# Taking (a) Part in the Discourse, Re-staging the Social: the use of audience-participant conversation in performance since the start of the millennium

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## Abstract

## Taking (a) Part in the Discourse, Re-staging the Social: the use of audience-participant conversation in performance since the start of the millennium. By Richard Dufty.

This thesis examines the emergence of conversation involving audiences as a dramaturgical device within UK performance over the last twenty-five years. It locates this as part of the general participatory turn in artistic practice and argues that using conversation in this way enables a staging of the social, facilitating exploration of paradigms for social relations and interpersonal discourse. The argument is that implicit in the use of conversation are certain ethical, philosophical and aesthetic qualities that inform the models of sociality that these performances propose and can act as a critique of dominant relational and discursive paradigms. This thesis argues that these conversational attributes inform the dramaturgical dynamics of performances employing this device, and that the framing of the theatrical event emphasises the performative aspects of the conversational relational paradigms proposed, including stressing their fundamentally contingent quality. The thesis is structured around four dramaturgical contexts within which 'audience-participant' conversation has been deployed: performance rehearsing debate and decision-making in the public sphere; performance using conversation to engender interpersonal intimacy; conversation used in a practice of community building and socio-political changemaking; and 'co-authored' performance where conversation is a site on which to explore the potential and limitations of discourse in self/other relations. This thesis employs a 'polyphonic' theoretical framework, drawing on diverse ideas from the 'philosophy of dialogue' to highlight the different ways conversation is used in these contexts. The qualitative research methods utilised include interviews with practitioners and first-hand critical spectatorship analysis. The use of audience-participant conversation is understood within the context of the advance of neoliberalism, the current trend towards authoritarianism, the contemporary condition of the public sphere, and the associated precariousness of notions of the dialogical that underpin liberal, democratic, humanistic principles. This thesis argues for the significance of this conversational practice as an exercise in defending these values.

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I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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## Introduction

This thesis is focussed on performance practice that has emerged in the UK since the start of the millennium in which a significant feature is the use of conversation involving audience-participants[1]. This can be conversation that is facilitated between different audience-participants or between audience-participants and an artist/performer (e.g., in one-to-one performance). The focus here is on conversation that occurs within the frame of the performance, as part of the artwork, rather than research process conversations or post-show discussions.

My principal research question is: *How have performance-makers in the UK over the last twenty-five years used conversation involving audience-participants as a device within their artworks to explore, advocate for and critique paradigms for social relations and interpersonal discourse?*

This question was based on an initial hypothesis that the apparent turn towards the use of audience-participant conversation as a dramaturgical device in this period[2] was central, rather than incidental, to the ideas, aesthetics and affect generated by these performances. My hypothesis continued that its use might be seen within the context of the wider move towards what Nicolas Bourriaud terms "relational art" – "a form of art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context" (2002, p.14). The move towards audience-participant conversation seemed to be some kind of response to Bourriaud's contention that the issue of how human beings relate to and communicate with each other in the highly mediatised, market-dominated social and communication landscape of post-industrial society, had become one of the "most pressing" ones for contemporary artistic practice.

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[1] I use Adrian Howells' preferred term "audience-participant" (Heddon and Howells, 2011) throughout this thesis, highlighting the hybridity of this role in the performances covered here.

[2] As well as those referenced in this thesis – Kaleider, Coney, Fast Familiar, Adrian Howells, Jo Fong/Sonia Hughes, Rhiannon Armstrong, Touretteshero, Fevered Sleep and Uninvited Guests – other notable UK artists/companies using audience-participant conversation during this period that I was aware of include: Quarantine, Ansuman Biswas, Joshua Sofaer, Brian Lobel, Seth Kriebel, Andy Field and Becky Darlington.

Bourriaud argues that if the colonisation of the field of social relations by the marketplace is the site for one of the most significant political, ethical and aesthetic struggles of the late capitalist epoch, "it can only be analysed and fought through the production of new types of relationships between people" (Ibid, p.85). Following Bourriaud, audience-participant conversation appeared to be functioning as a way of 'analysing' and 'fighting against' dominant paradigms for social relations and interpersonal discourse, and as a method for proposing alternative ideals, suggesting "new types of relationships between people".[3]

Bourriaud argues that "all works of art produce a model of sociability" (Ibid, p.109). Similarly, Helen Freshwater, in her overview of theatre audience scholarship says:

> Our sense of the proper, or ideal, relationship between theatre and its audience can illuminate our hopes for other models of social interaction, clarifying our expectations of community, democracy, and citizenship, and our perception of our roles and power (or lack of it) within the broader public sphere. (2009, p.3)

In examining how the practice covered here explores, advocates for and critiques paradigms for social relations and interpersonal discourse, I am subscribing to the idea that theatre/performance, as with other artforms, is always, whether explicitly or implicitly, producing 'models of sociability'. Like Freshwater, I extrapolate from the models of theatre/performance established through the relations and communicative dynamics between audience-participants, between 'stage' and 'auditorium' and between the theatre environment and the world beyond, to an understanding of their more general applicability. This is why my research question feels like an urgent one. The question is about how the people present in a performance setting relate to each other, but also, through that paradigmatic example, how human beings might relate to and communicate with each other on other social stages – whether in intimate,

[3] "New types of relationships" which might also be *old* types of relationships. There is an argument for the interest in audience-participant conversation being in part a desire for a return to the experience, values and qualities of face-to-face discourse in the light of the marginalisation of this mode of interaction with the proliferation of new communication technologies. From this perspective it might be seen as a form of 'progressive nostalgia'.

personal settings or within the wider "public sphere". Ultimately, my question is a way into exploring what Jo Fong refers to as "ways of being together" (Fong and Hughes, 2023) – the ethical, political, philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of living in a world with other people in it – and how this practice has employed conversation as a key device as part of that exploratory project.

This research feels even more relevant now than it did when it began in 2022. I am writing this shortly after the inauguration of Donald Trump for a second term. The affective polarisation that is an increasingly familiar aspect of public political discourse, along with the attendant rise in post-truth and populist tendencies particularly on the ascendant 'radical right', makes the questions about how we co-exist and communicate with other people, particularly those to whom we are different, particularly pertinent. Trump's return highlights assumptions that were perhaps being made about the durability and inviolability of certain values related to social co-existence within Western liberal democracies, which now look less secure. Basic ideas of equity between different demographic groups being ethically desirable and the fundamental liberal democratic principles of equality under the law and limits on authoritarianism, all of which have their roots in the Enlightenment, are being questioned. Catalysed perhaps by developments on social media, there appears to have been a diminishing of the "shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy" (Mouffe, 1999, p.755) underpinning our public, political discourse, including increasing disagreement on, and/or disregard for, basic facts. This appears then to be a crisis in the West (with the UK both contributing and subject to this globalised discursive sphere) focussed around the two imbricated elements suggested by my principal research question – how do we relate to, and communicate with, other people?

**Research methodologies, biographical positioning and other 'disclosures'**

The qualitative research methods I have used include "relatively unstructured" (Brinkmann, 2020, p. 435) interviews[4], conducted in the summer and autumn 2023 – some in person, others online – with all the living artists whose practice I examine across this thesis. Svend Brinkmann argues for a continuum between "relatively

[4] Transcripts are available in the appendices.

structured" and "relatively unstructured" interview methods, saying "[there is] no such thing as a completely unstructured interview because the interviewer always has an idea about what should take place in the conversation." In this instance, a list of potential questions was shared with interviewees in advance as an indication of the general areas I wanted to cover. In practice, these usually two-hour long interviews were open, responsive, improvisatory conversations around these themes. A relatively unstructured approach, replicating the generally understood dynamics of conversation, allowed my research methodology to be explicitly rooted in the conversational, dialogical values – including openness, doubt, humility, intersubjective learning – that were the subject matter of that research, but that also represent positive attributes of any research process. Brinkmann (2020) argues that all human research is conversational at some level, given we are linguistic creatures and acquired language through forms of conversation, and therefore any understanding of ourselves and the world inevitably happens in this sense through the medium of conversation. Relatively unstructured interviews, whilst sacrificing the claims to consistency and ease of comparison of more structured approaches, avow the conversational as fundamental to the knowledge-producing process, and use the deep roots of conversation as a good way to understand the "qualitative features of human experience" (Ibid, p.426). I was also aware that my research was entangled with my personal biography as a theatre maker and producer (to be detailed shortly), and in researching this area of practice I was also investigating my own history and subjectivity. For Brinkmann, unstructured and semi-structured interviews mean "the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself" (Ibid, p.437). In my research, this approach allowed for my active, entangled position – playing the role both of subject and object – to be explicitly recognised within the process.

My use of open-ended interviews or conversations of this kind with practitioners as a central part of my research methodology mirrors that of other performance studies scholars covering fields of investigation that overlap with mine, including, as examples, Josephine Machon (2013) on immersive theatre and Misri Dey on solo performance (2018).

The aim in the interviews I conducted was to better understand artists' intentions in using conversation within their practice, to elicit their first-hand accounts of its use in their shows and, through dialogue with them as informed interlocutors, to help me develop my own thinking. As such, in the vein of Henrich Kleist's essay from 1805, *On The Gradual Construction of Thoughts During Speech*, I am conscious here of thought emerging *through* conversation – new ideas being catalysed through the mechanics of dialogue, rather than speech being simply the expression of pre-existing thinking. Kleist says: "If there is something you want to know and cannot discover by meditation, then, my dear, ingenious friend, I advise you to discuss it with the first acquaintance whom you happen to meet" (1955, p.42). Peter Womack summarises the implications of Kleist's theory: "it imagines thought not as a thing inside somebody's mind, but as an activity that goes on between people. One can no more think alone than play tennis alone; there has to be another player returning the ball." (2011, p.3)

More broadly, including the archival and secondary research that has been part of my process alongside interviews, given my focus on conversation, I have been particularly aware of the dialogical aspects of this research journey, 'playing tennis' with artists and scholars as my own thinking develops – a process of creating my own synthesis of ideas from dialogue with the thinking of others. There is also inevitably a dialogical dynamic, beyond my involvement in actual conversations, that is relevant in my first-hand experiences of many of the performances that I recount – between me as audience-participant and the artwork as it unwinds (and with the authorial voice/s 'behind' the artwork), and between the phenomenology of these personal experiences and my conceptual/emotional interpretation of them. These conversations happen in the moment of the performance experience itself but also subsequently, as the initial phenomenological impact recedes further into memory. As such, in drawing on my spectatorship experiences as another significant element of my research methodology, I have been aware that, as well as having had a dialogue with the artwork when I experienced it live, I have also been having a conversation with a memory of that experience – a conversation with myself around the memory of an event. All this is to emphasise that, in my use of what Kirsty Sedgman calls "critical spectatorship scholarship" (2019) – first-hand audience experiences filtered through a theoretical

perspective – there is no claim to objectivity. My perspective is consciously partial, singular and subjective.

Referring to her own practice of empirical audience research in which the responses to a performance from a range of audience members are used as the basis for qualitative analysis, Sedgman says that a false opposition can sometimes be established between this methodology and the tradition of spectatorship analysis that is more reliant on the perspective of the 'expert' critic, based on the supposed claims of the former methodology to greater scientific objectivity. Despite being an empirical audience research scholar, she discounts any claims for her approach generating greater objective knowledge.[5] For her, both methodologies have their strengths, with each founded on the same central principle that, "all articulations of aesthetic response are subjective". All qualitative research based on interpreting aesthetic responses – whether the multiple responses of audience research or the auto-response often at the heart of theoretical spectatorship scholarship – should acknowledge the unavoidable subjectivity inherent in it. Referring to first-hand phenomenological analysis, including "Spectator-Participation-as-Research (SPaR)" (Heddon et al, 2012), Sedgman credits the positive aspects of the singularity of these approaches – they are "modes of enquiry which all have the capacity to lay bare the meaning-making process with exceptional depth, nuance, and care" (Sedgman, 2019). However, these approaches do need to acknowledge that singularity, to highlight that they are subject to the life experiences, biases and social contingencies (class, race, gender etc.) – i.e. the subjectivity – of the individual scholars involved in initial aesthetic responses and their subsequent articulation. Referring to all forms of research focussed around interpreting one's own or others' aesthetic responses, Sedgman says that "it becomes rigorous when we disclose those interests, by acknowledging how the act of watching – and the viewpoint of the watcher – has shaped the very phenomena we watch, along with the things we claim to have found as a result."

[5] Claims that she thinks are *not* made by most empirical audience research scholars but originate in an unnecessary defensiveness from some critical spectatorship scholars who feel they need to argue for the legitimacy of their informed subjective perspective against this imagined challenge (Sedgman, 2019).

Throughout this thesis I aim to disclose *my* interests in relation to the artists and the performances that I am describing, acknowledging my specific subjective positioning which shapes my experiences and my articulation of those aesthetic responses. There are general caveats that should frame my knowledge claims as a result: I am an interested participant, I am not everyone, and my interpretations cannot claim to have universal or objective status. Nevertheless, it is with this contextualisation and transparency that I believe, following Sedgman, my research and the claims I do make in this domain of subjective, aesthetic response, can be considered rigorous and can have scholarly merit as a contribution to "lay[ing] bare the meaning-making process". In its 'rigorous singularity', I hope that the element of my methodology which is based on first-hand critical spectatorship enables me to reach some of the "depth" and "nuance" in understanding possible meanings in the use of conversation as a device within this practice that Sedgman suggests might be a strength of this kind of approach.

Given what I have said above, it is important, in broad terms at this stage, to "disclose" my biographical perspective on this area of research and also to be open about the limitations, as well as the potential, of my chosen theoretical approach. My interest developed from a particular vantage point within the small-scale, subsidised UK theatre/performance landscape during this period. From 2002 to 2020, I worked at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC), principally as Head of Producing. BAC played an important role in the national theatre ecology during this period, generally focussing on supporting devised theatre/performance, and regularly programming close to one hundred shows annually. Many, if not most, of the artists/companies of significance in the UK operating within this broad genre of performance at this time presented and/or developed shows at BAC. It therefore provides a useful microcosm through which to observe wider developments in the UK theatre/performance scene. The artists/companies from whose practice I have chosen case studies for this thesis all had a relationship of some kind with BAC and it was there that I had most of the experiences of these shows that I draw on in my analysis. Because of its significance during the first decades of this century, the breadth and volume of its programme and, as such, its ability to represent wider trends in the UK performance landscape, I see the

BAC focus as a virtue of this research and one which, given my proximity as its Head of Producing during this period, I am well placed to exploit. It was at BAC that I noticed, increasing towards the end of my time there, the emergence of audience-participant conversation as a recurring feature in shows within the programme. Over that period, as now, I was also co-artistic director of the theatre company Uninvited Guests. As examined in Chapter 5, the projects that we made moved over this time towards including audience-participant conversation. Thus, the turn towards conversation that I observed in the programme at BAC was mirrored in the evolution of my own practice. Following BAC, I worked as a Relationship Manager at Arts Council England (ACE) giving me an insight into the move of arts funding policy towards greater value being attached to participatory, co-created and socially engaged practice, most clearly evidenced in the *Let's Create* ten-year strategy (Arts Council England, 2021). Alongside this professional history that informs (but also limits) my viewpoint on this subject, I also approach this study with an awareness of my demographic profile which inevitably affects my experience and interpretation. I am a white, non-disabled, heterosexual, middle-aged and middle-class cis man with all the historical and contemporaneous privileges that follow from each of those characteristics individually and in the aggregate.

In its theoretical framing and the fields of performance studies that it concerns itself with – in the spirit, I hope, of a good conversation – this thesis ranges widely. As will be touched on later in this chapter and explored more fully in chapter 1, various ideas from different thinkers operating within the broad field of the 'philosophy of dialogue' provide an eclectic theoretical throughline. Alongside this, in different chapters, references to relevant performance scholarship – e.g., on intimate performance (chapter 3) or on performance and disability (chapter 4) – are used to help support my analysis of how audience-participant conversation functions in these distinct performance contexts. Given the breadth of the theoretical reference points, reflecting the diversity of the practice I am concerned with here, it has not been possible within the confines of this thesis to enter into full detailed debates in relation to each of those theories and theoreticians. There is more that might be said – critiques to be considered and nuance that could be added – around, for example, theories of

democracy and performance (chapter 2), disability discourse (chapter 4) or concepts of the postdramatic (chapter 5) that I reference, and in relation to the various theories from the philosophers of dialogue that I draw upon. I do not have the space or capacity to do all of that here. Instead, my focus is on taking my understanding of some of these ideas – even if my interpretation might be criticised for missing certain aspects of a theoretical debate or for being too accepting of widely circulating scholarly orthodoxies – as lenses through which I can synthesise my analysis of the central object of my research, and the basis of its primary claim to originality: the use of audience-participant conversation in performance.

**Locating audience-participant conversation: the "social turn" and its critiques**

The move towards audience-participant conversation in performances that I noticed during the first two decades of this century, can be located, as suggested, within the wider move towards the participatory in Western contemporary arts practice – part of what Claire Bishop calls the "social turn" (2005). This connects with the move towards "relational aesthetics" in the visual arts in the 1990s that Bourriaud identifies (2002). For him, this shift is related to the geopolitical ruptures of the period – the collapse of the Soviet Union – and with it a fundamental re-thinking of the imaginary and the role of artistic practice within society. This involved a move away from holistic, utopian visioning and the modernist "imaginary of contrasts" (borrowing Gilbert Durand's term) that valued separation and conflict and tended towards "disqualifying the past in favour of the future", towards an imaginary that is "concerned with negotiations, bonds and co-existences" (Ibid, p. 45). This new artistic perspective that Bourriaud identifies is more accepting of the immovability of the fundamental structures of the extant socio-economic system in the West and aims to make incremental, practical change: "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities" but instead to propose "ways of living and models of action within the existing real" (Ibid, p.13).

More broadly, Bishop (2012) points to the "ethical turn" (Dews, 2002) in philosophy over the same period – a move away from the fragmented, insecure and singular subject of French post-structuralism and a return of the universalising ethical tendencies of humanism, manifesting in the rise of discourses around community, human rights and identitarian politics. Bishop argues that with the post 1989 crisis for

the collectivist vision, art responds with this social/ethical turn as it looks to respond to, and formulate a new critique of, a capitalist hegemony which no longer has even the simulacrum of a geopolitical counter hegemonic alternative opposing it. For Bishop this turn towards the participatory reflects similar social turns and moves towards participation that have occurred at other critical moments in the life of this collectivist imaginary – notably in 1917 and 1968. At these moments, as in the post '89 context, there is a "rethinking of art's relationship to the social and its political potential – manifested in a reconsideration of the ways in which art is produced, consumed and debated" (Bishop, 2012, p.3). As such, Bishop suggests the recent social turn can be seen as some sort of movement away from the "artistic critique" of capitalism towards a "social critique" – the two (sometimes sympathetic, sometimes contradictory) critiques Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2005) identify that have ebbed and flowed in the political and cultural discourse alongside capitalism since its emergence and which that system has responded to and sometimes incorporated to justify itself and win people to its cause. The artistic critique is focussed on the lack of freedom and limits on self-expression that can come with capitalism, "the loss of the sense of what is beautiful and valuable, which derives from standardisation and generalised commodification" (Ibid, p.38). Whereas the social critique stresses the poverty and inequality that are consequences of capitalism and the "egoism" that destroys social bonds – essentially a moral critique of capitalism. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that the focus on the freedom and self-expression of the individual in the artistic critique dominated from the mid 1970s onwards, with the social critique receding due to the transparent failure of the Communist project, and that the artistic critique was responded to, but also subsumed into, neoliberal, flexible and entrepreneurial incarnations of capitalism in the 1980s. With the re-emergence of the social critique in the 1990s, there appears to have been a reappraisal of the role of artistic practice in tacitly fostering this "new spirit of capitalism", a questioning of some of the emphasis on individual creative expression and private reception and a re-evaluation of the scepticism of modernism and postmodernism towards notions of community and shared values. From a reading of Boltanski and Chiapello, Bishop and Bourriaud, there is a sense that, with the final collapse of the utopian collectivist idea on the geopolitical stage, there was an inclination in artistic practice, following the social critique, to step

into this ethical/ideological breach, to engage actively with questions about equality and ethics, to avow more explicitly its relationship with, and ability to effect, the social. There was a need for art in these new circumstances to, quite literally in some cases, stage the social.

