusively.

This is me at 30. This is me at 35, 40, 60 and more. This is me at twelve.

Resenting other girls, for being girls.

I am angry. I am angry because I deserved to win. I deserved to win because I did the best job. I did the best job and by best job I mean that I have excelled the most at each of the qualifying criteria as outlined in the rules and standards. I have done the best job at all of these things and I did not win and I did not win because the world is an unfair totally fucked up awful horrible place where people get things they don't deserve and people who deserve them are pushed down and below so the people who are in control are able to stay that way and I fucking hate everyone in this contests especially since they are all horrible little shits who bought their way into everything and the winner is a winner is a winner because of fucking nepotism little absolute fuck shit asshole.

Victory to me is always bittersweet, bittersweet in that there is no one to share what it feels like to win. What it feels like to win is sticky sweet summer grass and ice cream beer and suncream and salty skin. It is soft and sharp and makes me feel like crying in a good and bad way. I love winning and I hate myself for loving to win. I love winning how I love being right how I love being right like I have cemented myself into the pavement for fear that if I moved or concede my world will topple down and won't until I am absolutely certain I can bring something else in without collapsing my tenuously balanced life with collapsing my tiny unimportant to anyone else myt tiny unimportant house of cards. I love winning. I love winning but I hate winners. I want to win but I want the win to upset expectations and that's what I think I have done today. I think you think that someone else one of the others one of the others would have won instead of me so that makes me even happier that I have won this knowing that you are all surprised. It makes that sticky sweet summer grass and ice cream beer and

suncream and salty skin taste so much stronger so much better knowing that I

won and that you are happy for me and that I will carry on this show with the

advantage of not having to be punished and dirty and soiled and knowing that

although I still might not win if I do you will be rooting for me because we had this

time together.

But compared to certain people I am losing. I am realitively far from that sticky

sweet summer grass feeling, If you sit in a certain school of thought. If you sit in

a certain school of thought I am not winning. If you sit in a certain school of

thought I am not even competing really. Not competing in the same game. But if I

was I'd be losing. Even though I might probably actually win some of the games

we play tonight, I am still losing. If you sit in a certain school of thought about

what the game is.

The internet makes it easy for me to see that compared to certain people one

could say, one could say that I am losing the game so much that it looks like I've

given up on the game completely. That compared to certain people, one could

say that there was a point when I fell behind, when I wasn't on track anymore

and I just gave up. One could say that the photographs of the camp reunion that I

looked at recently were photographs of people who were winning the game.

That the ever expanding waist line next the quickly receding hairlines of the men

who were the boys who were my first loves, that the already botoxed faces and

food deprived pilates toned bodies and giant rings of the women who were girls

who were my first true friends, that the pictures of their babies and their houses

and their weddings and their expensive clothings and holidays, that this all

demonstrates they are winning a game I resigned to stop playing years ago. One

could say I already lost. One could say without these things to measure the way I

have progressed from childhood plastered across the screens of people who were once my friends- that somewhere I was left behind and don't have a ring or a husband or a house or a baby. I am losing because I didn't follow the good advice to do a certain job That I am losing because I have not been on the fast track to success, that I don't own anything of worth.

You could say, if you belong to a certain school of thought, that I am so far behind, I am so far gone I am so far lost that even if I win all the games tonight, that even if I win all the games for the rest of the time we do this show, that I have lost, that I will never catch up and that because my heart really isn't in it, I don't even deserve the little I do have.

And I felt like I lost. I know that money doesn't mean anything I know that money means everything. And I lost. I've lost. I have made decisions and they have won and I have lost and I will continue to lose and I don't think we should do things like this anymore because the gap is just going to get wider and wider, infantile and standing in the corner of a store in Paris after 4 days 4 days with my mother and sister seeing the widening gap between me and them and standing in the corner of the store not wanting a handout pity dress purchase.

And looking at photographs of my sister's engagement. Looking at how happy my mother was then. After 4 days of spending time alone with the 2 of them, and looking at the photos of my sister's engagement and how happy my mother was and how happy my sister was and spending 4 days with the 2 of them, I realize there is nothing I will ever do that will make my mother feel that happy. There is nothing I could ever do because I have decided I have decided to do something different, I have decided that my world is different and there is no ability to cross over. There is a line I cannot cross. And my sister's decision to abandon her

dreams for $70,000 a year doing a job a job a job where she is scared to not

have her phone on her where she is scared to not have her phone on her

because she thinks if she is not available she will be fired, my sister who sold her

dreams to a job a ring a house and dog and talks of a child has won.

I like to put myself in situations where I feel like I'm in control. By in control, it

means that I have a handle on what is going on and have some sense of what

the outcome will be. I like to know where I am going to land. I don't need to win

but I don't like to lose.

Deborah: There's one piece in particular that I'm interested in talking about but I'm also just interested in talking about endings in general. The piece I was interested in talking about is *And On the Thousandth Night*. Just because of the way that that piece constantly denies the audience an ending. But I'm also interested in knowing about how you think of endings in performance in general.

What are some of the concerns you have when you're thinking about how to end a piece?

Tim: We're slightly notorious for having several endings, as if we couldn't quite decide what was the closure. In many of the pieces that's to do with the fact that there are several strands of activity or action or text going on, and they all need their own resolution. If you're not dealing with a single coherent structure or framework or narrative situation, where one ending suits all, then in a way everything has to have its own trajectory ending. I think it's complex. In one sense what we're thinking about is with the material you've put on the table, you're sensitive to what its final iteration is, or what its final, the point at which it arrives. In a sense that's what you're left with. If you've got a particular text and it's mutating in a particular way, what's the final iteration, or you've got a particular figure who's involved in a particular set of activities, what's the final version of those things. Which is all to do with how we read narrative or how we read sequence or how we read matter and how the final element of those things closes a discourse in a certain way. There's a very careful attention to what state a discourse gets left in. But maybe even more meta than that – that's a nuts and bolts dramaturgy basically – but beyond that there's also an interesting possibility of a state of reflection or contemplation or looking back. We tend to endings which are slightly like a kind of airlock in which it's evident that the drama, such as it is, is finished, but where a space of contemplation is introduced in which you can think about what's happened and measure to a certain degree the distance that's been travelled since the beginning.