Bishop, whilst presenting the rationale for this turn, notably provides a strong critique of it. She does this partly through a criticism of Bourriaud and the relational art of the 90s around which he shapes his argument. For Bishop, Bourriaud's extolling of the "microtopian ethos" (Bishop, 2004, p.54) of this practice – the focus on small, practical proposals for ameliorative change in social relations – results in art losing some of the ambitious, if discomforting, qualities associated with the traditional domain of the aesthetic. There is "no space for perversity, paradox and negation" (Ibid, p.39) here she says and instead the emphasis tends to be on generating consensus and social harmony. With this type of art and the critical discourse surrounding it, under the influence of the ethical turn, "political, moral, and ethical judgements have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgement" (Ibid, p.77). The arguments in Jacques Ranciere's *The Emancipated Spectator* (2007) against the trend he sees towards a "new theatre" in which the idea of the "active" audience is eulogised, provides a touchstone for Bishop and others' critiques here. Ranciere argues that the equating of traditional spectatorship with passivity, and the search for modes of audience engagement that are antagonistic towards spectacle and private, independent reception on moral or political grounds, has a long history but is misguided. For him, reducing the distance between stage and auditorium – what he calls a "presumption against mediation" (Ibid, p. 278) – results in a stultification for the spectator rather than any emancipation. Their autonomy over how they interpret what they experience is diminished and with this the spectator's relative ignorance in relation to the performer/artists is affirmed. This links to Bishop's critique of participation, with both emphasising what they see as the tendency of contemporary participatory practices towards interpretative reductivity, coercion and privileging the ethical over the aesthetic.

Bishop (2012) bemoans the social turn in part because of the political paradox that she thinks it results in: that in the pursuit of a version of the social critique in artistic form – through a focus on collaboration, social engagement and participation – the effect is

often to support the socio-economic status quo and the agendas of neoliberal Western governments rather than disrupting or proposing radical amendments. She cites New Labour moves to emphasise participation within the arts and the Big Society agenda of David Cameron as examples of a participatory ethos being used to provide 'fig-leaf' cover for state withdrawal from areas of social support. Beyond this, for Bishop, some of the values of participatory practice actually "dovetail […] perfectly with neoliberalism's recent forms" (Ibid, p.277). This critique is picked up by Jen Harvie (2013) who argues that there is a risk with some forms of participatory performance that they can function to naturalise the paradigm of flexible capitalism. This is a paradigm based on insecure, sometimes unpaid, labour. In a participatory performance context this is replicated with significant parts of the "work" being delivered by audience-participants in place of what might otherwise have been done by professional performers. In addition, flexible capitalism often results in the formation of transient, superficial communities, replicated for Harvie in the form of audience-participant communities who are encouraged to form relationships with strangers that most likely will not last longer than an hour or two. Harvie, like Bishop, argues that this practice can "hold out the heady promise of enormous social value", in the form of a commitment to "social engagement and fair democratic opportunity" (2013, p.1-2), whilst in practice these things are only simulacra. They are distractions from the promotion of a nexus of values and ideal behaviours that constitute what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) call the "projective city" – mobility, adaptability, and superficial, short-term social relationships: in short 'project working' – which is the persuasive, but ultimately corrosive, narrative of contemporary capitalism.

Harvie (2013) worries that there is a danger with the turn to participatory performance that the paradigm that is promoted is not social interdependence and a notion of equality or mutuality generated through the distribution of some agency and authorship responsibilities to audience-participants, but rather it is an extension of the neoliberal role of the "prosumer" (a term borrowed from futurologists Alvin and Heidi Toffler). The prosumer experience – familiar from interactive online environments – is based around the idea of being able to customise one's engagement with the marketplace, to create a sense of having a unique identity and more personalised

relationship with the thing that is being consumed, and doing that partly through the work that might previously have been done by paid employees being done for free by the consumer themselves. In relation to the labour of audience-participants in participatory performance, Harvie says: "Sometimes this experience may be unique and meaningful. However, it may also offer […] a spectre of uniqueness that reinforces the prosumer's sense of her authorial power while actually offering little such power" (Ibid, p.55). More broadly this might be read as part of the mythmaking of "the experience economy" (Pine and Gilmore, 2013) – disguising the brutal game of cost cutting, commodification and profit accumulation under an appealing veneer of cultural values that advance a positive model of self-determined engagement with the world which is closely aligned with the ideal of the risk-taking, autonomous entrepreneur (entrepreneur as audience-participant here), one of the heroes of the projective city and the new spirit of capitalism. So, the question suggested is whether the turn towards participatory practice effectively represents a sales pitch for this refreshed form of capitalism, rather than, as most of the left-leaning practitioners operating in this space would wish, that it points to an alternative?

Both Bishop and Harvie make good arguments that notions of the participatory have the potential to be aligned with dubious political projects (and have been historically[6] as well as in the contemporary context) and any claim that participation in performance is *automatically* a gateway to anti-capitalism or to a more democratic, progressive social model, is clearly misguided. There are persuasive arguments made by both them and others about specific examples of participatory practice which appear to replicate the values and dynamics of neoliberalism. There is also merit in Bishop's other critiques of the social turn – that this practice can prioritise relations of conviviality and consensus at the expense of antagonistic relations which can be more socio-politically productive, and linked to that, that ethical concerns can occlude aesthetic ones in both participatory practice and in the critical discourse surrounding it. The emergence of audience-participant conversation as an identifiable device in this

[6] For example, Bishop (2012) refers to the reflection of the participatory ethos of early twentieth-century fascism in the dynamics of the Italian Futurists' artistic soirees.

turn towards participatory performance, should be considered within this general critical debate.

Firstly, taking Bishop's arguments on the tendency she saw in contemporary relational/participatory practice to prioritise the consensual and the production of social harmony, there is certainly an argument that in the pursuit of shared discursive ground for a conversation, and in its efforts to establish an acceptable "horizon of risk" (White, 2013) for audience-participants so they feel able to engage, some of this practice leans towards conviviality, emphasising audience-participant care and avoiding more abrasive, disturbing relational dynamics. However, I make the argument in chapter 3 in relation to the use of audience-participant conversation in intimate performance, that care, conviviality and even the pursuit of the consensual does not necessarily strip practice that is predicated on these values of its radicality. Indeed, such an approach can be seen as antagonistic, not necessarily in the relations it establishes between audience-participants and with artist/performers within the frame of the artwork, but with the contextual neoliberal social imaginary that can disavow these values. In its conviviality and consensuality some of this conversational practice can suggest a radical alternative. On the other hand, there are also examples – notably *The Money* (2013), which I analyse in Chapter 2 – of practice that uses conversation, playing at the boundary where conversation becomes debate and argument, to stage pluralism, antagonism and dissensus.

Bishop also argues that the emphasis on the collaborative in participatory practice can tend towards artworks that are less nuanced, more simplistic, more influenced by ethical considerations and sociological discourses than aesthetic ones, than those created through the singular vision of a relatively autonomous individual professional artist. To characterise this, you might say the criticism is that it is a 'lowest common denominator' approach to artmaking, or art 'made by committee'. It is true that a kind of ethical reductivism – a desire to not rock the boat, to avoid alienating anyone, to do the morally correct thing rather than the most interesting thing – is there as a potential risk in some participatory approaches that, following Bishop's criticism of relational art, take the *fact* of participation as the primary goal rather than being too concerned with "*how* contemporary art addresses the viewer" and "the *quality* of the audience

relations it produces"[7] (2004, p.78). However, it is also possible to argue that risks around simplification and ethical reductivism can just as easily be applied to some forms of solo-authored, non-participatory practice. Indeed, it is a risk that is potentially heightened with the lack of openness to the disruption and complexity that can come with the distribution of authorship in participatory practice. In terms of the use of audience-participant conversation, my argument through this thesis is that it does offer a very particular means – the "how" above – through which art can address its viewers, and that it carries in it the potential for a specific set of qualities in the relations between audience-participants it generates and the wider social relations it implies. Its improvised nature, its liveness, its allowance for mistakes, for revision, for contradiction and doubt, and the distribution of agency and authorial responsibility that is implicit in its dynamics, offers a particular opportunity within the participatory to emphasise the qualities of complexity, plurality and ambiguity and to appreciate these as both ethical *and* aesthetic values.

This echoes arguments that Grant Kester makes in *Conversation Pieces* (2013) for the "emancipatory" rather than "stultifying" potential in participatory modes of spectator engagement and rejection of the opposition between the participatory and the aesthetic. He focuses on trends he observes around the turn of the millennium in an international visual arts context towards the creation of socially engaged, 'situated' artworks created through dialogical processes involving specific communities that often also use dialogue/conversation as a central feature in their final form. Kester argues for the concept of "dialogical aesthetics" emerging from this movement. Dialogical aesthetics carries forward some of the commitment to indeterminateness and rejection of "objectifying forms of knowledge"(Ibid, p.13) that he acknowledges as a positive attribute of the modernist/postmodernist aesthetic tradition, but does so not by characterising discursive interactions as something to be wary of as inevitably reductive or violent, but instead by adopting an "attitude of vulnerable receptivity" to the diversity and specificity of spectator-participants in the dialogical process.

[7] Through this thesis emphases within citations are original unless stated otherwise.

More recently, Gareth White, in *Meaning in the Midst of Performance: Contradictions of Participation* (2024), makes arguments – resonating both with Kester's thesis and mine on the value of the conversational in artistic practice – for the potential of participation in performance as a site where the contextual, situational, embodied and contradictory qualities of meaning-making can be recognised and explored. White's theoretical foundation is an "enactivist" understanding of cognitive philosophy which sees meaning being generated from "an organism coupled to its environment" and interacting with it. Meaning is embodied – it happens with the whole body not just the brain – and it is situational. Meaning happens as bodily response to the specific context one is in. In this sense meaning is made "in the midst" of things, and participation in performance draws attention to this process in the aesthetic realm. Alongside this, White draws on Theodor Adorno's concepts of "negative dialectics" and "non-identity thinking", rejecting traditional dialectics based around the resolution of antinomies eventually leading to unified truths and coherent identities. Instead, White emphasises dialectical *contradictions* which resist being resolved that characterise the aesthetic experience and have the potential to be particularly pronounced in participatory performance – the contradiction, for example, between watching and being watched, subject and object. For White it is "in the midst" of negotiating one's way through these contradictions – contradictions that are revealed through one's embodied, experiential engagement with the meaning-making process; contradictions to be wrestled with but that remain un-synthesised – that the participatory offers the potential to de-stabilise totalising and reifying ideologies with their closed semantic systems. My argument is that audience-participant conversation as a participatory device has a particular facility to foreground this process of situational meaning-making (the 'situation' including the specifics of other people, their attitudes and opinions) and in doing so to release these productively disruptive aesthetic/socio-political energies of contradiction and complexity.

Returning to Bishop, she suggests an opposition between the aesthetic and the ethical and aligns that with one between the visionary individual artist and what she sees as the often aesthetically compromised approach of collaborative or distributed authorship. As Shannon Jackson says, arguing against what she sees as these false

oppositions, “there are numerous ways that avowal of heteronomy can be both aesthetically precise and socially effective” (2011, p.74). In the chapters that follow I provide examples of performances that use audience-participant conversation – one of these ‘ways of avowing the heteronomy’ of the artwork and the inter-dependency of human beings more generally – as a medium for ‘aesthetic precision’ alongside ethical articulation and, however tentative and provisional, ‘social effectiveness’. Indeed, in a theme I return to, these performances also use conversation as a device through which to highlight and explore the general inseparability of the social, the ethical and the aesthetic in any communicative endeavour.

In terms of Harvie’s challenge, this use of audience-participant conversation *can* at first glance be read as a form of “prosumerism” (2013), promoting an idea of individual agency and self-determination (the chimera of the entrepreneurial ideal) whilst in practice not risking any meaningful distribution of power. Matt Adams from Blast Theory talks about some types of participation taking the form of “pigeon-holes” (Adams et al, 2008, p.227) in which participants are asked to deposit their carefully contained interventions, as if “pre-scripted” by the artists managing the encounter, in a way that functions only to affirm the figurehead artist as a “benevolent dictator”. In other words, this is participation that pays lip service to heteronomy and co-authorship whilst in reality covering for a form of coercion, aligning with the paradigm of flexible capitalism and the experience economy. However, conversation in performance, whilst not completely immune to being co-opted in this way, does have qualities that are resistant to any straightforward attempt to read it as part of a neoliberal participatory cultural project. Of course, it can be framed and steered in certain directions through the authorial hand of artists/performers, but as soon as conversation starts, some sort of distribution of agency and ‘authorial power’ to the parties involved occurs. The nature of that distribution of control differs of course, but without it occurring to some extent conversation cannot be said to be happening. Conversation implies a kind of sharing of power and authorship and some sense of autonomy for the interlocutors. It also has the capacity for unpredictability and open-endedness; to stage digression, fallibility, doubt and, as noted above, contradiction. Through these qualities it carries in it an implicit resistance to fitting too neatly into ‘pre-scripted pigeon-holes’, and the

potential to be disruptive of authorial intentions. As such it is inclined to avoid a simple replication or promotion of the prosumerist model. The audience-participant is producing content, but it is not necessarily the content intended. It pushes against being easily packaged or commodified. It is not an efficient model of consumer interaction. It can ramble, it can lose its focus, it is not just a series of 'easy clicks'. Conversation foregrounds the "friction" and "encumbrance" that Jackson (2011) says is implicit in the materiality of live performance; a counterpoint to the frictionless ideal of immaterial labour and consumption (disguising its materiality beneath a shiny surface) of hi-tech globalised capitalism. And, in a practical sense, the use of conversation in performance is uneconomical. There are often limits on its scale – the limitation of how many people you can have in a space at the same time having effective conversations – which mean that, unlike other examples of participatory performance (e.g., Punchdrunk's large-scale immersive work), there is no obvious route to profit. This practical lack of commerciality forms part of the latent subtext of much conversation-based performance, a perspective that resonates with Deborah Pearson's view of one-to-one performance that "its very economic unsustainability becomes its own act of resistance" in a "relentlessly neoliberal society" (2015, p.67).

Finally, in response to Harvie and Bishop's critique of the complicity of some participatory practices in naturalising a neoliberal paradigm, my argument in relation to the use of audience-participant conversation is that, whilst it is possible to read it through a prosumerist lens or as a form of what Adam Alston, in his critique of Punchdrunk and some other immersive theatre, calls "entrepreneurial participation" (2013, p.128), it can be read more easily as a means for exploring models of mutuality and non-commercially orientated interdependence. It is a device that naturally inclines towards emphasising the complex social negotiations necessary to co-exist with others, or what Jackson calls "experiments in not being privately self-governing" (2011, p.32), rather than prioritising an ethic of individualism and "self-made opportunity" (Alston, 2013, p.128) that Alston and Harvie highlight as a risk in some participatory approaches. However, it is still important to acknowledge the location of audience-participant conversation within this wider neoliberal context and its potential to be co-opted on some level as part of that project. Liz Tomlin's critique of participation in

Coney's *Early Days (of a better nation)* should be noted here (2015). For her this show, in its relatively unstructured framing of audience participation in political debate and decision-making around the founding of a fictional country, is an example of a type of participation that replicates tendencies in Leftist theory/political movements (she uses Occupy as an example) to emphasise "disparate and singular acts of resistance" – a form of individualism that Harvie and Bishop might say reflects that of flexible capitalism – at the expense of more coordinated and efficacious forms of representative democracy. Without debating with Tomlin on the specifics of its use in this show, the broader point I take from this is that audience-participant conversation is not immune from the potential to replicate forms of political organisation and discourse which, however directly or indirectly, even in ostensible opposition to it, serve the extant neoliberal paradigm and/or ape some aspect of its culture or dynamics.

Harvie refers to the participatory projects that she admires aesthetically and in terms of their political effectiveness as creating opportunities to "practice the 'we'" (2013, p.59), exploring the social imaginary but, importantly, doing so against the background of an explicit recognition of the neoliberal relational context in which that happens and the influence on those rehearsed models of sociality of that dominant paradigm. Conversation, in its avowal of heteronomy but also its reliance on individual agency and autonomy – hovering at the interface between independence and dependency, operating in an ambiguous space of collaborative endeavour but without altogether throwing off the resonances of "entrepreneurial participation" – is well placed to play a role in this contextually-aware practising of the 'we'; to explore/question/resist neoliberal paradigms whilst not pretending that it can entirely divorce itself from the influence of, or possibility of co-option into, those models.

**The theatrical context for the emergence of audience-participant conversation**

As described above, the performance practice I examine in this thesis can be located within the context of a broad social turn in arts practice and in relation to the critical discourses that have emerged from that turn. Much of it is influenced by and, depending on the specific example, can be identified within a visual art as much as a theatre lineage. At the same time, all the practice I examine here does have a

relationship with theatre – through the training/background of the artists, the institutions this practice was connected with (much of it was commissioned and programmed at BAC), the discourse with theatrical genres and the theatre canon that some artists engage with, and the conventions/expectations of the theatre experience that can provide contextual framing and impact on the meaning-making possible in these performances. As such, the turn towards participation in performance in the first decade of this century – noted by White (2013) as particularly visible within the London Fringe theatre scene; a scene in which I was embedded – as well as being part of the broader social turn in the arts, can also be seen within a history more specific to theatre.

Focussing on commercial West End theatre rather than the "Fringe" or "experimental" theatre scene, Caroline Heim argues that "Audience members are discovering new ways to perform in the theatre in this twenty-first century which are often remarkably evocative of nineteenth-century performances" (2015, p.173). In line with other theatre scholars – e.g., Kattwinkel (2003), Balme (2014), White (2013), Sedgman (2018) and Freshwater (2009) – Heim identifies a shift in audience "performance", and the rhetoric and expectations around that behaviour, that happened in the late nineteenth century and became consolidated into established convention in the first decades of the twentieth century[8]. This is a shift towards the audience sitting relatively immobile, in silence, focussing, with as little distraction from each other as possible, on what is happening on stage. She links this to the innovation of electric lighting and the advent of the darkened auditorium. Sedgman (2018), as explored in Chapter 4, connects this with an ideological move to assert a sense of cultural exclusivity; an attempt at social gatekeeping as a response to the socio-cultural 'threat' from the 'masses' living cheek by jowl with the traditionally privileged classes in the rapidly urbanising society of Britain in the Industrial Revolution. This is then consolidated into the modernist ideal – the celebration of "the individual's focussed engagement with the autonomous artwork" (Freshwater, 2009, p.45) and the 'black box' theatrical paradigm.

[8] As noted in chapter 2, Baz Kershaw (2001) sees the same shift occurring but identifies it as a post war phenomenon.

Of course, over the period since there have been examples – some perhaps connected with the triangulation that Bishop suggests between '17, '68 and '89 – when the ideal of the silent, contemplative audience member has been challenged. One thinks of the influence of Brecht and Artaud for example on the idea of the need for the audience to become more intellectually and emotionally involved; to be shaken out of their 'slumberous' inertia. Then, as Freshwater lays out, in the 1960s and 70s there are more explicit moves towards the participating audience in the UK with the emergence of TIE, the community theatre movement, the impact of Augusto Boal and the influence of performance art. Notwithstanding these previous attempts at reimagining the audience's role in theatre, many of the scholars listed above point to a significant move over the first decade of this century towards forms of theatre that create an expanded role for the audience, challenging the expectations of the modernist inspired black box model. For Heim (2015) this brings to attention the historically contingent nature of this paradigm and she sees the emergence of new types of audience performance in the contemporary context as a return to some of the modes of engagement that were commonplace before the darkened auditorium and its attendant values became the default. As such, this participatory turn in UK theatre can be seen as something new but also as a re-discovery after the interruption of modernism. The recent move towards the participatory also connects with the trajectory of the postdramatic. As Hans-Thies Lehmann says, "Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing *and* the spectating take place" (2006, p.17). This avowal of the audience's presence and suggestion that in postdramatic performance a "joint text" is created between stage and auditorium – the artwork thus becoming more explicitly heteronomous – inevitably opens the possibility for new and more participatory kinds of relations to be established between the audience and artists/performers.

This is the cultural, critical and historical ground for the turns towards the social and participatory in theatre/performance that I observed from my positions at BAC, Uninvited Guests and ACE. The arts/theatre sector discourse surrounding this turn evolved in various ways. One aspect of it was an increasing awareness – from arts institutions, funding bodies and communities of professional artists – of inequities of

representation and opportunity related particularly to race, gender, disability, age and class across all stakeholder groups – e.g., governance, leadership, staff, audience, artists, critics. This resulted in changes in rhetoric and (sometimes) policymaking and practice to redress these imbalances. A move could be observed towards greater prioritisation of social engagement with previously underrepresented and underserved social groups as part of institutional and artistic practices and, as the discourse around that evolved, increasing emphasis on the methodologies for that engagement being as equitable as possible. The increasing currency of the principle of 'co-creation' in social engagement projects can be seen as part of this. In terms of the evolution of participation as part of the performance event itself over this period, there appeared to be a parallel trajectory towards more agency and authorial responsibility being distributed to audience-participants, most simply illustrated in the evolution in this direction of Uninvited Guests' practice over this period, described in chapter 5. The use of audience-participant conversation, from this perspective, appears to be a natural development in this ascent up the 'ladder of participation'[9] and a consequence of the evolution of discourses related to social engagement within the arts. As such it is part of the ongoing challenge that the participatory and an avowal of the social represents to the modernist black box paradigm – questioning its conventional centres of authority, authorship and articulation, its divisions and hierarchies. That is not to say that any practice that employs audience-participant conversation is inevitably more socially progressive, more ethical, than one that does not of course. But this thesis does argue that, in the use of conversation as a device, the artists I have chosen to focus on here are able, very directly, to bring the social into the room, into the frame of the artwork. Through doing so they are provided an obvious opportunity to propose and critique paradigms of social relations, including their ethical foundations, and to explore the key role of interpersonal communication within those models.

[9] Sherry Arnstein (2019) describes different levels of public participation in civic decision-making as rungs on a "ladder of citizen participation".

**Thesis structure and the use of the 'philosophy of dialogue' as theoretical framing**

Alongside the primary research question introduced at the start of this chapter, I have two subsidiary questions that have shaped my research. The first, which the preceding paragraph begins to touch upon, is: *How does audience-participant conversation function dramaturgically in this field of performance?* This question suggests these follow-ups: What are the properties of conversation that are exploited here to achieve dramaturgical effects? How does placing a dramaturgical/performative frame around the activity of conversation affect the meaning it carries? What are the dynamics between performer(s) and audience-participants, amongst audience-participants, and between 'stage', 'auditorium' and the external world generated through use of this device? How are the effects of audience-participant conversation informed by inherited expectations of the theatre experience – i.e. in what ways do these conversational paradigms generate meaning through a dialogue with the conventions of other dramaturgical models, such as those associated with dramatic or black box traditions?

Through my research I have identified four loose dramaturgical contexts in which audience-participant conversation has been deployed over this period and that are exemplified by the practitioners and case studies I have chosen. These different dramaturgical contexts form the basis for my chapter structure. After an initial chapter that provides an overview of my theoretical framework, I begin in Chapter 2 by focusing on performance that uses audience-participant conversation to explore paradigms for social relations and interpersonal discourse within the context of public debate and decision-making. This practice creates microcosms of the public sphere within the frame of performance, facilitating discussion about political and moral issues. The principal focus is on the complex dynamics and rich interpretative potential of *The Money* (2013) by Kaleider in which audience-participants for each performance need to agree on how a sum of money will be spent. I argue in this chapter that audience-participant conversation is used in this practice to stage the process of democratic debate – providing fora for rehearsing the opportunities and challenges of negotiating agreement and managing dissensus. I argue that the framing of the theatre event serves to highlight both the performative aspects of this process and to give it paradigmatic weight, establishing an experiential and critical prism through which the

'inconvenient' but noble business of establishing social relations and conducting interpersonal discourse in the public sphere might be understood and engaged with.

The focus on the public sphere is followed in Chapter 3 by a focus on one-to-one performance and other intimate practice that uses conversation with audience-participants as a device. Using examples of shows by Adrian Howells, Jo Fong/Sonia Hughes and Rhiannon Armstrong, the argument in this chapter is that conversation carries within it a set of potential attributes or qualities that are used by these artists to emphasise certain ethical, ideological and aesthetic values. I argue that the harnessing of this nexus of qualities and values contributes to the generation of feelings of intimacy in the context of these performances and this helps suggest paradigms for social relations and interpersonal discourse that challenge instrumentalising and alienating tendencies within dominant relational and communicative models. My argument is that, in their framing as performances, even when they are occurring in found, public spaces, these shows carve out special environments, focussed time-space, where different rules apply; interstices within the hegemonic capitalist socio-economic system where a counterpoint to the standard relational and discursive dynamics of that system can be proposed and a model for a radical kind of intimacy based around the conversational can be experienced.

Chapter 4 returns to an examination of performance that provides a forum for public discussion on social and political issues, focussing on the use of audience-participant conversation within the practice of the disabled-led company Touretteshero. Unlike the performances covered in Chapter 2 which focus primarily on the rehearsal of the *process* of democratic debate and decision-making, Touretteshero's practice is a demonstration of the use of audience-participant conversation to advance particular socio-political objectives as part of a practice of democratic changemaking. Building on the arguments made in Chapter 3 around the potential qualities of conversation and the socio-political values its use is able to elicit, the argument in this chapter is that Touretteshero use audience-participant conversation to centre disabled voices, bodies and discourse in a way that emphasises the conversational attributes of imperfection and incompletion as key concepts within a radical, democratic discursive and relational paradigm. The argument is that this approach defamiliarises and denaturalises the

assumed hierarchies, codes of behaviour and exclusions of conventional theatre culture; that it destabilises notions of the fixed, final and perfect artwork and the wider privileging of non-disabled identities and discourse as if they were ahistorical fact that is associated with this. Instead, I argue, the use of conversation in this context stresses the imbricated material and discursive contingency of social, political and cultural paradigms – their inherent imperfection and incompletion – and therefore the possibility of them being changed.

Chapter 5 focuses on the emergence of audience-participant conversation within the practice of my own company, Uninvited Guests. It is located at this point in the thesis as if the near end point of an internal dialogue I have had with myself through my research and through my analysis of other practitioners in preceding chapters, about what I have been doing artistically for the last twenty-five years. It is as if, in line with one of the theoretical themes that recurs through this thesis, my subjective position in relation to my own work only clarifies itself through this intersubjective discourse with the work of others. Uninvited Guests is a representative here of a type of ensemble practice influenced by postmodern and postdramatic ideas that was prevalent in the 1990s/2000s. The argument in this chapter is that the move towards audience-participant conversation in Uninvited Guests' practice, which culminated with its first explicit use in *Make Better Please* (2010), can be traced back through the methodologies, thematic concerns, values and aesthetics of the company's previous practice which was influenced by the interests and tendencies of that wider scene. It can be seen as a consequence of the development of a discourse around collaboration and co-authorship, an interest in using second-hand content and the evolution of an aesthetic based around plurality and interpretative complexity, challenging the monological dramatic model and affirming the audience's role in the live experience. Understanding these origins reveals that, embedded in the use of audience-participant conversation as a dramaturgical device, there is both an interest in the search for connection with the other, an exploration of the desire for transcendence, but also an exposure of the *limitations* of any attempt to escape one's located, subjective position, to exceed the parameters of (linguistic and dramaturgical) discourse and the ultimate foreignness of the other. As such, the argument here is that the use of audience-

participant conversation in Uninvited Guests' practice suggests a paradigm for social relations and interpersonal discourse that values plurality, complexity and doubt, that aspires to connection with others, that believes in love, but that recognises that a utopian dialogical state is ultimately impossible to achieve and acknowledging this has ethical, political and aesthetic value.

The conclusion summarises the qualities of conversation referred to through this thesis, used in the dramaturgical contexts identified above to inform the paradigms for social relations and interpersonal discourse proposed, as an *openness to otherness.* It then focuses on the idea that recurs across these chapters of conversation being deployed in this context to avow the role of articulatory acts as constitutive of social relations and, as part of that, the emphasis placed on the contingency and contextuality underpinning that articulation and the relations that flow from it. What is proposed is that this "conversational perspective" (Bhabha, 1998, p.42) – which is ultimately a dance of liveness, and *aliveness*, around mortality – unites the relational and discursive paradigms explored through these different dramaturgical contexts. Finally, the use of audience-participant conversation as a dramaturgical device across these practices is presented as a challenge to the Aristotelian dramatic schema and the authoritarian socio-political paradigm that it can be seen to represent, which has relevance to our current historical moment.

The final question that has underpinned my research is: *How does an examination of the 'philosophy of dialogue' inform an understanding of the use of audience-participant conversation in this practice?* The chapter that follows provides a selective overview of the Western philosophy of dialogue, highlighting canonical reference points within this field. From the beginning of my research process it occurred to me that different thinkers' concern with dialogue, approaching this concept from a variety of perspectives – the epistemological, metaphysical, existential, ethical, socio-political, linguistic and educational – provided a set of distinct but connected theoretical frames that was reflective of the varied approaches to the use of conversation by performance practitioners outlined in the chapter structure described above. The persistence of this philosophical interest in the dialogical across historical periods and its dissemination across different theoretical fields felt important to reflect in the analytical framework

employed through this thesis for two further reasons. Firstly, to examine practice avowing the values of the dialogical and the polyphonic through a prism that is too restrictive and monological would be antithetical. In referring to different theories of the dialogical in each chapter, I hope to provide a range of perspectives that can then, in the spirit of this subject matter, enter into an implicit dialogue with each other and with the practice presented – even those examples of practice to which individual theories are not directly applied – through the medium of the reader's internal conversation as they make their way through this thesis. Secondly, highlighting in my theoretical framing the persistence and pervasiveness of this philosophical interest in the dialogical emphasises the importance of the challenge to these dialogical foundations that is occurring in the recent turn towards the antidemocratic and authoritarian referred to previously and, as a counter to this, the broad social, political and philosophical significance of artistic practice focussed in different ways on affirming the conversational.

## Chapter 1. The Philosophy of Dialogue

In the preceding chapter I introduced the fact that different concepts drawn from the 'philosophy of dialogue' provide the theoretical framework for this thesis. I made the argument, in a thesis exploring the use of conversation in performance, for the appropriateness of doing so through this 'polyphonic' theoretical framing. I also made the point that understanding this turn towards conversation through the prism of the philosophy of dialogue highlights the significance of notions of the dialogical to Western thought and politics and emphasises the historical relevance of these attempts, emerging in a moment wedged between the collapse of the utopian collectivist imaginary and the rise of the authoritarian right, to use conversation in an artistic context to explore models for coexistence and democratic discourse.

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly introduce canonical figures and theories from the philosophy of dialogue, focussing primarily on those that I use for my analysis in subsequent chapters, but including others, such as Plato, to provide a broader philosophical context. This chapter will point to the general relevance of these concepts to an understanding of the turn towards audience-participant conversation in performance since the start of the millennium and how, again in a general sense at this stage, they might inform an understanding of the central concern of this thesis – how the use of conversation in this context allows for an exploration of, and suggests attributes and qualities for, paradigms of social relations and interpersonal discourse.

### Dialogue, the dialectic and Derrida's critique

This review starts with the Socratic or Platonic dialogues, since their influence runs through the history of Western thought in this area. Nearly all of Plato's writings take the form of dialogues, in most cases with Socrates as the central interlocutor. At the heart of these is Plato/Socrates' conception of the dialectic, presented as the ideal process through which to practice philosophy and to establish truth. The dialectic involves the "destruction of assumptions" (Ibid, p.344) – taking an assumption from the misleading visible realm, the world of "appearances", and interrogating it to reveal further assumptions which are then questioned until, eventually, an immutable truth in

the intelligible world is revealed. It is a question-and-answer process with at least one other that happens through spoken conversation.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato makes clear that he sees spoken dialogue as a higher form of communication than the written word. The written word is set, it cannot respond to being questioned, it does not leave room for assumptions to be tested: "written words: they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing for ever" (1972, p.158). In its extreme form, Plato observed, the written word could become the pre-prepared rhetoric of the political speech that could present a distorted, if persuasive, world view as a fait accompli. The spoken word, in the form of the dialectic operating through live dialogue, can defend itself and, unlike writing, is able to address itself to the context in which it finds itself and the people with whom it is in dialogue. This argument for embodied, spoken dialogue – interlocutors being present, responsive and accountable – as an effective means to arrive at the truth, provides the foundation for key Western judicio-political principles and institutional practices. In the UK context this can be seen in the parliamentary system built around the idea of holding the executive to account through the process of ministerial questions and answers and, in a legal context, the concept of habeas corpus and the emphasis on cross examination to establish veracity.

This link between face-to-face, embodied dialogue and the pursuit of veracity is something that resonates with the turn towards audience-participant conversation in performance covered by this thesis. In line with the ethical/social turns previously discussed – whether as a reaction to the post-structuralist problematising of truth claims and/or the ascendancy of 'post truth' tendencies in public, political discourse – this move towards staging live conversation, across different dramaturgical contexts, does seem to suggest some interest in returning to notions of 'truth' (or adjacent ideas around 'authenticity'), and concepts of accountability and 'response-ability' that have Platonic roots, as relevant principles when it comes to proposing relational and communicative paradigms. Illustrative of this, as explored in Chapter 3, are Adrian Howells' references to the pursuit of "authenticity" in his one-to-one performances as an antidote to the increasingly "mediatised" qualities of everyday interactions (Heddon

and Howells, 2011). Another example is provided by Jess Thom from Touretteshero, the focus in Chapter 4, who refers to the political importance of “truth and authenticity” in discourse around disability as a way of those with lived experience making others “accountable” to that truth; challenging ableist attitudes that, without an insistence on those values, might escape that challenge (Pountney and Thom, 2023).

Although Socratic/Platonic dialogue is contingent on the co-presence of embodied interlocutors, and it often happens in a public place, it resists being public and of the world in other senses. There is a dichotomy, as already pointed out, between the visible and intelligible worlds. In Plato’s paradigm, the dialectic, operating through live dialogue, is reaching for an abstracted ideal world. In *Phaedrus*, as Womack (2011) points out, this pursuit of a form of knowledge arrived at through dialogue, that is not influenced by the opinions, appearances and seductions of everyday life and politics, takes the form of a literal removal from the city. The dialogue between Socrates and the eponymous Phaedrus happens beyond the city walls in an idyllic spot under a tree on the bank of a river. As Womack states, the conversation is “a retreat, a pleasant suspension of normal business” (2011, p.14). He notes that this is particularly pointed because of the status of these two interlocutors who were not favoured by the political authorities because of their unorthodox thinking and “corrupting” pedagogy. Leaving the city is about finding a space for dialogue that is literally and metaphorically freer – at a physical distance from surveillance by those in the polis and less influenced by the assumptions inherent in normal civic discourse. This association of dialogue with free, potentially subversive thought, and the need to find a space – whether that is a physical space or a conceptual space (being in a particular mindset) – that is in some way removed or protected from the pressures of normal life and intellectual/cultural orthodoxy, that provides the right conditions for it to be practised properly, is something that resonates with the practice of the artists covered here. There is a common sense of them using the framing of the performance event to establish alternative spaces, ‘safe(r) spaces’, interstices, where dialogue, debate and conversation that is perceived as being inhibited, prescribed or over-policed in other social spaces, can happen. These are spaces where different rules apply, where the world as it is known (the world of current “appearances” as Plato would see it) can be

defamiliarised and, as a result, extant paradigms for social relations and interpersonal discourse can be critiqued and new ones, perhaps informed by the comparative freedoms of conversation, can be proposed. Howells talks about "carving out other spaces" (Heddon and Howells, 2011, p.12): liminal environments where different types of conversation can happen. Similarly, Rhiannon Armstrong creates intimate spheres of exchange within public space that operate according to an alternative set of values than the surrounding environment. Touretteshero focus on establishing 'relaxed' performance environments which are accessible to disabled and neurodivergent audience members and where people that are often not afforded the opportunity to speak can do so. Uninvited Guests emphasise the space of performance as a place for magic and ritual where things can be said and felt that cannot elsewhere, and in which time-space can be messed about with. As I say in *Love Letters Straight From Your Heart*, "In this room it is always Valentine's everywhere" (Uninvited Guests, 2023).

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Plato's argument for privileging speech over writing in *Phaedrus* should be noted here (2004). Derrida sees Plato's advocacy for the spoken, "living logos" over "weakened speech" – ie. writing – as patriarchal. For Plato, Derrida argues, "the 'speaking subject' is the *father* of his speech" (Ibid, p.82) and words are therefore the "son". Without the "present attendance of his father", without the embodied interlocutor able to answer for the "son", words become directionless and ambiguous – they operate in the realm of myth and belief rather than knowledge. However, Derrida, unlike Plato, sees this as a positive. In the written text's "orphaned" quality, open to endless interpretation and reinterpretation, there is an avowal of the operation of *differance* as an inevitable feature of language to which Plato is resistant. Derrida's fundamental argument though is not that writing, in opposition to Plato, is better than speech, but that the insistence on the speech/writing opposition is false and mirrors other binaries he observes in *Phaedrus* – good/bad, internal/external, knowledge/myth etc. – which are undermined by a deconstruction of Plato's text. For Derrida, all these oppositions are porous, there are "passages" between them, and the qualities Plato argues are unique to each can be attributed differently. Speech can just as easily be seen as a medium of manipulation, ambiguity and chaos – as "kin to witchcraft and magic" (Ibid, p.117) – as writing.

Seen through a Derridean lens then, the conversation in *Phaedrus* happening beyond the walls of the city cannot be entirely separate from it, cannot be considered entirely pure or 'authentic', or function as a natural gateway to absolute, immutable truth as Plato suggests. But, likewise, in the spirit of Derrida's problematising of attempts at fixed definitions – his belief that, in any attempt to establish opposites, one side will inevitably "cross over into the other" (Ibid, p.130) – nor can conversation be considered as entirely divorced from these Platonic values either. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, there is an oscillation between interpreting the values and affects generated through audience-participant conversation in this practice from a broadly Platonic perspective and one suggested by Derrida's deconstruction. In other words, in the use of this device within this practice to explore models of sociality and communication and to suggest qualities and values that might characterise those paradigms, it can be seen, in a Platonic vein, as a conduit for authenticity, the pursuit of veracity, for rational process and an avowal of presence. But it can also be read in a way that suggests its Derridean potential, as a vehicle for ambiguity, for complexity, for the deferring of final interpretations and avowing absence.