With *The Notebook* which you didn't ask about, it's a narrative, it's very unusual for us to be dealing with narrative but there we are, we've got one. The book ends in a very particular way at a very particular moment that's incredibly abrupt. It's the literary equivalent of the sudden black out mid-sentence – not mid-sentence but on a revelation basically. On the page it's completely bewildering. But of course what you do with a book is – the revelation is that one of the twins crosses over into the other country, the other goes back to the Grandmother's house. That's the end of the book. Those are the last words. "The other one goes back to the house." And every time you read it you're just like, "What the fuck. I don't believe it." You're in outrage. But when you've got the book you can sit with the book in your hands, and you can think about that, and you can read it again and think "Wow, What the fuck." Whereas in the theatre, whenever we did *that* as the ending in the theatre, it felt like there was no space for this kind of contemplation. No space to let that happen. And the idea that we were going to change the lights and demand applause at that point felt so ugly. Everybody that we showed it to in rehearsals who experienced that were just

like, "Whoah the end. That was weird." So we became aware that we needed to put a kind of airlock at the end. Which shouldn't have any content, because if it had any content it would unbalance the enormous strength of that trajectory. So what we did was we turn to one of the very first passages of the book, where they describe the grandmother's house. So they say, "The other one goes back to the house, Grandmother's house is at the edge of the town. It's a small house. In the garden there's a pig shed and an orchard and in the house there's a fire and a bedroom and a couch upon which we used to sleep." So we just basically re-say something we've already said, as no particular content except to return you to the scene which you have been occupying, and it just provides about 30 seconds of space. I think if you look at our endings they very often relate to that.

So the ending of *Thousandth Night* is actually a similar thing in the sense that Cathy uses the form. What's interesting is that the only thing that's completely agreed in the whole six hours, is that Cathy will end it, and that it will be that text, although it's not written down anywhere so whatever version of it Cathy does is whatever she manages to drag out of her mind at that time of night. But she uses the form "Once upon a time there was a…" which is the form that we've all been using solidly for the last six hours. She doesn't tell a story. She basically goes into a list, and the list posits a mouth that wouldn't stop talking, ears that wouldn't stop listening, a heart that wouldn't stop beating, eyes that wouldn't stop looking, hands that wouldn't' stop touching and so on. Which is sort of to say Once upon a time, in other words, we were here doing this and you were there doing what you're doing. Which is not to say very much, but again it sort of just lets the situation into the room and provides a moment of re-contacting the now. There's something in that about redundancy, in the sense that really the ending we tend towards a kind of redundancy. We're not telling you anything new. The idea of these endings which reveal something is like, "What the fuck is that about?" I think it's much more interesting for us to use the end as a way to bring you into the present. This idea of an airlock is kind of interesting I think. It's making me think of the end of *Tomorrow's Parties*. It's interesting with *Tomorrow's Parties* because we struggled with that piece in some ways because it's so relentlessly about projecting into the future, and it's entertaining in that way, but it feels in a strange way non-present because it's all about what will happen in fifty or a hundred or a thousand years, so you sort of feel a little bit body-less and place-less. We were struggling to think, what are the ways in which we can bounce this back down into the room that we're in.   We came up with two methods both of which we use, and one which we use for the ending. The first one was this device which goes, "In the future, things will be pretty much the same as they are now." Which is just to say then you can embark on a list of things which allege to be how things are now. So people will still fall in love with the wrong person, people will still bump into each other's cars in the car park, people will still have jobs, people will still have kids who are bored when it's raining, stuff like that, or the rich will still exploit the poor. There will still be slaves. You can use that device in any way that you want but it sort of grounds us in a kind of present-ness. We know where we are, even if we can have a conversation about what that is, we kind of know the ground we're standing on. And then at the very end of the piece we use another device which is related to that. Which is we use a device that says, "In the future, when people talk about now, they will say what a disgusting time that was. Or in the future, when people talk about now, they will say that was a boring bit of history. Or when people talk about now they will say it will be an irrelevant narrative because things will changed so much

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that it will just be the Spartans, like it doesn't matter." But again the desire was to bring it back to the present, and I think the very final line is about time speeding up and slowing down. So human beings will live for a very long time or they'll only live for shorter and shorter periods of time and they'll pack everything into shorter periods of time, and the final one is that they'll only live for an hour. And in that hour they'll pack in everything that they need to pack in, like a butterfly. So it's like the hour that we've just spent.

Deborah: It's like reinforcing what the situation in the room was.

Tim: Exactly. And I think that's often what we do. I would be surprised if there was an ending of ours that doesn't somehow try to do that.

Deborah: Why is it that you guys do that? What do you think that tendency to make an ending that's about reinforcing the situation of now is?

Tim: Because in some ways that now, i.e. the moment that we're in, sharing the performance, the moment that other people are in, getting through it, negotiating it, experiencing it, I suppose that's the moment that we're most interested in. Everything else is, by our way of understanding theatre, everything else is a distraction. It can be as wildly distracting or as minimally distracting as you like, but that situation in the room, which is the situation of the temporary community that's formed around watching something, that's what really interests us. Throughout a performance we're probably looking for moments which ground us in that reality, and we're definitely looking to end there. We want to start there usually. We might start somewhere else and then crash into that space, deliberately after fifteen minutes of plate spinning. But that moment which is squaring off of us and the audience, audience and audience, it's the measuring moment, and the ending is the most important of those because it is the stock taking of "Okay what was this?" What it was is to be measured rightly in that space. It's not to be measured in the space of a fiction or in the space of a story. Those things are less interesting to us. We're interested in the now, the group of people who are assembled, the collective conversation that's going on and has been going.

Deborah: Is there a sense in which an ending furnishes an audience with a certain amount of meaning? Do you ever think about that thing of, "It's over now, what was it?" The idea that an ending has some sort of pressure on it to mean something, to give the audience something.

Tim: Yeah well I think it's super sensitive because it's the closing of a discourse or of a line. In my mind it's both something that you, dramaturgically you reject many things in the last ten minutes slot because whatever you put there has the feeling or the weight of expectation that is somehow the conclusion. So you probably have many gestures that seem too trivial or inappropriately trivial and you probably have many gestures which seem inappropriately meaningful, which is almost worse. I'd rather have inappropriately trivial than inappropriately meaningful. But you know that that moment's charged. It is in playwriting. It's to do with the time sequence. You just can't get away from that. That the last thing with Bond's *Saved* is the guy mending the chair, that the last thing, I went to see *Blasted* last night, the last words in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is "Thank you." And it fucking screams at you: This is