**Bakhtin and the dialogic: "when dialogue ends everything ends"**

As a literary theorist, the central quality of the literature that Mikhail Bakhtin values – reflecting as it does for him philosophical, psychological and sociological reality – is that it is "dialogic" rather than "monologic" (1984). The monologic, reflecting for him Platonic-inspired dialectical approaches such as Hegel's, emphasises the vision of a single, unified, authorial consciousness. When there are different perspectives and contradictions in play, these ultimately resolve into some kind of coherent singularity through authorial synthesis. Whereas the dialogic for Bakhtin, epitomised in Fyodor Dostoevsky's "polyphonic" novels, is about representing a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Ibid, p.6) without any unifying authorial resolution. The dialogic here is much more like Adorno's "negative dialectics" (White, 2024), referred to in the introduction, than traditional dialectics.

The dialogic is the defining quality of the relationship between the self and other/s, both in a literary context but also as a wider existential fact. The individual is in constant dialogue with others. Even when there is not a literal conversation with

another in progress, there is dialogue happening with other/s in a person's consciousness. For Bakhtin, human existence, any sense of self, is predicated on this unceasing dialogue: "To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends" (1984, p.252). It is a process of consciousness always looking for a final resting place, a settled position on whatever matter is at hand, including the self's own view of itself. But other/s are constantly there even when they are not *there*, conjured by the consciousness, asking questions of and challenging the self, proposing "rejoinders". The self, Bakhtin contends, despite being desperate to find this final answer, this fixed point, cannot do so. For every thought, for every action considered, the self is anticipating what other/s might say in response and is "addressing" itself to those other/s, whether real or imagined, with whom it is in dialogue. Desperate to move beyond the judgement of other/s (which is also the judgement of society) and to deny the influence that other/s have over its thoughts and actions, this pre-empting of what other/s might think in order to negate them, this unavoidable "addresssivity" in language, has the paradoxical effect of reaffirming that the self is in thrall to the other/s.

Bakhtin conjures a picture of constant internal dialogue, an un-ending existential Q&A, with every word being uttered with "a sideways glance" (Ibid, p.232), every word referring to another word – "the word dialogically contacting another word, a word about a word addressed to a word" (Ibid. p.237). Whether literally spoken or imagined, these words 'glanced at' are the words of the other/s and by extension their subjectivity. Bakhtin talks about the "penetration" of an individual's language, and thinking through language, by the consciousness of other/s. In this sense, dialogue and intersubjectivity are at the heart of our consciousness and subjectivity. The other/s are inside us, or provide a "background" against which the self can perceive itself; it is through embracing the dialogic nature of our identities that we can achieve self-knowledge.

The Bakhtinian emphasis on polyphony and "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, 1981) (different languages, dialects, tones and tenors having an interpenetrative relationship with each other in any given utterance) as the only way through which one might begin to construct meaning about the world and one's own self, resonates with the general

move towards conversation in performance. There is a sense that in a socially, politically and culturally more fragmented world, there is validity in a dialogic approach that foregrounds multiplicity, plurality and inter-subjectivity as a mode of artistic enquiry; that avows, as the practice covered here does, the polyphonic and the 'heteroglossic' as key constituents of any exploration of, and proposal for, paradigms of social relations and interpersonal discourse.

Another important aspect of Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic that has relevance to the use of audience-participant conversation in performance is that, following Plato, it has an embodied quality. Again, Dostoevsky provides the literary exemplification of this for him: "In Dostoevsky's work each opinion really does become a living thing and is inseparable from an embodied human voice" (1984, p.17). It is through the embodied "personality" – whether physically present or conjured as such in an individual's consciousness – and the ongoing dynamic of utterance and rejoinder that presence facilitates, that dialogue can proceed. For Bakhtin however – pre-empting White's arguments for the negative dialectics at the heart of experiential meaning-making (2024) – embodied personalities engaged in dialogue are representatives of impurity, incompleteness and open-endedness. They are not conduits, as Plato would have it, through which to reach final, fixed, abstract truths. The idea of dialogue being generated through personalities "entering into relationship with other personalities" (Bakhtin , 1984, p.32) – real, embodied personalities with their contradictions and fallibilities; their complexities and impurities – is a frame through which to view the breadth of practice this thesis covers and the paradigms of social relations and interpersonal discourse it explores. It is a key undercurrent of the performances described in chapter 2 in which audience-participants need to engage in negotiations with the other specific individuals present in the room, each with their own ideas and life history, to reach agreement. It is also there in the intimate practice covered in chapter 3 in which there is encouragement to pay special attention to the other person with whom one is in conversation, to notice them as embodied presence rather than abstract entity. The embodied quality of dialogue employed as a way of focusing on the specificity and complexity of people's personalities and life experience, and indeed to recognise the role of the individual's physical body and brain as part of that discourse,

is also noted in Touretteshero's practice in chapter 4 as they use audience-participant conversation to centre disabled people's lived experience. And, as analysed in chapter 5, the Bakhtinian notion of the dialogic as an embodied process that brings with it complexity, contradiction and open-endedness is there in the moves in Uninvited Guests' practice towards embracing audience-participant conversation as a form of collaboration and co-authorship in which the conventional intentions of authorship to unify are confounded and relational and discursive paradigms founded on plurality, openness and doubt are suggested.

With particular reference to my subsidiary research question on how audience-participant conversation functions dramaturgically in this field, it is pertinent to note here Bakhtin's view that drama is monologic:

> The rejoinders in a dramatic dialogue do not rip apart the represented world, do not make it multi-levelled; on the contrary, if they are to be authentically dramatic, these rejoinders necessitate the utmost monolithic unity of that world. In drama the world must be made from a single piece. (Bakhtin, 1984, p.17)

Of course, this is a critique of the Aristotelian concept of drama and the Platonic dialectics underpinning it. In his description of the background for moves towards the postdramatic, Lehmann critiques the dramatic tradition in terms that mirror Bakhtin's: "Wholeness, illusion and world representation are inherent in the model 'drama'; conversely through its very form, dramatic theatre produces wholeness as the *model* of the real" (2006, p.22). For Lehmann, like Bakhtin, drama has a "dialectical essence". Dialogue between characters on stage in the traditions of that genre represents the "dialectical movement of alienation and sublation" and serves the promotion of "wholeness" (Lehmann, 2006) or "monolithic unity" (Bakhtin, 1984) as both formal/aesthetic attribute and worldview, rather than representing the dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense as something grounded in plurality and contradiction that resists unity and resolution. Dialogue in drama then, for both Lehmann and Bakhtin, can be *anti-dialogical* in its effect: "a theatre that has […] withdrawn behind the fourth wall and which lets smoothly functioning dialogical communication take place there, could be said to prevent the communication *in the theatre*" (Lehmann, 2006, p.128). The

practice covered here, bringing conversation out from behind the fourth wall and into the 'auditorium', very directly acknowledging the audience's presence and role in the communicative process in line with broader tendencies within the postdramatic, can be seen as an indirect response to Bakhtin's critique of drama. Instead of monologic dramatic dialogue that emphasises resolution, unity and the singular authorial vision (i.e. the eventual erasure of dialogue), these are approaches to dialogue that suggest a world made from many pieces rather than one and that have the capacity to "rip apart" any overextended authorial ambitions to control and to totalise. This alignment between the Bakhtinian and the postdramatic, and the position of audience-participant conversation as a dramaturgical agent of both, will be returned to in chapter 5.

**I-Thou: dialogue as a spiritual meeting**

For Martin Buber, the philosopher most closely associated with the 'philosophy of dialogue' who provides the principal theoretical reference point in chapter 3, the encounter with the other, in its *ideal* form, is characterised by the "primary words" "I-Thou" rather than the alternative primary words which are "I-It" (1923). The I-Thou encounter is a complete "meeting" between entities that is reflective of a meeting with God. In I-Thou meetings the individual finds themselves outside themselves in the space "between", in a condition of "relation" or dialogue with the world. This dialogical relation is unmediated: "Thou is direct […] Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about" (Ibid, p.11). The I-Thou encounter involves a complete immersion and a sense of meeting the other in its wholeness, not as a collection of attributes or characteristics. This is an understanding of wholeness – unlike Lehmann's idea of wholeness as a guiding principle of the dramatic model – that affirms openness and resists a reductive view of the world. The I-It dynamic, in contrast to I-Thou, is characterised by an individual "experiencing" the world rather being in relation to it, being separate to and having a more instrumental view of the other. The I-It dynamic is not about meeting the other in an in between space – the encounter in this case happens within the individual and it happens on the individual's own terms, with the other seen as "object".

For Buber, both the potential for I-Thou and I-It exist within human beings – the struggle between these two modes is an inevitable result of being born. The I-Thou

primary word exists *a priori* for the child, but they inevitably transition to become aware of "the thing" and "that which effects" (Ibid, p.20). They are thereafter condemned to always have one foot in the realm of causality, the I-It. Buber contends that this tension between the two primary words, the twin contradictory dynamics underpinning our existence, is understood at the root of our consciousness and concept of selfhood: "I is aware with a single awareness of its solidarity, of connection and of its separation" (Ibid, p.63).

Buber was informed by a religious perspective, and there is a strong post-lapsarian framework in his description of the inevitable, yet regrettable, move away from this divinely inspired elemental I-Thou state. Imbricated with this, his description of the child being separated from the "womb of the great mother" and thereafter "longing for the Thou", (Ibid, p.25) suggest psychoanalytical paradigms. However, whereas for psychoanalysts such as Lacan, the move into language, the Symbolic, is seen as inevitably creating a barrier between the child and the mother, breaking from the Imaginary (a state of I-Thou-like directness), for Buber dialogue with another human being is when we come closest to the relation with God. It is in this meeting and sharing in language that the deeper reality of I-Thou can be found. For Buber, speech lies in the in between space that the individual needs to inhabit for I-Thou relations: "speech does not abide in man, but man takes his stand in speech and talks from there." In the same way, Buber says, "spirit is not in the I but between I and Thou" (Ibid, p.39). Spirit and speech operate in the same space, in some senses becoming synonymous. So, although dialogue, in the form of I-Thou, is at the heart of his paradigm for human beings' ideal interactions with all aspects of the world, including with nature and abstract ideas, it is in dialogue with human beings through language – i.e. conversation – that Buber thinks the full reality of Thou can be encountered, that the deepest, most transcendent relations between self and other can occur:

> Only here does the primary word go backwards and forwards in the same form, the word of address and the word of response live in the one language, I and Thou take their stand not merely in relation, but also in the solid give-and-take of talk. (Ibid, p.102)

For Buber, there are periods for the individual and for wider society when separation from reality, from I-Thou relations, can be more pronounced than at others. These are periods when a more instrumental view of the world and other human beings can dominate, when I-It is in the ascendancy. He talks about two "metacosmical movements" (Ibid, p.116) that ebb and flow through time – the move towards becoming more separate and then the reversal of this, the move back towards connection and I-Thou relations. This reversal can come as a sudden reaction to recognising the extent of the individual or a society's alienation from this fundamentally desired connection with the other. Buber describes this shocked recognition as a "great shudder" (Ibid, p.119) and with this shudder comes "the Word". Speech and dialogue occur like an urgent reflex in response to a recognition of being so alienated – the primordial desire for connection returns in the form of conversation, the "solid give-and-take of talk."

Adopting a Buberian perspective, it can be argued that the social/ethical turn and, as part of that, the rise of audience-participant conversation as a theatrical device across the dramaturgical contexts referred to in this thesis, is indicative of one of these metacosmical movements – a turn towards emphasising shared values and inter-personal connection; a revival in a humanist perspective in reaction to the hegemony of I-It. As I highlight in chapter 3 in the focus on intimate performance, these artists appear to be providing stages on which something akin to this reactive "shudder" can play out, where, as Buber might frame it, humanity and the Word can "be born again with new wings" (Ibid, p.116) – fora where audience-participants, with the urgency of primordial desire, can, through conversation, rehearse I-Thou-inspired paradigms for social relations and modes of communication in response to the opposing forces of I-It prevalent in the world beyond the performance environment.

**Conversation as "apology": ethics and the "face"**

Emmanuel Levinas, whose theories are used as framing alongside Bakhtin's in chapter 5, has a conception of the self and other that shares some similarities with Buber's. Like Buber, he adopts a paradigm that contrasts two different dynamics the self can have with the other. In Levinas' schema, "totality" and "infinity" (1991b) replace I-It and I-Thou, with the former dynamics in these binaries being more objectifying,

dominative, instrumentalising and violent, and the latter dynamics uncontainable, irreducible and metaphysical. However, for Levinas, unlike Buber, there can be no harmonious coming together in a meeting between I and Thou, self and other. He emphasises the overwhelming *otherness* of the other, its foreignness and separateness. The relationship with the other is reflective of the relationship with the ultimate, metaphysical other – the "alterity of the Other and Most-High" (Ibid, p.34). The metaphysical Other – and all true otherness – that lies at the heart of human existence is "absolutely other", separate from, and exterior to the self. It cannot be met and communed with, and it can never be known. The other is infinite. The instinct of the self is to bring everything into its orbit as something that can be used, to instrumentalise the other, to establish it within the limited narrative of selfhood – to integrate it into what Levinas calls "the same" – and through doing so remove its otherness, to remove its infiniteness. Levinas calls this process "totalisation" – a violent process of denying true otherness.

Openness to the infinity of the other is a guarantee against a reductive, unethical approach to other human beings. Without this awareness of infinity, totalising attitudes and behaviours become possible – it is possible to think of other human beings as means to satisfying one's ends, rather than profoundly separate others, who are subjects in their own right. The ethical structure that comes with the encounter with the other, who "resists" being incorporated into the self/same, is linked to Levinas' understanding of the "face": "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name the face" (Ibid, p.50). In the face-to-face encounter, the other – in its absolute alterity, exteriority and infiniteness – is present. The face resists being totalised by the same, it challenges the self and produces an ethical reflex from the self/same, establishing discourse: "The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (Ibid, p.201). Levinas calls this primordial discourse "conversation". This notion of the face, if acknowledged properly, almost inevitably leading to a conversational encounter with the other founded around ethical responsibility, is returned to in chapter 5, but has general relevance to this field. All the performances referenced in this thesis, in their participatory form, are foregrounding the faces of those who are together in the performance space –

whether artist/performer or audience-participant. They are, literally and/or metaphorically, turning up the house lights in the auditorium so everyone can see each other. They are drawing attention, through this avowal of the presence of other human beings and the "obligation" to speak and listen to them, to the central human activity of relating to others and the ethical and political considerations that flow from that.

Through conversation – language with a face – Levinas believes that the other breaks free from the *idea* of who they are in the mind of the self, from any totalising conceptualisation of them, and asserts their "absolute difference". It is from this difference, brought into the light by the face and conversation, that ethics springs. In other words, language and conversation are synonymous with difference and ethics – they cannot exist without each other. In conversation, Levinas maintains, despite having its totalising instincts challenged by the infinite otherness of the face, the self/same cannot be erased. The self/same needs to assert itself to some degree for the distance from the other that he considers necessary for ethics and conversation to exist. This dynamic – asserting the self but respecting the uncontainable, unknowable nature of the other – is at the core of conversation and produces an apologetic quality in response:

> Conversation, from the very fact that it maintains the distance between me and the Other, the radical separation asserted in transcendence which prevents the reconstitution of totality, cannot renounce the egoism of its existence; but the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognising in the Other a *right* over this egoism, and hence in justifying oneself. Apology, in which the I at the same time asserts itself and inclines before the transcendent, belongs to the essence of conversation. (Ibid, p. 40)

The idea of some kind of "apology" being at the heart of conversation – as a result of the ego 'asserting' itself through that conversation but recognising in that very assertion its obligation to the other – is useful when considering the use of audience-participant conversation in the performances referenced in this thesis, and the relational and discursive paradigms suggested by it. In group decision-making shows such as *The Money* (chapter 2), the intimate, conversational work of Jo Fong/Sonia Hughes and others (chapter 3), and the community-building that happens through the

Q&As in Touretteshero's shows (chapter 4), there is, in those opportunities for conversation, encouragement to speak *and* to listen, to assert oneself but also to reflect on others' perspectives. As an example, Fong/Hughes make explicit that there should be an equitable sharing of speaking and listening in the conversations in their show *Neither Here Nor There* (2018), allowing one person in a duo to speak for six minutes while the other listens before roles are reversed. Across this field of practice, often there is a designed-in encouragement for audience-participants and artists/performers to recognise that, although given a platform to speak, they do not necessarily have all the answers – to recognise in a Levinasian sense, the value of difference and the inalienable rights of everyone, in their profound separateness from and foreignness to each other, to be able to express themselves in any discourse rather than to be spoken for. Touretteshero state this principle explicitly when inviting people to participate in conversation in *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*: "[speak freely] but be considerate of the different experiences of other people, in the room and online" (2023a). In this 'apologetic' process of asserting the self, recognising difference (which is also a recognition of separateness) and realising the ethical responsibility to the other that comes with that, there is implicit in conversation, as Levinas suggests, both "inspiration" and "trauma" (1991a). In chapter 5, in relation to Uninvited Guests' practice, I use this Levinasian dichotomy to gain insight into the potential for both hope and despair to be elicited in the use of audience-participant conversation in performance and for this then to form a key aspect of the relational and communicative paradigms suggested by it.

**Consensus, dissensus and "naming the world"**

Unlike Levinas who sees in conversation an affirmation of profound separateness and difference – albeit carrying within it the desire to transcend the self and connect with the other – Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasises it as something that defaults to commonality and consensus and that as such "agreement in understanding is more primordial than misunderstanding" (2006, p.16). At an individual and societal level, the conversational back and forth that is the essential dynamic of language, establishes, or re-establishes after a temporary "disturbance" (Ibid, p.15), things "held in common" (Ibid, p.17).

An interest in the potential for audience-participant conversation to generate consensus and build a sense of community is, as suggested in the introductory chapter, something that can be identified in the practice of some of the artists covered in this thesis. As noted, the tendency towards consensus is also a key aspect of Bishop's critique of the wider participatory turn and the reviving of a humanist ethical framework that she identifies at the heart of this. At the same time, as highlighted previously, there is also evidence in this thesis of audience-participant conversation being used to explore the dynamics of dissensus – to point, contrary to Gadamer, and in answer to Bishop's general charge, to the *persistence* of discursive disturbances, of antagonism, in the fabric of social relations and communication and to emphasise the limitations of discourse in the pursuit of understanding, connection and agreement.

This leads on to an introduction of Jurgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt and Chantal Mouffe – who, in dialogue with each other, provide the theoretical framework for the analysis in chapter 2 – and their related but contrasting positions on discourse in the public sphere, including the place of consensus and dissensus within that. I follow that with an introduction to Paulo Freire's idea of dialogical pedagogy being a socially and politically revolutionary practice, which is the theoretical prism through which I analyse Touretteshero's practice in chapter 4.

Habermas' focus, like Gadamer, is on the natural inclination of discourse towards consensus, inspired by a common understanding of what is reasonable and rational. For Habermas the idea of "rational-critical" public discourse leading to consensus on matters of public importance is integral to the proper functioning of Western liberal democracies. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1992), Habermas charts the evolution of what he sees as the modern "public sphere" in late seventeenth-century Europe as a result of the growth of the mercantile class who had an economic interest in how the state was exercising its power and, with that, the development of a newspaper culture through which those actions and policies could be understood and criticised.