important. So you can't put anything down there. You can't put anything there lightly. I think often what we try to do is probably by the time we get to our ending we've already had our ending and we create instead this kind of airlock space. Because basically I don't want in the last 120 seconds anything very meaningful or anything very contentful because I will resent it deeply. The ending that is a dramatic revelation has got to be in my mind the worst kind of ending. It's just like come on. You saved it for that and a blackout? What are you talking about that was terrible. So I always want to avoid that. But I think there is pressure, but it's the cumulative pressure of everything you've done – it's towards this idea of "Where is this going?" There's also a pressure at twenty minutes, isn't there? Or at forty minutes. Which is that at twenty minutes I want to feel like whatever we're here doing, I have gotten somehow deeper into it than I was at the beginning. It's no good if I feel at twenty minutes that actually the stakes haven't changed. Even if it's a flat twenty minutes. It's not to say that it has to rise on a ramp. But twenty minutes, even if it's been the same action or the same word repeated for twenty minutes, I should feel at that twenty minute mark like things are more thickly entangled around me. So I think time – it's not just the ending – it's an accumulated pressure or charge or question maybe that – you can think about it in terms of beginnings, you can think well you can do pretty much anything for twenty, twenty five minutes, and it's not a problem. The next twenty minutes are very important because you're going to need to do something with that stuff that you've chucked down there. People will kind of watch anything for twenty minutes and it will be quite thrilling because whatever it is, it's something.

Deborah: It's something new.

Tim: But at the point in the next twenty, twenty five, if you're not managing to somehow make the soup a bit thicker, however you do it…

Deborah: It's funny because it sounds a lot like a three act structure, right? It sounds a bit like inciting incident-ish to say that after the first twenty minutes something needs to have happened

Tim: But what's interesting is that even something fairly flat like if you think of musically Steve Reich or choreographically Jan Fabre, some of the early pieces, they're extremely flat for very very long periods of time. Robert Wilson. But despite the fact that nothing's changing, the fact that nothing's changing means there's a sort of accumulation. So it's not about needing there to be incident, but it is about – we could say that at twenty minutes what's changed is that I'm getting frustrated and sick of the fact that nothing's changing. I've seen pieces like that that work. So I don't think it's quite, "Please put your change and introduce your character here", but it is being wise to the fact that time passing and viewer engagement over time has a kind of ergonomics to it, that even if you're in deep minimalism or heavy repetition or dramatic flatness, you probably are thinking about those things. But there are different ways to manage it, aren't there? Beckett or something.   But if you look at *Waiting for Godot* in detail you'll probably find there's some clever stuff going on about quite where the stakes are up. He manages the time.

Deborah: This idea of managing an audience's time is really interesting. Basically the fact that you're sharing time together and you have a responsibility to manage it somehow as a maker.

I wanted to ask, in the durational shows that you guys do, do you have that same thing of the twenty minute mark?

Tim: One of the interesting things about those shows is that on one level we tend to think about them as being a kind of release from the a lot of the tyrannical demands of a theatre audience and the tyrannical demands of an hour and a half and the tyrannical ergonomics of dealing with that kind of time. In some ways when you say it's six hours long, and people can come and go whenever they like, there's a few things to say about it. Obviously it's going to be boring. Six hours can't be all interesting. The fact that people are coming and going as they please relieves you of the architecture, because you don't know when they came in and you don't know when they're leaving. So in a sense the demand to make shapes that make sense in that way and have a compelling dramatic attitude to this hour and a half, you're totally out of control there. Because someone could come in at exactly the wrong moment, and leave again just before a so called resolution would have been achieved. So there's enormous taking off of steam there, that you don't have to deal with those things. We often talk about the fact that the work, a lot of it anyway, has been made through improvisation, and improvisation that's then structured and edited to make dramatic shapes in time, of a kind. One of the things you're doing there is you're forcing the dramaturgy on the material. In an improvisation this thing has a "natural" length or a "natural" flow to a certain place, but the bigger dramatic structure you've made demands that it wraps up in 12 minutes where naturally it played out to 24. And it lead to the lights coming on and a coffee break, but for our reasons we needed to go into this dance number which is completely unnatural. So we're often in the position where improvisational lead material that's been formed organically, we say "in nature", because there's nothing natural about it, but we can say that there's a set of behaviors and inclinations and codes that we work in that have given shape to something emerging in improve that has a sort of organic set of checks and balances that cause it to be a certain way, energies, and then having done that in nature, you're forced to bastardize it, take five minutes out of it and make it lead to a dance routine that it never knew about because it hadn't even been made. So there is often a bit of butcher's block where various unlike things have been joined together, and there's a violence in that, and it's violent to the time that those things initially took and the time that they were born in. So theatre in that sense is always violent and you're always buggering up the stuff to be in service of another thing. But the great thing about the long shows is that you exist inside the rules, beyond that there are no appointments to keep, so it can flow, and it means it can be super exciting, boring, it can become very hot and frenetic, it can become very placid and tranquil. You never have the feeling while you're doing the durationals that "Shit we need to calm this down because we need to turn this bend now to get to the dance routine." Or to get to the whatever. Because beyond staying inside the rules you've got no appointments to keep, so they're sort of relaxing in that sense as well. Having said that, the durationals as we've made them probably as improvisation per se tends to have, it has its own sort of time signature.

Deborah: I was going to ask if that violence you were talking about starts to happen in the last hour, for example, of a durational performance? When you can feel that you said the show was going to end at midnight and midnight is coming close?

Tim: Mostly you wouldn't feel that until, you shouldn't really feel that until the last fifteen minutes at most. *Speak Bitterness* and *The Thousandth Night* we agree, this is an agreement, that we'll all be either at the table or at the front for the last fifteen minutes or so, leading to Cathy's text, where Cathy ends. With *Speak Bitterness* it was Terry the last time we did it. But we've said that we'll all be there and we'll pass it around and there probably won't be any big dramatic features. Nobody shall go too far out on a limb. It might have a slightly more contemplative tone. It's allowed to scratch that up a little bit, not too much. But yeah, fifteen minutes. And prior to that it's business as usual. *Quizoola*'s interesting because often as a player you've not got your eye on the clock, the first you know that your time is up, either on a shift, which is kind of a mini-ending, or there's going to be a change of players and I'm going to be leaving, or at the very end, the first you know is you seem the coming through the door, the other ones, and that means you've got about ninety seconds as they walk slowly to the side, and then there's a period of grace where you could try to get to something that feels okay to end on. The end of the 24-hour *Quizoola* that we did in Sheffield last year was me and Claire, and I was desperately trying to get Claire to a place that I considered worthy of it being the ending. And I think I was more or less saying, "Is that it?" Like there's gotta be something else. And I could see them coming, and I was scrambling, so it was rather nice actually. Because the violence of the imminent closure was sort of on the table as a thing. But mostly we just keep that pressure off, and there's an artificial decision about the last fifteen minutes. Cut it down to a basic play, reiterate the basic play you saw at the beginning, and close with one voice. I don't think we feel that as a violence in quite the same way. Any hour and a half long construction of a theatre show is an archaeology of many extremely violent editing jobs that have gone on to make that shape plausible and apparently natural.