The "ideal speech situation" (1991, p.25), as Habermas later calls it, underpins that public sphere. This "situation" consists of a set of principles that need to be in place in order that an effective, rational debate can occur and for the public sphere to function

properly. The key aspects of this are that participants should be more or less equal and free in the given situation to express their opinions and to challenge others' arguments. There should be no coercion of anyone and a culture of freedom of expression. In the public sphere, stronger arguments with a greater claim to be rational, through dialogue in the print press and through spoken, public communication (e.g., conversation and debate, originally occurring in the salons and coffee-houses of seventeenth-century Europe), will win out and a consensus will naturally form around these. These opinions, whether directly or indirectly, then help regulate the behaviour of the state. For Habermas then, 'deliberative democracy', founded on conversation in the public sphere, was the latest stage in the development of the relationship between the state and the citizen, between authority and those subject to that authority (1992).

For Habermas, this Enlightenment-inspired formulation of the public sphere – which, to employ the terms used across this thesis, is the formulation of a paradigm for social relations and interpersonal discourse focussed around matters of public interest – is critical to the liberal democratic process, but in the twentieth century begins a process of "decomposition" due to the development of a new cultural landscape dominated by mass media. This results in a move away from a more active, "reading public", which could approach the debate about the issues of the day with a level of critical detachment and base their views on relatively objective information, towards a new paradigm where the public play the role of passive consumers who are manipulated by advertising and displays of power and celebrity. This decomposed public sphere represents in some ways a "refeudalisation" (Ibid, p.195) in the relations between the people and those in power – a return to when monarchs and the nobility focussed on asserting their status and their power through appearing in public rather than using publicity as the means through which one might engage in rational debate on pertinent issues of the day. In this sense Habermas is fighting a rearguard action – arguing for the rational and the reasonable, not necessarily as way to reach absolute and universal solutions, but as the best chance of getting as close to those solutions as possible, and of at least reaching the local consensus that he deemed was necessary for democratic systems to survive. Without the operation of the public sphere in this way, the

implication is that democratic political systems and their societies become disfigured by the "manipulative publicity" (Ibid, p.178) of populism, and authoritarianism can develop unchecked.

The turn towards audience-participant conversation in performance identified here can be aligned in a general sense with this Habermasian rearguard action. It can be framed as a re-assertion of (reimagined versions of) the "ideal speech situation" – an appeal for relational and communicative paradigms based around honesty, receptiveness, respect and understanding, the rational and the reasonable, against the background of the continued decomposition of the public sphere, arguably accelerated as it has migrated online. In many ways then, the performance environment can be seen here as taking over from the 'free' and 'open' spaces of the eighteenth-century coffee-houses and salons; focussed environments away from the general discursive maelstrom where these ideal, paradigmatic iterations of the public sphere can be configured.

Arendt's ideal "public realm" (1998) overlaps with Habermas' public sphere in some ways. It is separate to the private realm in terms of the values, behaviours and discourse that characterise it. It is a place of noble enterprise and ambition underpinned by some common values, not least shared facts. It is marked by the desire of those that engage in "speech and action" within this realm to transcend the short term, selfish concerns of the here and now and to contribute in some way to a grander moral, ideational project – the pursuit of some kind of "earthly immortality". Arendt differs from Habermas though in her focus on the Greek polis as the primary paradigm, rather than the Enlightenment coffee-house. For her the polis was an agonistic environment and a "space of appearance", where self-presentation and rhetoric was a significant and valid feature alongside rational debate. For Arendt, that "fiercely agonal spirit" (Ibid, p.41), the competition for attention, the *performance* of debate, ensures that ideas and character are tested and that "the best of all" deeds and achievements will emerge, based on a commitment to a "common world" that will outlast the limited concerns of our private lives and our mortality as individuals.

Arendt's model emphasises the plurality of human life and that being "*the* condition […] of all political life" (Ibid, p.7). The role of speech in this public realm is to wrestle

with this plurality and to compete with others to make the most persuasive case for how certain courses of action best serve the achievement of that transcendence. Arendt makes the point that, without speech, our deeds and actions cannot be made sense of, cannot be understood in terms of the narratives around earthly immortality that are an essential need as part of the "human condition". Interestingly, given the current historical moment's technological and communicative innovations (e.g., social media and AI), Arendt frames some of the risk to her ideal paradigm for the public realm in terms of the gap between rapid technological advance and the ability of human beings to find the discourse with which to make sense of it: "we, who are earth-bound creatures and have begun to act as though we were dwellers of the universe, will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do" (Ibid, p.3). It is possible to understand the general move towards audience-participant conversation in performance in Arendtian terms as an attempted reaffirmation of our "earth-bound" status, exploring relational and discursive paradigms that make visible – in an avowedly public manner, on stage, in a "space of appearance" – our corporeal status as interlocutors; an attempted reconnection of human beings with their words, speech with action, in the face of the disconnection and abstraction of these things in a contemporary cultural context.

Despite some differences in emphasis between Arendt and Habermas, Mouffe (2013) makes the point that both of them share a fundamental belief that the discourse of the public sphere or realm is one that should incline towards shared values, common objects and, once the rhetorical performance and agonism that Arendt sees as integral to it plays out, that consensus around the best ideas and plans for action will result. For Mouffe, Arendt is presenting "agonism without antagonism" (Ibid, p.10). Mouffe's position is that the social is an overdetermined space in which final consensus on any socio-political question can never be reached. Any socio-political determination is always based on the "ineradicability of antagonism" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) and therefore always exists in relation to something that is outside itself. It is a paradigm of political and social relations in which the 'us/them' dynamic is unavoidable. For Mouffe, any apparent consensus must rest on excluding those elements that would be disruptive to it. It is inherently temporary, contingent and partial. Antagonism

"forecloses any possibility of a final reconciliation" and of "a fully inclusive 'we'" (Ibid, p.xvii). Mouffe calls these contingent consensual articulations happening against a background of their own negation "hegemonic articulations". The key here, and this is something that is returned to across this thesis including in the conclusion, is that the business of constructing social and political meaning is an "articulatory practice" (Ibid, p.105) – it is a product of discourse rather than there being absolute material foundation to it. No set of values or articulated consensus, no hegemony, can be said to be final or not subject to re-articulation. Embracing the ineradicable antagonism on which this all rests, Mouffe sees as necessary for healthy pluralist, democratic life: "Unlike the Habermasians, we do not see this as something that undermines the democratic project, but as its very condition of possibility" (Ibid, p. xviii). Mouffe's aim is that the destructive implications of unbridled antagonism are translated into a more productive agonism – a scenario where "enemies" become "adversaries" (2013) through institutional political frameworks which allow for radical disagreement whilst acknowledging the democratic right of all participants to articulate their points of view.

Mouffe's socio-political paradigm is, as I have said, a key reference point in my analysis of *The Money* in chapter 2. Also, in its emphasis on the indivisibility of social and political constructs from "articulatory practice", and the fundamental contingency and precariousness underlying this, a Mouffean logic echoes across my analysis of the whole of this field of performance in which the articulatory practice of audience-participant conversation is used as a site on which relational and discursive paradigms can be explored, advocated for and critiqued.

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996), which provides the theoretical framing for the analysis of Touretteshero's practice in chapter 4, reflects the Mouffean argument that hegemonic social, political and economic relations exist on the basis of a "logic of articulation and contingency" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p.85). For Freire, focussing on educational systems, the "oppressors" (1996) exercise power as much through their articulation of narratives that serve their interests as through their command of material conditions. The "banking" system of education that he critiques is one that seeks to "fill up" students with pre-determined knowledge. This dynamic maintains the myth that what is taught is permanent, natural and cannot be challenged. It is an "anti-

dialogical" system that functions to maintain the status quo. As Freire says, "once a situation of oppression has been initiated, anti-dialogue becomes indispensable to its preservation" (Ibid, p.119). Instead, Freire advocates for a "dialogical" education system in which traditional hierarchies between teacher and student are disrupted, the expertise of all participants (whether lived, professional or theoretical) is recognised and, rather than a "banking" dynamic, the focus of the encounter is around posing problems to be better understood and then, possibly, resolved through dialogue. This is a view of the world in which a shift in who has the rights to play an active role in the discourse – within the education system, but also more generally – who has agency in the ongoing and contingent ideological process of "naming the world" (ibid, p.69), as well as changing the discursive paradigm (from anti-dialogical to dialogical), can have a radical effect on socio-political realities.

Mouffe and Freire together suggest another perspective from which to consider the general move towards audience-participant conversation over the last two decades. That is that conversation-based performance of this kind represents an avowal of the pluralistic, dialogical articulatory process against the background of a prevailing hegemonic order that, on some level, is *anti-dialogical* – whether that is characterised as the anti-dialogism inherent in the dominance of international corporate capitalism, or the anti-dialogism of an increasingly polarised and antidemocratic political culture – and in the normal course of things denies or diminishes opportunities to speak in these ways, on these subjects, with these people. Within the frames of these performances, attempts can be made to respond to this hegemonic anti-dialogism, using conversation to suggest new discursive possibilities, to de-naturalise dominant discourses, to ask questions about who gets to "name the world" and rehearse different ways that naming process might happen – to suggest counter hegemonic discourses but also counter hegemonic discursive methods; alternative ways of relating imbricated with alternative ways of communicating. In this sense, overall, it can be framed as an embrace of antagonism and dissensus, not necessarily in terms of the dynamics generated between interlocutors in individual shows (although there are examples of this), but in relation to the wider cultural and discursive context with which it is in dialogue.

**Rorty's "conversational perspective"**

The final figure to introduce briefly in this overview of the philosophy of dialogue is Richard Rorty. His view of conversation within his philosophy of pragmatism is that, given there is no basis for grounding any expression of values or community as part of a pursuit of immutable, universal, ahistorical truth (as those operating within a Platonic or Kantian tradition might suggest) instead "conversation is an activity which is its *own* end" (Rorty, 1980, p.734). Conversation, and what Homi K. Bhabha describes as Rorty's "conversational perspective" (1998, p.42), is about accepting that ultimate truths are out of reach and that our codes of behaviour, our social identities and our moral imperatives are all contingent on the local, historical conditions within which we exist and result from this ongoing, "ungrounded" (Rorty, 1980, p. 736) social dialogue, which only has other conversations (now and in the past), rather than any higher force or objective, as a guide. In arguments which echo Mouffe's critique of the Habermasians, Rorty says that the "*anti*-pragmatist" [my emphasis] believes that "conversation necessarily aims at agreement and at rational consensus, that we converse in order to make further conversation unnecessary" (Ibid, p.732); that conversation, and indeed the social and moral arrangements that spring from it, are expressions of something "more than a contingent project" (Ibid, p.735); they are aiming, instead, for final truths. Whereas the pragmatist believes this ultimate consensus is impossible because this epistemological and moral finality is unachievable. Truth, as a notion for the pragmatist, is always contingent on the context in which it is being discussed and, as such, as an inevitable consequence of history and the unavoidable relativism of human affairs, *conversation*, the back and forth of human agreement and disagreement, will always be necessary. Rorty sees the positives in avowing the conversational, of existing in the knowledge that all we have tying us together and giving our lives meaning are the contingencies and inevitable fallibilities of conversation rather than the chimeric "hope of getting things right" (Ibid, p. 725). Rorty's conversational pragmatism suggests a paradigm for social relations and discourse that is fuelled by existential urgency, where conversation is seen as the only medium available through which moral values, social relations and any other attempts at meaning can be worked out. I argue in the conclusion that this pragmatic conversational perspective, this sense of relational and discursive urgency inspired by an avowal of contingency and contextuality, is a common

thread through this field of performance and connects the social and communicative paradigms suggested by the use of audience-participant conversation across this practice.

**Summary**

In my overview of the philosophy of dialogue above, dialogue and conversation has been identified in different ways: as the means for establishing truth through dialectics (Plato); as the predication of subjectivity and basis for a literary aesthetic (Bakhtin); as a route to intimate spiritual communion (Buber); as the manifestation of ethical consciousness (Levinas); as the primordial foundation for language and understanding (Gadamer); as the basis for the public sphere and democracy (Habermas, Arendt and Mouffe); as the roots of an emancipatory pedagogy (Freire); and as the pragmatic means for establishing provisional meaning and forming contingent communities in a landscape of relativism (Rorty). As highlighted in this chapter, each of these provides a useful prism through which to understand the general move towards audience-participant conversation in contemporary performance and enables insight into some of the common characteristics of the relational and discursive paradigms suggested through use of that device across this field. At the same time, the distinction of these theories from each other helps me to elucidate the distinct dynamics and themes at play in the different dramaturgical contexts I have identified. Hence, to recap, in chapter 2 I use Habermas, Arendt and Mouffe to analyse performance that focuses on democratic debate and decision-making. In Chapter 3, Buber's concept of dialogue as a transcendental meeting between self and other provides a framing for an exploration of the use of conversation in intimate performance. Chapter 4 employs Freire's theory of dialogical pedagogy to understand Touretteshero's use of audience-participant conversation as part of a practice of changemaking. In Chapter 5, the move towards conversation in Uninvited Guests' ensemble practice is understood through the prism of Bakhtin and Levinas' theories. Finally, as noted in the section above, in the conclusion Rorty's notion of conversation provides insight into the existential fundaments of the relational and discursive paradigms proposed across this field of practice.

## Chapter 2. Performing Democratic Debate: consensus, dissensus and practising politics

### Bringing the public sphere into the "private" performance space

This chapter focuses on performance practice that has emerged in the last decade in the UK in which audience-participant conversation takes the form of group discussion on ethical or political issues and often involves having to reach agreement on the action to take in relation to a presented scenario. I argue here that conversation in this dramaturgical context is the medium through which iterations of the 'public sphere' are established within the frame of the performance artwork, enabling exploration of the relational and discursive paradigms on which such fora might be based. The primary case study here is *The Money* (2013) by Kaleider which I analyse through reference, in turn, to Habermas, Arendt and Mouffe's differing understandings of discourse in the public, political sphere. Overall, I argue that these performances use audience-participant conversation as a means through which to rehearse the principles and processes of democratic debate and decision-making; an opportunity to practise the 'inconvenient' business of negotiating with others on matters of shared concern. I argue that the frame of the performance event in this context shines a light on the performative aspects of democratic discourse, emphasising the constitutive quality of the articulatory act within any social or political construct and the contingency that underpins it. In turn, this chapter points to the use of audience-participant conversation as part of a dramaturgy of 'publicness' that can be seen in contrast to the paradigm of artistic autonomy and private reception suggested by the 'black box' theatrical model.

Of course, there are established traditions of applied and explicitly political theatre practice, notably those drawing on Boal's theory and practice – e.g., Forum Theatre – that conjure iterations of the public sphere through use of audience-participant conversation (2008). Here, although Boal remains a pertinent reference point and I note towards the end of this chapter his views on dialogue, democracy, and theatre as a forum in which to rehearse political action, I am identifying a trend that is emerging from a slightly different place. The practice here is less focussed on a specific political

agenda related to the issues debated, or on achieving concrete socio-political outcomes as might be the case within those Boalian and 'applied' traditions and which is, as I argue in chapter 4, also one of the features of Touretteshero's use of conversation. Instead, the practice covered in this chapter is, as noted, focussed on exploring the values and mechanics of democratic process, with the specific issue around which that happens often a second-order concern. It is also notable that the theatre-makers I refer to here, albeit they are quite diverse from each other in many ways – exhibiting a range of influences across live art, public art, gaming, immersive and interactive theatre – are ones with historical roots in something like the modernist-influenced black box theatre tradition that I described in the introduction. Indeed, many of the key individuals behind the companies cited (e.g., Seth Honnor from Kaleider or Tassos Stevens from Coney) directed or performed shows in BAC's black box spaces in the late 1990s or early 2000s. Interestingly, this is when 'Scratch' emerged at BAC. Initially this was based around theatre-makers being encouraged to present works-in-progress as a standard part of their show development process and for audience feedback (both written and spoken) to be solicited *after* these performances. The concept of Scratch spread elsewhere and, at BAC, developed over two decades into an overarching ethos based around the iterative, dialogical development of ideas and projects, not just theatre. Looking back, the first moves towards the practice and ideology of Scratch can be seen as an early manifestation of the participatory turn in the UK theatre/performance landscape. However, despite this heralding of new potentials in terms of audience relations, the general expectation surrounding the mode of audience engagement in the black box spaces at BAC and in comparable environments in the early years of the new millennium, from which these artists would emerge, was still that it would default to "quiet receptivity" (Sedgman, 2018).

Christopher Balme in *The Theatrical Public Sphere* argues that the dominance of this paradigm from the early twentieth century onwards turned the theatre experience into one that generally failed to engage with the public sphere: "The black box is predicated on intensified absorptive attention usually in darkened spaces to enable a primarily aesthetic experience but which is seldom conducive to social or political debate" (2014, p. 13). Balme's argument is in danger of being too generalised, suggests a false

opposition between aesthetic experience and social/political engagement (which is an inversion of the same binary Bishop uses to critique the participatory),[10] and can be rebutted with reference to different examples of theatre based on the modernist black box paradigm that have not withdrawn from debates happening in the contemporaneous public sphere – the political playwrighting of Bond, Brenton or Churchill for instance. But there is still a valid point here, supported by others as noted in the introduction, that despite the clear social and political agendas of examples of modernist-influenced theatre practice, there is an insularity, or what Balme calls a "reclusivity", suggested by this production-reception model, a diminishing to some degree of the *publicness* of the theatre experience. The darkness of the auditorium and "the protocols of audience membership" (Kershaw, 2001, p.136) associated with this – principally immobility and silence – reduce audience members' awareness of each other, of the public alongside them. Further to this, the generic 'no-where' space of the black box implies a disconnection from (literally turning out the lights on and painting over the doors that lead to) the specificities of the public social world existing beyond the theatre space. This controlled and codified atmosphere and sense of disconnection from the complicated, contested social world outside, creates the scope, as referred to in the introduction and explored further in chapter 4, for barriers to entry to be established, keeping the 'misbehaving', 'imperfect' and uninitiated public – the "unruly" audiences that Baz Kershaw bemoans the lack of – from the doors of the theatre. Kershaw identifies "a growing poverty in permissible [audience] response" (Ibid, p.135) in Western theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. Echoing Balme's assessment of the relationship between theatre and the public sphere, he argues that this move away from more participatory modes of audience behaviour evident in previous eras is a denial of the inherent publicness of theatre, negates its "democratic potential" (Ibid, p.151) and has resulted in it becoming "increasingly irrelevant to communities and to politics" (Ibid, p.136).

When I started working at BAC in 2002, as I have said, the black box paradigm was the standard arrangement and provided the context within which some of the artists

[10] See introduction.

covered in this chapter were making theatre earlier on in their careers. Despite it being an arts centre housed in a Victorian town hall with lots of original architectural features – wood panelling and decorative ceiling plasterwork etc. – the three performance spaces at BAC were painted completely black, obscuring this historical detail. From 2007 onwards the paint was stripped away, there were no longer any black box spaces, and instead the historical specificity of those spaces was overtly recognised and presented internally and externally as a virtue. Alongside the visual change, the names of these spaces changed from generic art centre names – the ‘‘Main House”, “Studio 1 and 2” – to their original names linked to their functions in the town hall. So, the Main House became the “Council Chamber” and other performance spaces now included the “Members’ Bar” (originally the room where councillors could drink) and the “Members’ Library”. This shift in the physical environment at BAC and its accompanying nomenclature at this time parallelled the ideological and aesthetic moves that characterised the social/participatory turns that were being felt in the theatre happening there and elsewhere. Building in a BAC context on some of the precepts of Scratch, these were moves away from the emphasis of the modernist ideal on the autonomous artwork, created by the ‘genius’ artist/s, that is best experienced in an insulated, decontextualised environment, as free as possible from extraneous interruptions. Instead, there was a turn towards engagement with social context, with the specificity of the location in which the theatre event was happening, with its history (a history that in BAC’s case was visible in the walls of the spaces) and with the communities surrounding the institution where that art was being made and presented, including attempts to address the barriers presented to certain demographic groups by the conventional theatre-going experience. There were also moves to distribute greater agency to audiences in different ways within the frame of the theatre event. Collectively these tendencies can be read as a fuller embracing of the publicness of theatre, its contextuality and contingency; a harnessing of what Joe Kelleher, commenting on the “political-ready quality of theatre”, describes as “its liveness and sociality, the simple fact that it happens now and that it gathers people, who may well be strangers to each other, around issues of disagreement but also of common concern” (2009, p.10). As such, these developments can be seen perhaps as a response to the thread of truth in Balme’s hyperbolic claim, based on his critique of the

previously dominant black box paradigm, that "what goes on in the privacy of a western theatre is an almost entirely private matter" (2014, p.17).

The artists referenced in this chapter all followed a trajectory like that of BAC as it stripped the black box paint from the walls of its theatres, moving with this general turn towards an avowal of the heteronomy of their artworks, emphasising their publicness, and, as a key part of this, recognising the potential of audiences – the public there in the room – to play a central rather than incidental role in bringing the artwork into being. The use of audience-participant conversation, as one iteration of this avowal of heteronomy, provides an opportunity for the public to be given voice within the frame for the artwork, and, as the artists referenced in this chapter do, to make the interests, concerns, conflicts and consensus-building of the public sphere – the work of democracy – the subject of the artwork. It adds to its semantic potency that this exploration of the relational and discursive dynamics of the public sphere in these performances happens on the conceptual and physical ground (such as at BAC) where the legacy of the black box paradigm with its accent on private experience still resonates.

**Artists practising in this area**

I will use *The Money* by Kaleider as an extended case study in this chapter, focussing on the ways that it relates to different philosophical paradigms of the public sphere. Before moving on to that analysis, I will briefly note examples from the work of two other companies who were visitors to BAC during my time there – Coney and Fast Familiar – to give a flavour of the other practice that can be located within this dramaturgical context in its use of audience-participant conversation.

In the introduction I referred to *Coney's Early Days (of a better nation)*, in which audience-participants are encouraged to have political debates with each other (with frustrating results for some (Tomlin, 2016 and White, 2016)). *Adventure One* (2014) is another example of a Coney show in which audience-participant conversation, occurring within a fictional scenario, is used to explore a set of political or ethical issues and in so doing puts a frame around the business of relating to others and discussing contested matters in the public sphere. Following an audio guide, participants visit

locations in the City of London gathering information about a fictional financial trader who has developed a new algorithm that will make anyone in possession of it rich. Audience-participants are instructed to gather to discuss whether to steal a bag from this trader which has a memory stick with the code for this algorithm in it. Doing so will cause major disruption to the financial system. Following the conclusion of the experience on the streets of the City, the group are facilitated to have a more reflective conversation about their different relationships with that system – they are asked to consider and debate how "inside" or "outside" it they feel they are, the merits of direct action and the positive and negative aspects of modern globalised capitalism (Stevens, 2023). As well as being about the important contemporary issues that are debated, Stevens sees the use of audience-participant conversation, in this show and others, as a means through which differences of opinion can be aired and the process of communicating and reaching agreement across those differences can be practised:

> How can you get people experienced in holding differences and recognising, 'okay, we are united on this and we differ on that. And it's not that I think that's unimportant, but it's less important than the thing we've got to do together'? I think that you can only really do this through practice. And the practice is conversations. (2023)

In their shows *Justice Syndicate* (2017) and *Acquisitions Panel* (2021), Fast Familiar place audience-participants in situations that replicate real-world discursive scenarios: a jury in a fictional case of sexual assault and a museum committee deciding whether to acquire an object with a colonial history. In each case, audience-participants are fed evidence related to the matter under consideration through digital tablets and have a series of conversations between themselves in light of this information about the best decision to make. The evidence is carefully calibrated so that different points of view amongst those participating are likely. Echoing Stevens, Rachel Briscoe from Fast Familiar sees the principal concern of these pieces being to explore the activity of having a public conversation on matters of public interest, 'practising' agreeing and disagreeing and connecting across difference, rather than the specific themes and moral or political questions raised by the fictional scenarios. Speaking about *Justice Syndicate*, she says:

> People are always like, 'is it a trial show because you guys love crime dramas?' The answer is, 'we do love crime dramas, but no'. What we were trying to find was a format where a group of strangers have to have a discussion about something important. The only thing that we could think of really at that point was a jury. (Barnard and Briscoe, 2023)

Through the framing of performance – or what Tony Fisher, quoting Giorgio Agamben, calls the "gesture" or the "exhibition of a mediality" (Agamben, 2000 cited in Fisher, 2017a, p.19) – the focus here is on making visible the *means* through which democratic articulation happens and, through this "aesthetics of critical visibility" (Fisher, 2017a, p.20), perhaps considering how that articulation might happen differently in the future.

*The Money,* which I analyse below, is another example of a show which allows audience-participants to have "a discussion about something important" whilst suggesting its primary focus is a reflexive one. It is a show about the activity of having conversations with other people in the public sphere and attempting to negotiate agreement. It allows audience-participants particularly high levels of autonomy within its framing to conduct those conversations, creating extensive opportunities, as an audience-participant and researcher, to reflect on the discursive and relational dynamics of the public sphere it engenders. It also presents each group of audience-participants with a clear decision that needs to be made with the potential for a direct real-world impact, but also with significant barriers in the form of other people and their different opinions to be navigated through to reach a consensus and achieve that impact. As Briscoe says, in relation to Fast Familiar's work, "we live in a very complex and uncertain world. Almost the more chances we can give for people to sit with that and find ways of being okay with that, the more important it is" (Barnard and Briscoe, 2023). *The Money* is a good example of a performance "gesture" in which audience-participants are given an extended period to observe the "mediality" of the public sphere, to take notice of the means of democratic discourse, to "sit with" the complexities and uncertainties of the socio-political world, and to rehearse a way through.

### *The Money:* an introduction

*The Money* is a "show-game" (Gomez, 2016), as Honnor describes it, in which extended conversation between audience-participants is the central activity. Conversation, sometimes assuming the form of debate or argument, is the means of playing this game and realising its object. There are two categories of audience-participant, Players and Silent Witnesses, and those attending can decide in advance which category they want to be. The object of the show-game is for the Players, without facilitation from the company, to unanimously decide how to use the money that has been emptied from a briefcase on to a table in the centre of the space by a performer at the beginning. This money is made up of the revenue from the sale of the Players' tickets for that performance plus any money 'rolled over' from previous performances. To explain this further, one of the few rules presented to the audience-participants at the start on a sheet of instructions that is reminiscent of the folded sheets of paper that accompany board games, is this requirement for there to be unanimity in the decision reached about how the money is to be used. If this is not achieved in the time given (usually one hour), the rules dictate that the Players forfeit their ability to decide how the money is used and that sum is added to the pot for the next performance. The other category of audience-participants, Silent Witnesses, as the name suggests, are only able to silently observe the Players. They cannot contribute to the conversation about what should happen with the available money. However, they can decide to 'buy in' at any point during the performance. This means that they pay an additional sum and switch to being Players, with the ability then to take part in the conversation.

The Players are always located centrally in the space in some sort of horse-shoe shape with Silent Witnesses in concentric rows of seating looking in on this. The layout is suggestive of that of political debating chambers, such as town halls or parliamentary chambers, in many parts of the world[11]. The connotations associated with the physical arrangement of the space compound the thematic focus of this performance and the sense of the role of audience-participants within it. This is an exercise in public

[11] Performances have also happened in relevant 'found' spaces – e.g., the Council Chamber at County Hall in London.

conversation, decision-making and action. A group of people have a length of time together to publicly discuss what action they might collectively take and to attempt to reach agreement on that against a background of multiple alternative possibilities, with the opportunity to discuss the values that might determine their decisions and the priorities the group has given the limitations of the available resource.[12] Then there is the opportunity, if a discursive agreement is reached, for that to lead to action in the world beyond the space of the performance. In this way, *The Money,* as well as conjuring a version of the public sphere, is providing analogous experiences of, and drawing critical attention to, some of the real-world settings where governance occurs, connoting the formal political settings referenced above or other environments where public debate and decision-making happens – e.g., workplace management or board meetings.

**Discourse, Reason and Consensus: *The Money* and the Habermasian public sphere**

I will now look at the attributes of the public sphere we are introduced to in *The Money* and, by extension, the paradigms of social relations and interpersonal discourse that are suggested through the use of audience-participant conversation in this context, which is the focus of this thesis. The Habermasian ideal of the public sphere, as described in the previous chapter, is based on an Enlightenment paradigm in which free-thinking, open, equal and rational individuals come together to have reasoned debate. Habermas references Kant's view of the Enlightenment project as "the public use of reason" (Habermas, 1992, p.104). He aligns himself with Kant's notion that reason requires free, independent thought (one needs to shake off the "tutelage" of received, non-rational argument and convention), but at the same time it is a collective, communicative enterprise:

> Certainly one may say 'Freedom to speak or write can be taken from us by a superior power, but never the freedom to think!' But how much, and how correctly would we think if we did not think as it were in common with others, with whom we mutually communicate! (Kant, 1949 cited in Habermas, 1992)

[12] In my experience, the sum of money ranged from around £100 to about £700.

Reason, 'correct thinking', needs to happen through communication with others. For Habermas, as for Kant, this communication, the fundamental activity of the public sphere, happening in a non-coercive environment with others, should be based around principles of equality. That is that all who have an interest in and might be affected by things discussed in the public sphere should be able to access and contribute to it and that the arguments presented between these free and equal individuals should be treated on their own merits, according to the reason supporting them and laid out in argument, rather than on the basis of the social status or intellectual reputation of those participating.

If there is a context in which something approaching these ideal conditions are met and reasoned debate ensues then, as previously noted, it should almost inevitably reach a consensual conclusion. This process of reaching consensual agreement on moral values and the potential actions that might flow from them through transparent, reasoned dialogue – with self-interest and external contextual factors that might introduce bias temporarily 'bracketed' – which is at the heart of Habermas' notion of the post-Enlightenment public sphere, but also his understanding more generally of the operation of reason and morality in human societies, he calls "communicative action": "I call interactions *communicative* when the participants coordinate their plans of action consensually, with the agreement reached at any point being evaluated in terms of the intersubjective recognition of validity claims" (1990, p.58). Rather than being a medium that tends to distort the search for 'truth', it is only through language and interpersonal communication, and the reasoned argument that Habermas believes underpins communicative action, that this truth can be proposed, rationally tested and through which it establishes itself as something approaching an objective norm. Communication is then the means for recognising validity claims about the world (rational truth claims or moral claims) and the "plans of action" connected to those claims. It achieves that through a tendency within the rational communicative process towards reaffirming consensual 'objective' norms and working towards establishing new norms or "repairing a disrupted consensus" (Ibid, p.67) where there is temporary disagreement.

A key point to emphasise here is that for communicative action to function, for truth claims, including ethical claims, to be validated and for norms to be established that have an objective status (i.e. are more than the insubstantial and unsubstantiated whims of an individual's mind musing on rational abstractions), and for the public sphere to function as it should, there needs to be "*practical* discourse" [my emphasis] between people. In other words, it is not the *theoretical* concept of a dialectical dialogue but the *actual,* social process of argumentation played out in conditions that approximate the ideal ones that Habermas argues for, that results in consensual norms and plans for action being established. Habermas makes this clear as he lays out the key principle in his concept of "discourse ethics", an understanding of ethics built on the ideas of communicative action: "Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse" (Ibid, p.66).

In several ways, *The Money* appears to be a forum for exploring and testing Habermas' paradigm of the public sphere, and his concepts of communicative action and discourse ethics. Firstly, there is the ostensible notion that audience-participants have equal status. There is no formal hierarchy within the group of Players, no chairperson, no clear mechanism for the majority to impose its will on the minority beyond the force of argument. The need for unanimity effectively gives every individual Player a veto which functions to allow every person an opportunity to demand to be listened to, even if their perspective is unpopular or their oratory less compelling than others. Everyone in this performance has the right on paper (implicit in that requirement for unanimity written into the rules of the show-game) to speak and to be heard in a way that takes seriously what is being said, either for those listening to then offer support or to argue against the argument presented, in a bid to reach agreement. In this way, difficult truths (or indeed difficult falsehoods), arguments that sit outside what could be conceived as the received wisdom of the group, beyond what might be the "tutelage" of conventional opinion, can be voiced and must be given attention. Honnor describes the political paradigm being presented in *The Money* as an "isocracy" (Burger and Schütz, 2018, p.215) – one in which all citizens have equal power, in which all have the same rights to contribute and are not excluded from doing so or privileged by

prescribed hierarchies – and there is a clear overlap between this notion and Habermas' version of the ideal public sphere.

*The Money* also presents a public sphere in which, in line with communicative action, the search for consensus on the right course of action is the motivating principle. This assumes that, by dint of the game design, consensus will not be immediately present – there will be different views on what should be done with the money. Honnor expresses it in these terms: "It's a space that can hold divergent thinking, but also prioritise convergent thinking as well, [it] actually allows people to find what they do agree on rather than assuming people won't" (2023). Adopting Habermas' formulation, a "disrupted consensus" in need of "repair" is the starting position for the conversation between audience-participants. Players are looking, through the backwards and forwards of discourse over the hour of the show-game, to find a form of language that everyone can buy into, that represents this consensus, this "convergent thinking", that "expresses a common will" as Habermas (1990, p.67) describes the normal, ongoing process of reaching agreement through language. *The Money,* in its stripping away of props, set and, in the main, performers, from the performance environment, asks audience-participants to notice that the only tools they have to land on this "common will", to establish this 'convergence', is 'expression' – language and conversation. Audience-participants are asked to use reason, argument, appealing to moral norms, to build a discursive framework within which expression of a common will might be crafted and unanimity achieved.

So, this is a public sphere in which discourse is clearly foregrounded as the material for interpersonal relations, and moral or political action can only flow from the agreement that is possible through that discourse. It is also a sphere in which there is an awareness that, to achieve that desired agreement through discourse, one of the key currencies is the 'good reason'. In other words, that a proposed course of action – whether presented as having a moral, political, ludic or artistic flavour – is backed up by rational argument, or at least there is an indication that the audience-participant proposing that idea could back it up in this way. For Habermas, as suggested, an instinct towards reason is part of human beings' "intuitive grasp of what argumentation is" (Ibid, p.92). When it comes to moral argumentation, he believes that

part of what gives morality its cognitivist anchoring is that rationality, good reasons, lie behind it: “To say that I *ought* to do something means that I have *good reasons* for doing it” (Ibid, p.49). These good reasons can be articulated explicitly through discourse, or, more often perhaps, interlocutors engaged in the process of communicative action anticipate that these reasons *could be* articulated if required – that moral claims are “discursively redeemable” (Ibid, p.58). Habermas talks about how in communicative action one actor “seeks to rationally motivate another by relying on the illocutionary binding/bonding effect (*bindungseffekt*) of the offer contained in his speech act.” In other words, it is the explicit but also implicit offer of good reasons that is contained in the language, the “speech acts”, through which a point of principle or proposal for action is advanced, that motivates the listener to attach themselves to the argument put forward and propels them ultimately towards the establishment of a common will, a consensus. This bindungseffekt, for Habermas, is a key feature of the way that human societies communicate, reach agreement and maintain their general cohesion.

In *The Money*, audience-participants are operating in a public sphere in which something like the “illocutionary bindungseffeckt” is revealed as an important dynamic. Players make arguments for why a particular course of action, a specific way of using the money, is a good one, or the best idea of those that have been proposed, or they argue that it is a fair compromise between others that might have support. The offer of good reasons through argument, or the impression that any proposal for a particular way of using the money can be “discursively redeemed” with good reasons if required, elicits a sense of binding to such an argument as it is vocalised and an urgent, excited desire for/experience of social bonding around it; the thrilled sense of a potential consensus emerging on the site of a good idea. These feelings are all accentuated by the pressured game-playing conditions of The Money.

As a Player in performances of *The Money*, I repeatedly experienced feelings like this. I felt a high degree of motivation towards finding a good idea; a sense of urgency to discover the best idea available in that moment, from this group; an idea that could command consensus. This motivation manifested itself as a heightened concentration on the ideas that were being advanced and an often-visceral reaction to arguments put

forward – sometimes positive, sometimes negative. I was both keen to propose my own ideas if it felt productive at a particular point in the discourse to do so, or to listen to others' and attach myself to those, vocally approving them or sometimes adding to or amending them, with the intention of making them 'better' or to add elements of a third Player's idea to create a compromise solution that might facilitate a consensus in the group. In all these experiences I felt something analogous to the bindungseffekt – bound to and bonded through these arguments; bound to the force of the good reasons in the arguments, through the illocutionary power of something that felt like rationality.

As previously stated, it is a central tenet of Habermas' theory of communicative action, discourse ethics and the rational-critical public sphere that he sees as the ideal model for deliberative democracy, that the notion of discourse that underpins each of these concepts is something that happens in *practice;* it is a process that is actualised rather than one that remains as abstract theory. The framework of *The Money,* with its emphasis on the need to reach a unanimous decision on how to spend the pot of cash, giving any individual dissenting voice significant power to disrupt the achieving of consensus and the 'successful' conclusion of the show-game, draws particular attention to the fact that a practical discourse is occurring. It locates the discourse in a particular place and time happening with a specific set of people, each with their own attitudes and idiosyncrasies. With very limited interventions from the authorial authority (represented by the performers) through the course of the discussion – there is no *deus ex machina* here to knock heads together or impose a standard solution – audience-participants are focussed on the practicalities of negotiating with the actual individuals in front of them and the arguments they present, rather an abstract or predetermined notion of them. Reaching what feels like a satisfactory conclusion means involving oneself in the "cooperative effort" (1990, p.66) that Habermas believed was key to resolving any moral problem. However well-conceived an individual's formulation of a plan for how to use the money might be, unless it moves from being something monological to being something dialogical through a practical discourse that "rationally motivates" others through its illocutionary power, then it is ineffective; it has not justified itself in terms of the norms, the agreed moral 'truths', as

they are represented by, and (re)created through, the discourse of that particular group.

One of the feelings I experienced in *The Money* was that as a group of Players we were on the hunt, through this tangible discursive process – the to and fro of proposal and counter proposal, passionate support for an idea or critique of another – for an argument that would be 'convincing'. Habermas contends that part of the bindungseffeckt that comes with the agreement that is reached through rational argument is the reflexive understanding of how you reached that conclusion. You need to engage in actual argument with others because "only it can give the participants the knowledge that they have collectively become convinced of something" (Ibid, p. 67). In *The Money,* my experience was that when you do approach the point of being collectively convinced of a course of action, whether or not you ultimately reach unanimity or not, there is an aspect of the experience in which one can feel attached to the discursive positions you have arrived at *because of* the difficult process you have been through to get to that point. The practical argument you have been through, the hunt for a discursive 'way through', has lent additional power to the arguments that as a group you have landed on. In this sense, the practical discursive process is a key determinant of the power of the discursive position arrived at; the moral, rational and emotional claim that it has on the group relies on going on this journey.