Deborah: The idea of an ending, do you think that there's something about an ending that's a bit like a death? Do you think that there's some similarity between endings in performance and death, or our fascination with endings and death?

Tim: I think that in a strange way – well it might depend what you think about death. But maybe this predilection for the airlocks and this negotiation of this end space is to do with wanting the end to be a kind of bridge between the world of the piece and the world of the person who's just sitting in the auditorium, returned to their seat to think. And in some ways that's about saying, "Let this thing stay with you." Just take these last few steps very carefully because this should stay with you, it shouldn't stay here. Whereas if I think of the dramatic "lights go out" moment, that feels more like a death to me. Like oh they've gone, fuck shit. I like the idea of, the important thing about the ending is that it doesn't resolve anything. That's probably why in this last minute I don't want anything new that would feel like a revelation or an answer or anything. I want to float either the contemplation of the tensions that have been here already, or a contemplation of some restatement of what the basic energies of the piece are. Because I kind of want those things to stay with people. Sort of helping them out a little bit. But it's a bit like you're trying to help them out slowly so you can put something in their pockets as they leave. Whereas the dramatic ending seems to stake all on you being traumatised by this last bit of information or a visual image that will stay with you forever. Maybe it works. I'm trying to think if I've ever seen a show that ended like that that was actually any good. Because it seems like such a stupid – maybe it would be a good thing to try.

Deborah: To see if you could make it not …

Tim: I mean I don't know. I'm trying to think if I've ever seen anything that ends like that that wasn't –

Deborah: I mean I know what you mean by the feeling. I know I've watched things that have ended like that and I can remember the feeling. But what's amazing is I can't actually remember any of the endings.

Tim: Well that probably tells you something, doesn't it? In improvisation sometimes, when we've been working with some lights on the floor so it's not totally stark naked, occasionally I've gone over and I've flipped all the fluorescents in the room on, probably over the last thirty years I've done that many times, in order to effectively throw a bucket of cold water on the piece. The weird thing is it always feels like something really hot has just happened. And usually within a day of saying "Yeah that was great" we realize that actually it was just nothing. It was just that you changed the lights. It's like somebody just stood up in the auditorium and shouted "Wake up!" Which is very dramatic but it doesn't mean anything. So maybe that's the same with the ending, that it's a powerful effect, but not necessarily very deep in its implications on you, and maybe that's something about those kind of endings which are more like thinking spaces. It allows the tendrils of the piece to enter you in a different way such that when you get up from your seat you're still somehow implicated or tethered to it. I don't know, it's interesting.

Deborah: Something that struck me was when you were talking about the idea of the show's over and then you have time to think about it, and I realized I kind of never have time to think about a show right after it's over, because you're applauding, you've gone with someone else, and you're talking to people and then sometimes you don't have time to have thought about it until some time the next day or even sometimes months from then. So there's something about the way you're describing endings, as though you're building in that time for the audience to think. That time that they don't get.

Tim: A little bit. This is making me think of the time at the end of movies when the music is playing over the credits, that it has that similar, it's in and of the world but the film's finished. Most people just get up and run for the bus or whatever but there is a sort of built in contemplative space there that theatre with its desperate mechanism of applause can't really have. And that's very breaking, isn't it? It immediately ties the shoelaces, commodifies, wraps it up and off you go. I mean I don't mind it either, it's got that social function in the auditorium that I quite like. But it's interesting that it is a closing note, so maybe we just want a little bit of time before that's coming in order to let a bit of thinking happen. Maybe.

Deborah: For *And on the Thousandth Night*, can you tell me a little bit about the thinking behind the concept for that show? The game?

Tim: All of the durational pieces have come about by – we never have sat down to try and make one – in fact the occasions where we've tried to make a durational piece we've failed. They've all arisen by accident. Of those four pieces that I would really

think of as the durational works that we've made. *And on the Thousandth Night* came when we were working on a twenty-four hour show called *Who Can Sing a Song to Unfrighten Me?* And it was made with sixteen performers, it was played in only a few cities, and it had a series of structures throughout it which cycled. So there was an imitation magic act that they were all doing that would last twenty five minutes or so. And then we would play the game which was the story telling piece for twenty five minutes, and then we would do something else, and then we would do something else, and then the storytelling would come back. So the whole 24 hours was an endless cycle of about six or seven different structures with occasional one off scenes or interludes interspersed between them. And one of the thoughts about this show was somehow bedtime stories or fairy stories, and we were rehearsing, and we thought there would be something in telling stories but we didn't know what. We were just telling them in the rehearsal room with a group of those people. We were telling fairy stories or traditional stories or made up stories sometimes. And because there was no way of limiting people's time, it just mean with sixteen people playing it just took forever and it was boring and it just meant that only a few people would speak, so I introduced the idea that after one minute somebody with a watch would say "Stop." And then we would just move to the next one and then it became apparent that the stopping was really exciting. And that the fragment of a narrative that was left cut short was more interesting than having to play any of those things through to the conclusion. So we found a way – we were with a watch for quite a while, but that was very mechanical obviously and had no, the person saying stop was in a very hot position but it had no consequence to them, so we just developed a system where there was no watch, you could say stop anytime, but if you said stop you had to tell the next story. So it cost you something if you were going to interrupt the other person. And that very simple but very dynamic motor became the principle on which those sections were orchestrated. And then within that then various other decisions – no names, no place names, no product names, which was a way of leveling the ground so that you could tell the story of your morning at the same time as someone would tell a Grimm fairytale or a Raymond Chandler short story. And it was the same because there were no people names and no place names, so there's always a man or a woman, and a city or a country, but never Los Angeles in 1929. That was all obliterated. Which basically reduced everything into generic story world and allowed all the materials to have a kind of equivalence to each other. And there was beyond that there was some discussion of the dynamics of different genres, dilemmas, those very clear set ups for stories that you get in traditional storytelling and so on. And how those could be used. And also, to be honest, many people don't know what a story is. You try playing that game with people who haven't really practiced or concentrated on it, it's woeful. Because most people have no clue what actually constitutes a story. Most stringy unfucking structured, even the more lunatic moments of that, we've all got some muscle as far as what actually constitutes a narrative, and sometimes people take the piss out of that and go off on a strange direction, but compared to playing that with seven untutored players, it's a very very very different experience.

Deborah: What would you say constitutes a narrative?

Tim: In that piece anyway it's that combination of event and consequence and decision and the ability to manage information and the revelation of that information over time. It's not dissimilar to people who can speak argumentatively and their

minds are able to structure information in points or in paragraphs rather than tangling. And some people set out to tell a story and it's a car crash of things they've forgotten to tell you previously. And that game doesn't allow that. You can't do it. Once you've sold me the idea of this lone child you can't introduce a brother. You're immediately killed for that, in that game. So it's sort of keeping, there's a certain level of keeping track, and building and selling, and a sort of ratio of padding that's allowed. You can pad a lot in that show but you have to have at least a skeletal structure that's evolving. Even if you don't start out from something that you know, because often people start telling a story about something they've got no idea. "There's a bucket of water on a table." And you watch them bootstrap towards a kind of a story.

Deborah: When I watched it online what I found interesting was that some of the stories seemed to end, kind of.

Tim: Yeah it's true. It's sort of not allowed technically in the game, but you do feel that people manage to get to something that's kind of like a conclusion. And in the best cases they're left then to continue because they shouldn't be allowed really to finish, but occasionally they're stopped conveniently which I think is a rule infringement in my mind.

Deborah: When you're telling one of those stories, as you said in an improvisation there are certain bits of material that obviously should last ten minutes, but then if someone doesn't stop you for twenty minutes, what techniques do you use in order to keep, when it's pretty obvious that the story seems to be coming to its end but nobody's saying "Stop" – how do you?

Tim: I think there's different levels of that. One example might be these stories where two people get married, one of them says to the other, "Never look in the cupboard," and the other one thinks well I'm not going to look in the cupboard, and then the other one becomes sick and they think I'm going to look in the cupboard, usually around this moment of narrative tension other people will interrupt you, because there's something about frustrating this desire to see in. But sometimes when you tell that story someone will you let you go – so they open the cupboard, now what are you going to do? Inside the cupboard there's a box, or inside the cupboard there's a diary but the diary's locked, so they think there's a key, on a chain around the husband's neck. You make some new devices and defer the ending of your narrative. So those things are fun. The flip or the other version of that is when really there's been a succession of incidents and whatever was at stake has been resolved. So the guy finally puts the gun in his mouth and kills himself or whatever, and it's obvious that that's the end. Beyond that it's very difficult. Usually what would happen is it would be clear that I've kind of finished, other people will be looking at me as if to say, "You shouldn't have done that," You're humiliated and probably you're forced to say, "And the next day a man comes round to the apartment to read the gas meter, and he looks through the door. And as you're forced to continue, another person will say stop, as if to say –

Deborah: To put you out of your misery.

Tim: But also you've been shamed into admitting that you sort of closed something. You're forced to continue in a lame way, with an unsatisfying, transparently hopeless, and once you've acknowledged that you've done that, other people will stop you. But it's also a nice thing in the structure of it. What I don't like is if you get to, "The guy shoots himself" and somebody else says "Stop." It's too much allowing that it's stopped in a convenient moment, whereas I would prefer to force people to climb the stairs again, and then stop them.

Deborah: I really enjoyed when I was watching and it felt as though you were challenging each other. When someone would start a story that couldn't really go on for longer than a certain period of time and everyone else would just make them sit with it for ages.

Tim: Yeah that is really nice. It's one of the side effects of the rules is that you sometimes stop people, occasionally you stop people because you've got a really good story that you want to tell. Sometimes you stop people because you want to shut somebody up, therefore you're quite prepared to think that you're going to be the next in line, so you're sort of thinking of what to do. But the other circumstance of having to continue is there'll be a very fast ricochet of "Once upon a time there was a this" "Stop." "Once upon a time there was a that" "Stop." "Once upon a time there was a this" "Stop." And it's like kind of bullying or something. You're thinking, this is good, I'll kick in as well. And then you kick and suddenly the teacher appears and you're the one who's putting the boot in. So you get stuck. And then you're not at all prepared, and you might have just said, because basically people are just saying nonsense things, so "Once upon a time there was a bunch of rhubarb on a table." Yeah. Continue. Tell us all about it. But that's also one of the pleasures, but that's the one where you really get stuffed.

Deborah: One of the things I noticed when I watched it online is that Cathy kept bringing up the same story over and over. She kept getting stopped in this one story about a woman who's doing, I can't remember, but it was like a woman who was doing something, and she just kept continuing to try and tell that story over and over again. Is that allowed in the rules? It seemed unusual but it was…

Tim: It's a dynamic thing in a game that's about endless channel hopping and endless shifting of attention, that insisting on something becomes a very noticeable feature, and it's important that somehow different people are insisting on different things. In different performances different people will stick out for that tactic. So Claire actually has one about the woman eating ice cream on the summer's day, which is going to turn into the ice cream's running down her body and the dog comes. It's very disgusting what happens because you can imagine. So some people know that that's where that story's going to go and they try to stop her from going there. But you know Richard likes to do this one about the tiger who comes to the door. So he will do that repeatedly. And he knows that people don't really want to hear that shit so he keeps getting cut down. I tried really hard in Berlin to tell the story of *La Jetée*, the Chris Marker film, and I was getting really pissed off because nobody would let me tell it, and I tried about five times from different angles. Because there's that thing where people, you know, want to tell the story of two people sitting in the café, nobody will let you do that so you're stopped, so you say there's a fly and it lands on a table, and it's on a table in a café under this man and this woman talking,

so you try these other entry points to try and get past the security system of the other ones. But yeah insistence is an important part of it for different people. And on any particular iteration of it, different people will stick out for different narratives that they're sort of clinging to.

Deborah: How does it feel to tell a story that you know you're not going to be able to end? Especially when you get, like the *La Jetée* example, if you've gotten about two thirds of the way in, and you think "Great, I'm really being allowed to tell the story now."

Tim: With something like that, I get frustrated that I can't get to the body of it. I want to be able to put not just the initial set up, I want to put in place the body of the ideas. Like I want to get to a place where people know what is on offer in this particular narrative. I'm not bothered about closing it because in a way that's explicitly forbidden in this piece anyway. But actually that's not important to me anyway. It's more like I want to be able to do the middle. That becomes really important.

Deborah: I also wanted to ask about the ending for *Sight is the Sense that Dying People Tend to Lose First*. Because I remember that piece really runs in the face of causality. I can't remember how that piece ends. How does it end and what was your thinking about how to end it?