So, its emphasis on reaching consensus (presenting this as the determinant of 'success' in the game that is being played), its focus on the use of conversation to achieve agreement on a course of action, the ostensibly free and equal nature of participants (operating without any imposed hierarchy or explicit interventions from an authorial authority) and its reminder of the socially cohesive forces that can potentially be generated through the process of reasoned argument, all suggest that *The Money* has some of the architecture of the Habermas' ideal public sphere and is exploring the relational and discursive paradigm of communicative action.

**"Representative publicness": *The Money* and the 'decomposing' public sphere**

Although Honnor expresses his interest in establishing a forum in which Habermasian rational consensus might be achieved – as he puts it, where "common ground", "shared values" and "convergent thinking" (Honnor, 2023) can be found – he also recognises

how the behaviour of audience-participants, facilitated by the design of the experience, can present interesting challenges to this. Examining *The Money* through the theoretical prism of it is a model for the public sphere and as an illustrator of the practical dynamics of public discourse and decision-making, leads to an analysis now of how the Habermasian Enlightenment ideal has been complicated and critiqued by historical developments in the way the sphere operates and by alternative theories in this area. My argument here is that there are elements of these other theories and these complexifications of Habermas' ideal public sphere, including from Habermas himself, that can usefully highlight the parallel complexities in the dynamics of *The Money* and the relational and discursive paradigms which it presents and critiques.

As noted in chapter 1, Habermas argues that in the twentieth century the public sphere, which he saw as the bedrock of deliberative democracy, had been degraded by the "don't talk back" (1992, p.170) dynamics of mass media. He sees this as a return to the principle of "representative publicness" that characterised the pre-Enlightenment public sphere: monarchs and the nobility justifying their power in a public setting, not through rational argument, but through self-display as if on stage. This is a decomposed public sphere, as Habermas sees it, where self-promotion, image, prejudice and performance – i.e. representation above reason – have (dangerously in terms of the prospects for deliberative democracy) become significant factors in establishing power and control, in engendering acquiescence.

*The Money* makes apparent that, in the public sphere it is conjuring, the power of performance in front of an audience and the subjective affects associated with this are part of the scene alongside the emphasis on reasoned argument that is characteristic of the Habermasian ideal. There are elements of explicit theatricality in the framing of the experience here that point to this. For example, at the beginning of the show, the character of a transit security guard, dressed in full protective uniform, brings the briefcase with the money into the space and another performer ostentatiously empties it on to the table. It is also notable that the Silent Witnesses are established as an audience looking on at the Players 'on stage' at the centre. There is of course a double meaning in the use of the term "Players" – we are playing a game, but we also might imagine ourselves as players in a theatrical troupe. Although reasoned debate and the

search for consensus is encouraged and provides momentum for the experience, the dynamics of *performance* are highlighted and have an effect.

My experience of *The Money* was that, alongside feeling drawn to reasoned debate, the *bindungseffeckt* of the good argument, there were inevitably other factors that influenced where I positioned myself in the conversations that took place. I felt the ebb and flow of sympathy and support for different interlocutors, sometimes based on the emotional power of the story told or the passion displayed in the argument made. I listened to personal stories of people who needed the money to buy something practical for themselves or loved ones. I remember a student who needed help with their living costs and someone else whose washing machine had broken and was struggling to find the money to replace it. In one performance I attended there was someone who made myself and others cry when arguing that the funds should go towards someone they knew who had a terminal illness but was looking to try an experimental treatment overseas. There were also more general appeals for a cause – for example, to distribute the money to local homeless people or to give the money to an organisation that gave out micro loans to small businesses in poorer areas of Africa. Then there were arguments made for less obviously altruistic ways of using the money. For example, people suggested that we should use the money for us all to go to the pub after the show or to have a party.

Arguments for each of these courses of action were usually framed on some level in moral/rational terms. For example, arguments were made based on establishing a hierarchy of needs amongst those ideas proposed or arguing in favour of a course of action based on the principle of proximity – helping a particular person or cause because of a closeness to the experience of those in the room (e.g., to help one of the Players or a family member in need). When it came to rationalising ideas to spend the money in less clearly altruistic ways – on entertaining ourselves (the pub, the party etc.) or even doing something which had an artistic bent (there was a suggestion in a performance I was at to replicate K Foundation's famous money-burning artwork) – arguments sometimes involved pointing out the hypocrisy in appeals to altruism being made in the context of the performance and then the less selfless actions audience-participants might adopt in relation to how they chose to spend their own money in

their everyday lives. It was argued that it was rational and in line with normative moral codes exemplified in real-world contexts for the money to be spent on something that had a ludic or creative character; something that gave the people in the room pleasure rather than was focussed on generosity towards others. Notwithstanding these rational/moral framings, the power of an argument presented in *The Money*, its purchase on other Players and the wider audience of Silent Witnesses, rests also on how and by whom it is performed and how that performance is received by others in the audience. Honnor points to the sense of performativity that surrounds the dynamics of discourse in *The Money*; the sense, for both Players and Silent Witnesses, of watching/participating in a piece of theatre that has an affective dramaturgical structure despite, or *because of* (given the performance of authenticity has significant currency in the current cultural moment), the fact that it is unscripted and the protagonists are "real people" rather than professional performers: "Extraordinary events happen and turns happen and emotions rise and fall. You couldn't write a script for it. And it's impossible to believe that it's entirely just real people having a conversation because it's so extraordinary" (2023).

In referring to the "decomposition" of the public sphere in the twentieth century and return to a culture of power being exercised through representative publicness, Habermas says: "The public sphere becomes the court *before* whose public prestige can be displayed – rather than *in* which public critical debate is carried on" (1992, p.201). *The Money,* in its set up as a debate that is a show and a game, emphasises this sense of the business of communicative action in the context of the contemporary public sphere – speaking and listening to strangers, trying to reach agreement on a course of action, discussing morality and conducting politics – being in significant part about performing or displaying one's self and one's argument *before* an audience (a "court") rather than being able to bracket the contingencies of performance, including its affective qualities or "manipulations", in favour of purely rational debate with others *in* public. As well as making a good argument, *The Money* highlights the importance of playing a good game and putting on a good show in this paradigm of the public sphere.

**Speech, action and plurality in the "space of appearance": *The Money* and Arendt's public realm**

From one perspective, this might represent the degradation of the public sphere that Habermas thought characterised contemporary Western culture – the move away from a commitment to rationality, the increasing disregard for objective fact and the transition in public debate towards an emphasis instead on power won through personality, display and manipulation. However, alternatively, there are those that argue there are certain non-rational characteristics that are implicit, necessary and positive aspects of the public sphere and the democratic process. From a performance studies perspective, David Wiles argues in his recent book *Democracy, Theatre and Performance*: "democracy always was and always will be an art of performance," and the corollary of that, in the democratic public sphere "reason can never be unhitched from emotion" (2024, p.2). Similarly, Fisher, looking at the relationship between theatre and politics, says: "historically both have employed performance as a means of staging or procuring certain rhetorical effects, seeking either to influence or to sway those publics in one way or another by directing the passionate attachments of their respective audiences, thus changing the existing affective relations between individuals and the wider world" (2017a, p.7).

Arendt's theories on the "public realm" are relevant here and offer further insight into the public, discursive environment created in *The Money*. Arendt's view is that it is an essential aspect of human natality that we should be inclined towards collective action in the public realm, an environment marked by both an aspiration towards "earthly immortality" and recognition of the plurality inherent in being human (1998). Arendt argues that there is a paradigm of interpersonal relations and communication (i.e. politics) that flows from these things and that characterises the ideal public realm. Referencing the Greek model she says: "the public realm itself, the polis, was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that was the best of all" (Ibid, p.41). The public realm, based on the polis, is a place of excellence in which individuals are looking to "distinguish" themselves through action, but also, importantly, speech. For Arendt action and speech are symbiotic. She sees speech as

the way in which action can be given meaning. Speech can "materialise and memorialise" (Ibid, p.204) the "new things" that action can create, and through which a "relative permanence" can be created for human beings and their efforts. Arendt says action "becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do" (Ibid, p.179). It is in the act of speech that the desire of the individual and the group to have a legacy, to be remembered for the action one has performed, can be realised.

It is an important aspect of Arendt's public realm that, when in it, people properly "appear" to each other; they are "being seen and heard by others." Here people have stepped out of the darkness of the private realm (in a literal sense – a space which is less visible, hidden from the public gaze in the domestic environment and in which the business of human life is focussed on a deeper and 'darker' set of interiors, those of our bodies and their processes). They have moved out of this private realm – in which their actions and speech have limited effect and meaning, and where a subjective relationship with people, ideas and things holds sway – into the public realm, onto a much bigger stage on which they can be observed, can be heard, can be understood and can have an influence on the "common world" (the world we share that exists beyond the private and the subjective and that stands to last longer than those things):

> To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an 'objective' relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself. (Ibid, p.58)

Arendt calls the antithesis of this private realm, a space where human beings can be fully visible and can relate to and affect the common world, the "space of appearance". She says, "action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm" (Ibid, p.180). Whilst Arendt leaves

space for rationality and argues clearly for the importance of facts[13] to the construction of any political discourse, she also emphasises that the public realm is a place to be seen and heard in "shining brightness"; a place for opinion, for "passionate attachments" as Fisher calls them, for struggle, and for the visceral pleasure, the "glory", that comes with acting and speaking with others, in front of an audience, when all are motivated by an aspiration towards creating something new that aspires to have a lasting meaning. Arendt writes about the pleasure of practising politics this way in the public realm:

> the joy and the gratification that arise out of being in company with our peers, out of acting together and appearing in public, out of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed, thus acquiring and sustaining our personal identity and beginning something entirely new. (2006 p.259)

Arendt, attached as she is to the model of the Greek polis, makes clear that it is a transferable concept for her: "The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action" (1998, p.199). I will propose here that in a sense *The Money* establishes, on a temporary basis, a "polis", a "space of appearance", where people need to speak and act together and where the qualities that Arendt associates with appearance in the public realm have a material effect on how the event is experienced by audience-participants.

As previously examined, the structure of *The Money*, based around the central conceit of the show-game in which Players must reach a unanimous decision, helps organise the dynamics of the experience around the Habermasian ideal of consensus-building. As also noted, one of the consequences of each Player having a veto is that attention is drawn to the specificity of each individual in the room and their opinions. Another way of putting this is that it highlights the *plurality* of identities and opinions within each

[13] Arendt writes: "Facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other; they belong to the same realm. Facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth. Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute" (2006, p.234).

temporarily assembled group of strangers. As an audience-participant, on each occasion I experienced *The Money,* through the complexities of trying to reach agreement between all of those that were in that small group of people – despite each appearing, like audiences for much arts activity, demographically relatively homogenous – something akin to what Arendt calls "the human condition of plurality" (Ibid, p.7) presented itself; the sense that plurality is unavoidable in any situation where human beings are together.

Political life, for Arendt, is the negotiation, through speech and action, of this plurality. It is a repeated pattern in *The Money* that this plurality emerges (surprising me, despite prior experiences, each time it does so), and the need to use speech and action, to engage in political life to negotiate a way through, is thus set in motion. The veto that each Player has is one of the key devices that allows this plurality to be foregrounded, but it is also encouraged by the fact that Silent Witnesses can buy-in. A consensus, or something approaching one, might have been reached amongst the Players but then, as happened when I experienced the show, a Silent Witness buys-in and volunteers a new opinion, disrupting that consensus or seeking to establish a consensus around something new. Each of these devices, the veto and the buy-in, is a temptation to audience-participants to contribute and a mechanism through which they can do so; an encouragement for the multiple opinions in the room to be voiced. The time given and the lack of authorial intervention during the hour-long discussion also play a role in helping to foreground this condition of human plurality. This is not a rushed or overly prescribed discussion. This means that there is time for a range of ideas and opinions to emerge before the urgency to reach consensus takes over. Should an early consensus emerge there is also enough time for the inherent plurality within the group to leak out, leading to alternatives to the consensual position being voiced. Those dissensual articulations, which often carry a marked dramatic value, then function to further highlight the pluralistic, democratic potential in those assembled. As Fisher says, in his explication of how "dissensual speech" can operate in a performative fashion within the "general doxa" (the established system of beliefs and norms): "the performative utterance of a dissensus, has a specific effect – to stage the democratic

appearance of the people by opening up the antagonistic space of democratic politics within a given doxic formation" (2017b, p.199).

The character of the conversations that tend to emerge in *The Money* reflects the spirit of Arendt's polis and is another factor helping elicit demonstrations of plurality in the audience-participant group. In my experience, these discussions ultimately revolved around morality, politics, shared values and what actions might represent and be justified by these discourses. This is discourse that is about more than fulfilling the physical needs and subjective whims that define Arendt's private realm. Instead, the discourse in *The Money* carries a notion of ethical or intellectual transcendence – a sense of wanting to speak of public 'truths'; things that can be said to be true beyond the here and now of an individual's personal interests and desires, that might have longer-lasting and more universal significance. For Arendt, the entry into this kind of space of speech and action in which the focus is on doing or saying something that might transcend one's own mortality is a feature of a properly operating polis: "Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible" (1998, p.55). In *The Money*, this pursuit of "potential earthly immortality" – or more prosaically described perhaps as having conversations and making decisions about significant matters of public interest; what Dan Barnard from Fast Familiar calls "big talk" (Barnard and Briscoe, 2023) – inevitably brings the "human condition of plurality" to the surface. These are, by definition, things that people care about, they are essentials to Arendt's "human condition" (1998) and audience-participants can find themselves, as I did, "permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit" as they discursively struggle over them. What is at stake ultimately are the notions of transcendence and immortality that come with speaking and acting in public. In this sense then, from an Arendtian perspective, this is a matter of life and death which provides significant motivation for people to express their opinions on the matters being discussed; an incentive for the plurality inherent in any group to manifest itself.

With this facilitation and highlighting of the "human condition of plurality", the "agonal spirit" that colours the dynamics of the conversation, and the tendency of the discourse to move towards transcendent themes, *The Money* stages the framing

principle of Arendt's paradigm of the public realm: it is "the space of appearance". It is a space for Arendt where, in contrast with Habermas' idealised public sphere, the *performance* of acting and speaking in public is celebrated; the "joy", "gratification" and "glory" of this publicness. She acknowledges that the activities of acting and speaking have a performative quality. They can justify themselves without solely needing to refer to pre-existing meta-narratives – i.e. reason. In other words, speech and action in themselves can have a persuasive quality. In this she leaves space for opinion, rhetoric and storytelling as key ingredients in creating the "human artifice" (Arendt, 1998) that establishes a framework of meaningfulness within which human beings exist and understand their contribution to the world.

In all my experiences of *The Money*, I had strong sensations that I can connect with Arendt's description of the joy and gratification that comes with having conversations with people in public, in the space of appearance. These feelings emerged, for me, from the mix of reasoned debate, passion and personal narrative that featured in the discourse, and also from affects that I associate with performance – aesthetic pleasures that come from the language and the physical gestures used, the rhythms and timbre of voices speaking and arguing, and the nexus of excitement/tension/suspense that comes with watching or participating in theatrical performance.

Further to this, as an audience-participant I was aware of that side of myself that was concerned about the public, political and ethical world being made visible, exercised and accorded significance. There was a sense of emerging from the private concerns and private performance of much of my life into a space of appearance in which the future of our "common world", this "human artifice", is at stake and I, and the others with me, were fulfilling a fundamental human imperative to *perform*, through speaking and acting, our profound interest in this world and to have that (and, in so doing, ourselves) recognised on this public stage. Arendt says that if one only lives a private life, one is "deprived of things essential to human life". In *The Money,* a stage is created for this "essential" need – to discuss matters of public concern in public; to practise what Wiles calls "the art of talking to persuade in the heat of the moment" (2024, p.12) which is at the heart of the democratic process – to be fulfilled, and for the performative dynamics and desires implicit in this need, the calling towards the

potential "glory" of speaking and acting, to be revealed and reflected upon as part of a positive paradigm for social relations and interpersonal discourse in the public realm.

**Having conversations and reaching decisions in an "undecidable terrain": *The Money* and Mouffe**

Whilst Arendt stresses the power of performance, of passion and agonism within the "space of appearance" which is public political discourse, she does not see these things as contrary to the pursuit of reason-based consensus as Habermas suggests they might be. These qualities are presented by Arendt primarily as catalysts enabling the best opinions – the truest, most reasonable, arguments – to come to the surface. The agonism that Arendt sees as a feature of her public realm is the temporary struggle between different opinions and interests that ultimately results in the "best of all", a settled "representative" (2006, p.237) conclusion being arrived at. In this sense, her version of agonism and her understanding of the non-rational aesthetics of discourse add nuance to, but do not disrupt, the fundamental rational, consensual Habermasian model of communicative action.

As referenced in chapter 1, Mouffe recognises this overlap between Habermas and Arendt's view of public political discourse. As she says, "Arendt ends up, like Habermas, envisaging the public space as a space where consensus can be reached" (2013, p.10). Whereas for Mouffe, because of "the ineradicability of antagonism" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001), a total, uninterrupted consensus is not possible, nor is it desirable. It is not possible because antagonism will always be there providing an alternative to any consensual articulation. It is not desirable because antagonism arises out of there being things (e.g., identities, ideas, signs) beyond the scope of any consensus that cannot be integrated into that consensual articulatory system. Without those things that exist outside that system it cannot sustain itself because it needs to exist in relation to that which it is not. Antagonism is therefore fundamental to the system of political articulation and the operation of genuine democracy; antagonism is a manifestation of the fact that in the contingent field of human relations there are always alternative ways of doing things and other ways of articulating a world view: "without conflict and division, a pluralist democratic politics would be impossible" (Ibid, p.xvii). Acknowledging the ineradicability of antagonism is thus central to the

embracing of democracy, and the purpose of politics is not to deny this antagonism in pursuit of a mythical final consensus, but to find radically pluralistic, agonistic forms and institutional structures for its expression.

Mouffe's critique of Arendt is that, like Habermas, Arendt thinks of pluralism as "inscribed in the horizon of intersubjective agreement" (2013, p.10). Arendt, from Mouffe's perspective, founds her notion of pluralism on the idea that people are "multiple", whereas Mouffe sees them as "divided" (Ibid, p.15). This foregrounding of division and disagreement is relevant when thinking about *The Money.* As already established, reaching agreement in the show can be difficult. Although there is an imperative towards establishing some sort of consensus to successfully complete the game, this happens in the context of it being a temporary and provisional agreement; that the possibility of disagreement, division and failure in the game, even when what feels like agreement on a course of action has been reached, is only a buy-in of a Silent Witness or one change of mind of a Player away. One of the fundamental Mouffean concepts here is that all politics, all human agreement on action, happens on a field of contingency and it is only through articulation that political agreement and hegemony can be constituted. None of these articulations, even the most dominant hegemony, can offer finality, fixity or closure – the ideologies, identities and formulations of the social that they propose are always, ultimately, "unsutured" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). These articulations happen in an "undecidable terrain" and a decision between people, in a social context, is always exclusive. There are always alternatives to what is decided that need to be excluded for this temporary, contingent agreement to be articulated. There is always leakage from the interior of this contingent, hegemonic system to the exterior and vice versa, enabling the process of political discourse to proceed by reminding interlocutors of the unfixity and constantly negotiable quality of all socio-political positions.