Tim: Yeah, it's interesting. What I like about that piece is that I kind of at a certain point I decided I would write it more or less without a dramaturgy, and I definitely had this thing of "Jim's going to say all this stuff for an hour and I don't care if it's interesting or not." I was really, and I knew how Jim performs, and I'm just not thinking about any of these questions, it's just going to be what it is. And if it's funny, fine, but if it's not funny I don't care either. It's just there as a thing. And Jim's interesting because as a performer he doesn't want to impose a dramaturgy on it. So I know that if I'd worked on it with any of the Forced Ents performers, their instinct would have been to sort of fix where they're going to break or where they want to definitely be able to get this gag to work, or a sort of energy flow in the thing, and Jim, I don't know, maybe through his work with Richard, but his natural tendency is as a performer he didn't want to do any of that. Which is also, because I did some work with him before I'd really finished the writing, so I already knew that that was like that. But it has sort of, having said that, there are, there's a couple of moves I make in the last three pages or so where you can sort of see that I'm trying to just change the rhythm a little bit or just change the shape a little bit, and it ends, well it ends with the title. So you know as he's saying that this is the last line because you know the title of the piece. By that time it's kind of obvious that this is where we're going to end.

Deborah: It's amazing that I didn't remember that the ending was the title. I think that that's actually really to the credit of the piece that I didn't remember that. I just remembered it as Jim, it seemed like a piece that didn't begin or end.

Tim: Which was really one of the things that I was trying to do. It's probably more than anything else that I've done, the thing that tries to avoid dramaturgical structure. That it's open, and that Jim just sort of breathes it in the room every night, and that it

has a different structure because the night is different. And because an hour is an hour so its kind of shape, you can't avoid that. But beyond that it's – *(Tim opens up his laptop and brings out the document which is the text for* Sight is the Sense that Dying People Tend to Lose First*.)*

Deborah: It's great how it doesn't have any paragraphs.

Tim: It's totally unhelpful.

Deborah: I thought it would be a list. It must be really hard to memorize.

Tim: Yeah Jim was saying that he thought it was very unhelpfully laid out but then he began to like it.

Tim and Deborah are reading from the end of the document.

Deborah: Oh yeah, "You cannot run forever" – that feels like a bit of a …

Tim: There's a whole list of "You cannot." And it's also very fast now. These are very short sentences. "Trees move up. Tango is a dance. Tito is a leader. Traffic can be terrible. There are four dimensions. There are two sides." He's counting. "A one way street. No good way to say goodbye. Words are not things." I mean it's banging. "You cannot run forever."

Deborah: So it sort of counts down and then nearly goes into a negative space.

Tim: Yeah.

Deborah: Huh. So in a sense it does kind of – I mean I don't remember this having ended, but it does

Tim: Yeah like the thought that my desire or thought has no structure – that broke because I did do this sort of acceleration and intensifying at the end. This split that there's a signal here if you're looking for it. "Entropy is what makes things come to an end. Pressure can stop the flow of blood." I mean it's sort of, there's a lot of like tensions in here which I think is really nice.

Deborah: It points to the idea.

Tim: And I think just before it you've got this – um –

Deborah: Yeah it's interesting how there's this subtle narrative structure that creeps in.

Tim: Yeah it's just like little, almost key words that get mentioned that set off a certain set of expectations. There's basically an expanding thing, and then a contracting to negative thing, as you were saying, that happens. I think that's about it.

Deborah: In the chapter I'm talking about how endings make theatre and narratives into a contained period of time. They make them into something contained in contrast with the rest of the endless march of things.

Tim: Yes.

Deborah: And that thing you said about the airlock, it's just this idea that shutting it down and saying this was the thing, now it's over.

Tim: Absolutely. That was something I was writing about in the piece that I sent you from Sheffield. This idea that it's only the fact that it ends that makes it possible and that gives it meaning actually. It's interesting to think about a piece that would never end, and what does that mean. It's a sort of conceptual, it's probably Long Player, the music thing, it's similar to John Cage, it's an Art Angel project, it's meant to last for 500 years or maybe 1000 years, I can't remember. It's a systematic music composition, generative, that's making itself and broadcasting long term.

Deborah: But even by saying 1,000 years it's still contained.

Tim: Yes, I mean the idea that something would never end – there's an incomprehensibility to that. It doesn't make any sense at all does it? Because even the universe, we think, will end. So it's only the idea of finitude that makes things comprehensible, which is probably why and is certainly key in these cultural forms - that they have duration somehow.

Deborah: It does make me think about how Coney have tried to make work that doesn't end. They had this *Loveliness* project where afterwards you had to be an agent of loveliness and theoretically you'd get emailed, and they had this thing about how a performance hasn't ended until the last person has talked about the performance. Which is also a nice way of – but yeah it's hard to wrap your head around.

Tim: I suppose the event as such ends, but this sense of how does an event ripple on is the big contribution of Brecht to that idea of catharsis and closure. All these ideas about the rhizomatic spreading out of the implications – the echoes of an event in the people who were present. The way that the event calls to people who were present to change or to report it to other people. And even this idea which comes from, which I heard from Anne Bean when I did the Tate Legacy project, Anne was the other artist and she had this beautiful line about archive being the chemical trace in the brain. So that sense of where the legacy and the history of a work or the implications of a work continue in this tiny electrochemical way, I think that's very interesting. There's a sort of ending, but then there are all these systems that are ongoing energy and thought and narration. Which is very interesting I think. But it's almost like the ending of the event plays a key part in the transmission of it into those other places. It's a guarantor or an attempt to negotiate the ongoing transmission.

Deborah: I think that's absolutely it – because unless the event was a contained thing, it can't then become a thing that has trace or legacy. Wow that's all good stuff. Well I think that's going to give me plenty to go on for the moment. Thank you.

Tim: You're welcome.

Afterwards Tim and Deborah began talking off record when Tim said there was a last thing about endings that was important to record.

Tim: So no it's just making me think that there's a very strong thing that we always talk about when we're making pieces, and especially when we're thinking about the ending of pieces, which is basically that the ending has to be built from the materials that you've been working with. We've a very strong allergy to this wheeling on another thing in the last fifteen or twenty minutes, especially the beginning, because basically the ending has to be a kind of working through the consequence of and the product of the stuff you've been really negotiating. The most dissatisfying thing in the world is in the last twenty minutes to sort of wheel in another thing to produce your ending for you. Because actually then it's not – whether it's an ending image or an ending thing – it's actually not consequent to the trajectory through the material that you've been charting. And I think that's really basic principle for us, is the ending has to be an expression of and an articulation of, a knotting of the things you've had on the table. Not some new thing that you think might be amusing. A lot of things have been chucked out for that reason – because they might be great images or a lovely dance number or whatever it is, but what the fuck has that got to do with anything that we were doing before. Yeah that was it.

Deborah: That's good. That's great. That's cool. Um, that actually fits nicely with something ….

Interview with Tassos Stevens of Coney

The Ending of *A Small Town Anywhere*
12 March 2015

Deborah: So basically I wanted to talk to you about endings in Coney's work and Coney was a company that immediately came to mind because of the piece I did, *The Loveliness Principle*, and the fact that it was sort of less of an ending and more of a beginning or something. I would love to know what your take on endings is in general?

Tassos: Well hi thanks for having me. Shout out to the radio audience.

Deborah: Of my PhD.

Tassos: There is a thing that I am often quoted for saying which I will now say, which is definitely that I think for any audience with regards to any event, not just the kind of work that we make, their experience of the event begins when they first hear about it and stops if and when they stop talking about it. That's now coined that it's a piece of bullshit that I can just spout, but because Coney's focus is all about the audience and about their experience, it's fair to say that we first started thinking about what happens in advance of the show and that space which is normally occupied by marketing, in terms of the messages that people are receiving and the different ways that they are receiving them, and in the very early days realizing that we could play in that. The idea of talking to a gate keeper of the experience who would let you in and bring you to the place where you needed to be, not just geographically, time and place, but also imaginatively in a kind of readiness.

Deborah: Can you give me an example of who those gatekeepers might be?

Tassos: Yeah. So allegedly Rabbit might be one but I couldn't comment on that. With *A Small Town Anywhere* Henri was a clearly fictional character, though with Small town there's kind of two levels of fiction and then the kind of reality. So Henri is the historian of the small town. He's not very good at his job and he has a mostly blank history and he's trying to discover what happened in the town's history by recreating it with you to discover what would have happened if the town were people like you. And then there's the fiction of the town itself that you're entering into, and then there's the reality of a room full of mostly strangers, which I really like as a line. So Henri, you could start, so that advance exchange could happen via communications, like digital communications, so email, even sometimes a phone call, and also in person sometimes.

Deborah: So how do you handle marketing for your pieces? If it's considered part of the piece.

Tassos: Consider it's part of the piece and consider what information you want to be outside and what information you want inside. And also there's something with Adventure 1 which uses a gatekeeper of someone called Josh who you will speak to online in advance, there's email and bits of magic phone stuff, but it's very deliberate so that you're getting, we're not doing much marketing for it, it's an adventure so we

can't tell you what will happen, it's in the city but we can't tell you where, so okay yeah, I want it. So we're not telling people information until we've got them on the mailing list and then we show them the dates but not the precise location, and when they book a ticket it's deliberately a little bit cumbersome because they'll get an email from Coney HQ who are running the box office, introducing you to Josh who is an associate of ours who will lead you into the experience, and then Josh is like, "Thanks Coney!"

Deborah: And Josh is a fiction?

Tassos: Josh is a fiction but those exchanges help ground him in that frame, which, given that he's one of the voices that is leading you towards a point where you might do something that could be considered quite rash, rash is the wrong way, but there is a challenging action in every sense that you are being asked to do, and that very interesting point where people are trying to cope with – there will be a point where they'll kind of go, "This feels quite real but I know it's theatre." And then, "Oh no it must be fiction because otherwise, there's a safety net" That was slightly tangential. But you consider, within these different levels, the real event, what do you they need to know? They need to know where it is when it is, they need to have a smartphone, they need to be able to upload music to that, they need to have comfortable shoes, dress for the weather kind of etc., and it will cost you £12 and it will last roughly this long, so along that kind of journey you're then laying out when do we need to tell them that and where do we want to tell them that? And then in terms of , "What is the fiction?" where you're going to be telling somebody who works in the heart of the city and you don't know much more about them and what you're going to be doing until you're there. So again it's laying out what do people need to know while on that journey, and thinking of the journey as an exchange, as a series of interactions.

Deborah: And this thing about the fictional gatekeeper, Is it that from the very first challenging their ideas of what is fiction and what is real? It sort of grounds the piece in that space?

Tassos: Yeah, depending on where it is. With Small Town it was very clear in the way that Henri is – there's a playfulness to Henri from the outset which signals pretty clearly, this is fiction this is play. Because you're going to a theatre, you're going to a theatre show. With Josh and with Adventure 1 you're going into the wild, and what is interesting because so much of what you're then experiencing is a principle of minimum necessary fiction in that so much is responding to what you're really seeing around you and casting that into the story, because that makes everything, the stuff that we're not responding to, that becomes part of it. And that magical, often magical sometimes scary uncertainty of what's in this what's not just switches the whole world on in that way.

Deborah: In terms of endings?

Tassos: Let me carry on with Small Town because the journey of that is very useful. So you've had this exchange with Henri in advance and you might be given something like your secret, which will end up, well this is a town that gossips, so that secret will be crucial for what's at stake for you.

Deborah: Would it be a real secret that you would have given?

Tassos: No it's a fiction. So it's to do with the occupation that you're given. That you choose. So you might be Debbie the butcher and there's an occupation that goes with a Butcher in a small town. It's the occupation secret but it's still you inside it. But it's definitely not a real secret. It's something that you made up. But because you made it up then you can invest in it. Then on the night, some people won't have done this in advance, so we've got to do a speedy casting into it, but we're in a salon of the historian which ideally is a different space from where the town is. Because the first thing we've asked people, and this is a standard tool, the first time you meet the gate keeper they will ask you an open ended question. Josh asks you for your position in regards to the financial system and the people who work inside it and encourages you to write about it, and then that will, spoiler, that will pop up for you as a point of reflection later in the experience. And we're playing a few tricks depending on how you answer that question. With *Small Town* you've asked what for you is the heart of a community. Which is what the piece is about. It's centralizing that. And we take all those answers and then in the salon, in the room, we've made an exhibition where it's been written on a nice card and stuck on a wall, so that you can kind of read them as a kind of reflection point. So it's about community but rather than us writing something that primes the audience for that which is a bit, "meh", they reflect back that multiplicity of voice that's kind of really interesting and gives them that space. But that's just before they go in, and this is very much a room full of mostly strangers. So it's quite quiet in there usually, people will talk hushed to their friends, it's like people are in an art gallery, that sort of (atmosphere.) Then they go into the town and two and a bit hours pass and they live or die together. They are sprung through sort of a simulation of a rise of fascism and then choose how they respond to that in the biggest broadest strokes. It's quite intense. It's really important then that we are taking care of them as they're coming out of that experience. So there's a very real need that we don't just end the show, throw them out into the world, because that would be failing at care then I feel. Important that there's a way to come out of that fiction, and come out of the second fiction, and they go back into the salon which we call a decompression zone. And the very simple but necessary social engineering of buying a glass of wine, so we can offer everybody a glass of wine, so there's no reason for them to go to the bar

Deborah: They don't have to pay for the glass of wine, it's free isn't it?

Tassos: Yes, and then it's like, and then you don't have to do very much. The least you need to do is for them to start talking to each other and sharing their own stories. And be like, "You backstabbing, what were you doing?" sort of thing. And then a greater reflection. There's been a reflection at the end in the town where the historian's read the final chapter of the history, which is when the army marches on the town what happens after that. And that is a come down and there's reflection in that but still within the fiction, and then this is a reflection out of the fiction. But it's looking at what – because people now want to know – they want to know what happened in other towns - not because they're really curious about that but because they want reassurance that it was their town, and their story, and that they made it happen. And also the observation that would be made by Henri who's played by Tom Frankland that also just to reflect and notice the difference in the room from before.

A room of strangers and now – that's a part of the meaning of the piece – you just played at being a community and now look what's happened.

Deborah: Now you are.

Hey Deborah,

I was writing the show while we were in rehearsals, and one day I brought in that ending as a joke. So the cast was performing the scene, and they were stunned when they got to the surprise ending. They loved it and wanted to keep it, because they felt we needed to give the audience one final slap after allowing them all this freedom from racial discomfort. What worked about it was that it made people re-evaluate everything that had come before, and all the assumptions they'd been making throughout that last scene. A typical train of thought would be, "I did notice those people weren't acting like black people!" and then, "Oh my god, what does it mean to 'act like a black person'—did I really just think that?"

xoxo
yj

At the end of Gardens Speak, the audience are giving the choice to write a letter back to the martyr they just heard their oral history and bury it in the soil facing their tombstone. They are told that the letters may be shared with the surviving families of the deceased. The letters are incredibly touching. People seem to place themselves in the story by reflecting on their position as people who just learnt about a political and personal reality they weren't aware of. Some admit in writing that they were crying over a stranger's grave. Others reflect on whether they would have been as brave or take similar decisions as the martyr if they were in their position. The piece starts when the ten audience members walk in together to the "garden" space but ends when the last person leaves the space as each person take different time in writing the letter. For me as an artist, the piece will end when I share these letters with the surviving family members, I am not sure when this will happen but hopefully when some justice would have been reached in Syria. That way it will feel more like a closure rather than an addition to an already painful wound.

Facebook Responses about Nic Green's 2009 piece *Trilogy*

In response to a Facebook status (written and posted by me 9 April 2015, and shared by Nic Green on 7 April 2015)

PhD Question - Can any friends who saw or participated in Nic Green's show *Trilogy* and perceived it as an action that helped radicalize them or solidify their relationship to feminism get in touch? Male or female are welcome to reply. I'm writing about Endings that actually serve as a kind of Beginning. PM me if that's how you feel most comfortable.

I received an overwhelming number of responses from past participants, many of which were highly personal, informal and intimate, so below are select responses where respondents were comfortable with their response being shared in this thesis.

Aby Watson
6 April 2015

Hey Debbie, just saw your status. So, here are some thoughts, but also please ask questions if you need to.

I participated within Nic Green's Trilogy when I was 19. At this time, I had only recently discovered what feminism even was but before the process I still had some underlying ideas that feminism was a bad thing. I was quite ignorant and scared of it, thinking it was an identity which separated gender and excluded men. I thought feminism was something that scared people and was based on anger.

Over the process of trilogy, my ignorance dissipated and I was shown what being a part of a feminist community meant: to stand up to injustice and prejudice in an empowering and accessible way to all.

I was quite shy with my body before the process and performance and felt quite ashamed by it. During and after, I enjoyed the wobbles of my body and became unashamed by the natures of my female anatomy. It was a total enlightenment, and to share these scary moments with a group of honest and inspiring women was so totally powerful.

It encouraged me to take risks afterward and challenge both myself and others. It was the first time I understood and defined myself as a feminist and yeah, was a pretty big milestone in my life.

X

Laura McDermott
6 April 2015

Hi love - saw your message about Trilogy and would 100% agree that it solidified my relationship with feminism and affected my subsequent actions and behaviour. Do you have specific questions? Xx

Janice Bradshaw
8 April 2015

Hi Deborah I took part in Trilogy at a time of change in my life. I saw a recording of part 1 just as it was being developed and was so moved by it that I said to my daughter (Laura Bradshaw) that if I had the chance I would love to take part in it. I got the opportunity! And performed in Manchester, London, Glasgow and Edinburgh in the flesh and almost every night of the tour by telephone link live to the performance. Being part of this made me take stock of where I was in my life and who I'd become over the last 25 or so years. Was I the same person I was in my teens? Did I still hold the same values? I looked hard and was able to see that person still there – she'd just been overlooked for a while. It was very inspiring for me to meet with other women with similar views – of all ages. Most of my friends don't seem to feel like I do. I was very shocked by the response I got from relating my 'womanifesto' to a live audience every night – I was just being honest! I also realised during this time that I was a feminist. I'd never given a name to my thoughts and beliefs before! So this was the beginning of a new era for me. A move on from the responsibilities of being a wife and mother to rediscovering me and allowing me to be me! Giving myself time to rediscover myself. Having stood up to be counted I find it difficult now not to respond in some way to things that I may have let go at one time. I have the confidence of maturity and experience on my side and can say things in a very different way to how I might have said things in my teens, so I don't upset people but still get my point over. I still love to meet up with the women I met during this time – it feels like home.

Erin Brubacher
8 April 2015

Erin: I organized all the volunteers throughout the Edinburgh run an danced in it there many nights. I also danced in Belfast. I sang at the Arches (my first week on the job-- wasn't expecting that!), in Edinburgh, and in Belfast.

Deborah: I would love to know about the first time you sang, and what compelled you to make that decision.

Erin: I just know I was tremendously moved and thought there was no god reason at all to say no to these two incredible women. (I saw part 3 first, then part 2, then the whole thing.) Another experience that was pretty amazing was being the naked photographer. I made portraits of all the women all throughout Edinburgh and also in Belfast. I was always naked when I shot them. I feel like Trilogy A) really changed my feelings of comfort with my body and B) really reinforced some governing principals of how things are made for my own practice. Here are some words I wrote about that a few years ago that reference my Trilogy experience:
http://media.virbcdn.com/files/59/367a7bf87490f11c-SocialDramaturgySept21.pdf

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