*The Money* locates the search of audience-participants for consensus against this backdrop of contingency and provisionality. As previously discussed, it encourages heightened awareness of the plurality of opinions on what might happen with the money. There is always the sense that there are alternatives available and things would turn out differently on another occasion. The attempt to establish consensus in each

performance is timed. If achieved, it is by definition a temporary one, governed by the imperatives and contingencies of that moment. The game-like format of *The Money* suggests a resonance with Wittgenstein's notion of "language games". Mouffe (1999) references late Wittgenstein in her critique of Habermas and Arendt, agreeing with him that when agreement happens it is not truth that is being expressed but expression of a "form of life"; a provisional consensus achieved through language which emerges from the contingent cultural and social forms of that historical moment. *The Money* is a show that is a game and it uses language which is also a game. Both this show and language generally, like any games, establish their own internal rules and measures which have this fundamentally contingent quality. When I was playing *The Money* – in the urgency of the game-playing, the emotional significance attached to succeeding and failing – I was conscious of how the operation of those contingent rules was having a physical effect on me (the adrenalin, the raised heartrate etc.). I was also aware of how those feelings could be undone by an awareness of this contingency. It is 'only a game' after all; the imperatives that it generates, and the emotions that attend that, are all contingent on the game, in the same way that the language used, the arguments made and any consensus arrived at, are all relative to the context in which they are employed. They do not have the absolutist status of logic or reason. Instead, this is "a logic of articulation and contingency" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p.85).

*The Money,* in its emphasis on both the performativity and game-like qualities of public discourse and practical politics, draws attention to this logic. It highlights the necessity of articulation – the expression of persuasive arguments, performing one's case in front of an audience using conversation – for anything to be achieved. Articulation is the only 'equipment' the Players have in the game they are playing, and this throws into further relief the contingency, the fundamental 'up-for-grabs-ness', of what should be done with the money on the table in the middle of the space. What should be done in each performance of *The Money*, the practical ideas and moral imperatives generated, are subject to the contingencies of that performance, dependent on how the discourse proceeds, who is participating, and the performance of the arguments made over that hour.

This Mouffean logic of articulation and contingency is further compounded by having money, cash, as the object on which the conversation is focussed. It is there as a physical thing – notes and coins emptied onto the table at the beginning of each performance; an amount that is specific to each performance and is usually counted by an audience-participant at the start. It is *the* money, the definite article, so the audience-participants – through the show's title and in the physical presence of the specific sum – are asked to think of it as something tangible, not simply an abstract concept. Something needs to be done with these objects (the cash) at the end of the performance – the conversation that the group in that room has will determine what the future destination of that money will be. In this sense it is something definite, something decided, a physical fact that cannot be denied and has status beyond this specific context, but also something that speaks of temporal contingency in the specificity of its amount and the form that it takes in that moment (the number and denomination of notes and coins for each performance). At the same time as having a concrete physical presence it has an abstract, symbolic identity – it is a cultural signifier within an economic system where its meaning comes not from its use value but its exchange value. Its value in this sense is contingent on widespread social agreement, on a hegemony, which, like any hegemonic construct, as Mouffe would see it, is established through articulation – through language and discourse, culture and performance. Money is in this way a representative of how deep, consensual agreement is founded on articulation and re-articulation, it has value in the fact that others agree to give it value; its meaning and worth has cultural foundations rather than, ultimately, having any unconditional use value.

Seen from a Mouffean perspective, money is a powerful signifier of the idea that the background to all politics and political discourse, is one of contingency rather than necessity, that it "requires making decisions in an undecidable terrain" (Mouffe, 2013, p.17), a terrain where what *is* could always be *otherwise*. In practice, in *The Money,* this means that the money is always suggesting that it could be something else. Through the specificity of its physical presence, it is announcing that it might be a different amount, and on another night it will be. It is only here in this form, in this amount, for this performance. It leans into what Alan Read (2008) sees as one of the central

features of the event of live performance – its "singularity". Alongside this, in its abstract contingency, the money is a profoundly open signifier, representing, even within the limitations of the relatively small amounts that tend to be involved in these performances, a huge variety of possibilities for action. It can be a washing machine for a poor student, it can be food for a homeless person, it can be a boat on a canal,[14] or a meal out for the Players. Money, like Mouffe's paradigm of social relations, where the articulatory game of establishing meaning and identities through an antagonistic political process happens, is "overdetermined." It is always open to fresh articulations of what it might be; it resists being fixed.

This, of course, is the nub of what drives the complicated dramaturgical dynamics of *The Money.* There is no right answer here, there is no indisputable moral or rational template for deciding how to spend the money. Making a decision, reaching unanimity, on some level, relies on limiting the possibilities, sometimes excluding things without good reason, projecting a sense of discursive closure against the reality of a final suturing in the social and discursive field being impossible. Therefore, in *The Money* the dictum that "all discourse of fixation becomes metaphorical" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p.111) becomes part of the dramaturgy of the show-game. To reach agreement, Players need to articulate arguments with the force of necessity, presenting an idea as being clearly 'right' or 'true' or 'the best'. There needs to be the performance of conviction and imperative, but the openness represented by the money, along with the other show-game structures and devices previously referred to, are reminders that these performances of conversational confidence have a metaphorical status, they are part of the game-playing. In *The Money,* "convergent thinking" and articulating the consensual, which is the name of the game, always happens against a backdrop of the "divergent"; undecidability is the terrain for any decision and remains ever-present. A decision can only happen when the Players recognise that in order to agree, at a certain point, they need to exclude the divergent; they need to hold back the tendency to speak of something different, to come up with a new idea or critique one that

[14] This refers to one performance of *The Money* in Groningen in which agreement was reached to buy a boat on the city's canal (Honnor, 2023).

otherwise has wide-spread agreement. They need to recognise on some level that reaching agreement is a discursive contrivance that demands both speakers and audience make an active decision to 'buy in' to this particular 'performance', this particular argument for this idea on how to use the money at this particular time, knowing that there are always other performances, other forms of articulation, out there. Continuing with the framing of conversation of this kind as a form of performance, which *The Money* encourages, another way to look at it is as a form of suspension of disbelief. To reach agreement, for a temporary period, Players need to invest emotionally and intellectually in the expression of a discursive idea despite there being plenty of evidence to support contrary claims. It is only by actively excluding those claims and privileging the claim of the one idea, suspending disbelief in the chosen performance, that a decision can be reached.

Unlike Habermas and Arendt, Mouffe does not conceive of public, political discourse as happening on relatively neutral terrain. Both the former have a notion of the ideal discursive participants entering the public sphere/realm and shedding much of the baggage of the private/social to conduct this reason-based discourse as free, equal and relatively disinterested individuals. Participants within this paradigm are able, to a significant extent, bracket their conditioning and the power dynamics of the social sphere to reach a conclusion which is based around a depersonalised consensus which has an objective status. Mouffe, in the same way that she considers antagonism and division to be an ineradicable aspect of human relations, sees that the uneven power dynamics that flow from the articulatory battles to establish hegemonic authority within the field of social relations, cannot be bracketed when conversations about politics and attempts to make decisions in the public sphere happen. The ground of any conversation is not neutral and is always marked by the power plays of previous articulations. Indeed, recognising that power is ever present and language and interpersonal communication can never be free of the agonistic process of contesting meaning and identity is the basis of radical democratic politics. It is a recognition that all power comes from the articulatory process and that all articulation is some sort of expression of power. Neither can be pure, natural and objective and therefore there is

always space for any conclusion reached or any assumption made through the intersection of power and discourse to be questioned and articulated differently.

Mouffe uses Wittgenstein's critique of his own early work and the logical positivist thinking that emerged around it, to critique the Habermasian ideal of the frictionless rational-critical discursive space, in which language can move beyond bias, prejudice and social context, where participants can engage as genuinely free and equal truth seekers: "We have got on the slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground" (Wittgenstein, 1958 cited in Mouffe, 1999). In *The Money,* there is a pervasive sense that audience-participants are on "rough ground" having to engage in practical discourse to negotiate their way through the contingencies of this group of people, the variety of ideas proposed by it and the social context that impinges on this negotiation to reach agreement. Despite Honnor's interest in establishing an isocratic system, and the "equal distribution of power" (Burger and Schütz, 2018, p.215) exemplified in the fact that everyone has a veto and has the same rights to express a point of view in terms of the rules of the show-game, this 'constitutional' equality is revealed in practice as subject to distortion by the many varied inequalities, privileges and cultural hierarchies of any social space, in the same way that constitutional equality on a wider societal/political level (e.g., in the justice system) can draw attention to the inequities that immediately come into play in practice as different people engage with it. The activity here involves public speaking and developing and critiquing arguments. Inevitably there are those with educational and social advantage/disadvantage in these areas alongside variances of personality. There are those who are confident to speak in an unplanned way to a group of strangers and to respond to challenges and those that are less so, those who have had relevant prior experience and those that have not. As Wittgenstein suggests, it is the friction thrown up by these inequalities, by the inescapably uneven social context within which communication happens, which provokes the movement of the discourse. Taking it further, Mouffe would suggest that it is the "ineradicable character" (1999, p.752) of power and antagonism that is there in any social relations, embedded in the articulations through which those relations are constructed, that leads to the agonistic

discursive process as these power relations and antagonisms are negotiated and renegotiated. For Mouffe, it is the business of walking over this rough ground of messy, uneven and overdetermined social relations – constantly negotiating and re-negotiating, articulating and re-articulating how those relations should be defined and what a provisional agreement around ideology and action might look like – that is the work of politics.

In *The Money,* audience-participants have an opportunity to practice doing politics in a performative setting, negotiating with their peers on this uneven social field, on this terrain of undecidability, with only their conversation available to attempt to chart a way through the ineradicable anti-consensual forces of antagonism towards "relative and precarious forms of fixation" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p.98), towards agreement and a decision. Mouffe (2013) stresses, particularly to the anti-institutional Left, the importance of making decisions in politics, and also the need to manage the antagonistic forces within society (utopian dreams of social harmony being unachievable) and the need to engage with the institutions where power resides to do these things. As noted, *The Money* uses conversation to offer audience-participants a dramaturgical experience that suggests a parallel with real-world institutions where decisions are debated, power exercised, and decisions made. Of course, you can reject the institutional framework that is established for the event, embodied in the set of rules that you are given and emphasised by the arrangement of the space. You can decide to opt out of being a Player and become a Silent Witness. You can even decide to leave the event altogether. Even though the rules say that there needs to be a unanimous decision, what would happen if a subgroup just decided to walk off with the money, convinced by the rightness of their cause? One critic who experienced *The Money* considered some of these possibilities: "Was I the only one who thought of trying to figure out how the enforcing structure could be broken? Screw up the agreement sheet, make some paper origami with the bank notes, gang up and walk out? Stop the clock and defy its inevitable power?" (Love and Marten, 2015). But, as suggested here, and as evidenced in my experience of the show-game, this wholesale rejection of the institutional terms that have been established for the event – framing the discourse and dictating the basis on which any decision will be considered valid –

does not happen. It could be argued that challenging the rules of the game, "stop[ping] the clock" and "screw[ing] up the agreement sheet", has a Mouffean counter-hegemonic tone – it suggests a questioning of an over-ready acceptance of received/imposed limits of the political imaginary in the public sphere; challenging the show's version of an Overton window. However, more persuasively, the Mouffean paradigm is represented in *The Money*'s encouragement to walk over the rough ground of discussing different ideas, assembling coalitions, using conversation and argument to create precarious consensus, in order to decide on an action that will have impact in the world, and doing all of this within the imposed institutional conditions which force participants to confront the contradictions, inconsistencies and antagonisms supressed in any agreement; an institutional framework that encourages articulation of both the convergent and the divergent. *The Money* encourages audience-participants to practice politics in this way, trying to make (the best) decision in that moment within the given parameters and constraints, knowing it will always be imperfect, and, in so doing, asks them to reflect on the position of those in overtly political positions making decisions about how to spend (our) money and the impure, compromised, precarious game that comes with having power and having to make decisions that can never be perfect.

**Rehearsing democracy, negotiating the "inconvenience" of other people**

As demonstrated, the public sphere that *The Money* creates in microcosm – the paradigm of social relations and interpersonal discourse that it suggests – has some of the qualities of Habermas', Arendt's and Mouffe's. Indeed, it establishes a dialogue within it (reflected in this chapter I hope) between their contrasting but imbricated notions of social relations, public discourse and politics. It conjures the aspiration towards communicative action – reaching consensus on a course of action based on reason – that Habermas prioritises; the performative power of appearing in public and deep-seated need to do so that Arendt foregrounds; and the emphasis on division, conflict and the precariousness underlying any agreement that Mouffe proposes. But, in the final analysis, what all three have in common is the fact that the practice of interpersonal communication – argument, discourse, conversation – is key to the establishment of this space, to creating political meaning and agreeing on political action. *The Money* functions as a reminder of the importance, the excitement, and the

challenges of trying to reach agreement with others in a public forum, through conversation, on a course of action. It suggests that politics and political discourse should be an enterprise which involves *actual* engagement with people, their identities and ideas, in their concrete, complex specificity, and that inevitably it will involve having to compromise, make impossible choices and accept imperfect solutions. It presents a paradigm in which negotiating through this compromise and imperfection – using conversation to reveal these complexities and contradictions and then to reach a decision – can be experienced as a positive feature of having power in a democratic political context. This is the 'glorious' impurity that comes with democratic conversation rather than the stultifying purity of autocratic proclamation.

The messiness of this discursive process, its non-ideal quality, its acknowledgment of the practical realities of the other people with whom one is negotiating rather than an abstract idea of 'the people', comes with its frustrations. Jackson (2011) writes about the social turn being the latest move in an ever-present dialogue between an emphasis on autonomy or heteronomy within artworks and in the critical culture surrounding them, or, as she puts it, between "avowing" or "disavowing" the "support" surrounding the production and reception of an artwork on which it depends. She argues that performance is a medium which, as part of its inherent quality, because of this support from others on which it so obviously relies, is always particularly marked by how it avows or disavows this dependency, how it responds to these frustrations, or "inconveniences" as she calls them: "Performance promises to accommodate within limits collaborating groups of people who do not always know each other and commits to being inconvenienced by the claims that they bring" (Ibid, p.42).

Performance/theatre, in its various forms, is always negotiating its way through these "claims of inconvenience" from other groups of people (artistic collaborators, venue staff, audience, funders etc.). Inconvenience is the "price paid for being supported". In this sense performance/theatre is inevitably dialogical rather than monological, but the move towards "social practice" foregrounds this, it avows this to a greater extent and makes an artistic virtue out of "paying this price". It commits "to make art from, not despite, contingency" (Ibid, p.28).

My argument here is that the use of audience-participant conversation within this dramaturgical context is an explicit act of avowing the support, the dialogue, on which performance (including these specific performances) relies, but also, as demonstrated across this chapter, on which any iteration of the democratic public sphere (and indeed one might say, all human activity) is dependent. It is an embracing of the rough ground and the inconvenience of speaking and acting with other people; an embracing of co-existence. And, as referred to at the beginning of this chapter, this happens on sites (in arts centres and theatres like BAC) and/or with artists with connections to the black box, modernist tradition. In this turn towards inconvenience in the form of audience-participants having conversations with each other about moral/political issues – towards an avowal of the "friction", or in other words used by Jackson the "fettering" and "encumbrance," that she sees represented in the claims of other people and that is implicit in the materiality of live performance – this practice is rejecting some of its modernist heritage of disavowal. It brings the "unruliness" (Kershaw, 2001) of the public sphere – in inconvenient, material form through the bodies and voices of the audience-participants – into the realm of the 'reclusive' performance space. It uses audience-participant conversation to avow a dramaturgy built on the rough ground of this inconvenience, on plurality, provisionality and precariousness; a dramaturgy grounded in complex social relations with actual human beings; a dramaturgy of *publicness*, in which a satisfactory denouement (in the theatre space as in life) is not guaranteed. At the same time, as demonstrated in this chapter, the framing of the performance event around conversation, argument and debate in this practice emphasises the performative, contingent quality of the articulatory act, its function as the constituent of socio-political relations, of publicness, and the unavoidable performative aspects of the democratic process.

*The Money,* and other performances of which it is an exemplar, in their presentation of iterations of the public sphere within the frame of performance, make an avowal of friction, encumbrance and inconvenience – i.e. people and the social – part of their aesthetics and a central aspect of the experience (including the challenge) for audience-participants. They do so against a background of discursive polarisation in many political contexts and the idealised identities and political positioning that can

attend that, offering audience-participants a (nostalgic perhaps) taster of the pleasure and nobility of negotiating an imperfect agreement between complicated, contradictory and flawed human beings. Boal writes about the process of "spect-actors" in his theatre being encouraged to voice their opinions and have conversations around political issues, not being revolutionary but "a rehearsal for the revolution" (2008, p.98). In an analogous way, the use of audience-participant conversation in the dramaturgical context highlighted in this chapter functions as a means through which to *rehearse* ways in which people might be able to communicate and reach agreement across difference in the wider public sphere; a rehearsal of the opportunities and challenges of democratic debate and governance in a world in which it can appear under threat. As Boal also says, "dialogue is democracy" (Ibid, p.xvi) and the turn towards the use of political/ethical conversation between audience-participants as a device can be seen as a response on some level to the rise of the monological, the autocratic, the intolerant and the anti-democratic as characteristics of public discourse and political culture in the UK and other countries. Recognising this context for their work in this area, Briscoe, from Fast Familiar, talks about offering audience-participants the chance of "rehearsing" the business of establishing social relations and conducting inter-personal communication against this backdrop of division and polarisation: "It's not about everyone having to be the same. It's about being able to have a conversation" (Barnard and Briscoe, 2023). The interest in conversations happening across difference and division, and performance-makers facilitating this within their artworks, establishing fora where people can practise "holding differences" (Stevens, 2023) – where paradigmatic versions of the public sphere can be explored – points to the increasing centrality of democracy, the future of democratic institutions and democratic culture, as a theme and area of serious concern for companies such as Kaleider, Coney and Fast Familiar. Briscoe, echoing Boal, provides a succinct summary: "it's when we stop talking that democracy dies and the bad guys win" (Barnard and Briscoe, 2023).

## Chapter 3. Staging Intimacy: connecting through conversation

### 'Life-changing' conversations

I begin this chapter with some personal reflections on the last show that Adrian Howells performed at BAC, a few months before he took his own life – his final one-to-one piece, *Unburden: Saying the Unsaid* (2013) (hereon referred to as *Unburden*) – before then introducing the overall focus and central arguments of this chapter.

Appropriately perhaps in a chapter concerned with intimacy, I start with a description from my partner Shelley Hastings, who was Senior Producer at BAC, of *her* last encounter with Howells in *Unburden*:

> We sat very quietly and still and bathed in candlelight he gently took my hands. He […] talked about the need to acknowledge our mistakes without dwelling on them, as well as understanding when we are blameless and have done our best. He then carefully asked me to think about how I would choose to live if I had only three months left, who I would see, where I would go, what I would do. The way he expressed this was without fanfare or drama, he was just asking me very simply and directly to consider who and what really mattered. In the warmth of that room, and held by his confident gaze, we went on to have a conversation that I feel changed my life. [...] Just as the conversation is drawing to a close you share a drink with Adrian and a candle is lit and you are asked to place it in the room. It was only then that I realised that we were surrounded by candles that held the residue of the last few months of everyone who had experienced the work. The room was charged with the final wishes of everyone Adrian had encountered during the work. (Hastings and Wylie, 2016, p.255)

This description echoes my own experience of *Unburden* as an audience-participant during the same run at BAC. Hastings is right that the many candles flickering across the space in which you are sitting are revealed, towards the end of this performance, with the lighting of one's own candle, as a field of others' "final wishes" and their feelings about "who and what really mattered". But the candles are also a representation in that moment of all the other *conversations* that have happened previously, a representation of the medium and mode for expressing these wishes and

feelings; conversations that might have been as life-changing, as transformative, as the one experienced by Hastings. As the candles burn (on their way to burning out), as an audience-participant you are reminded of the temporality of life and the inevitability of the lights going out, which has been the thematic focus of this encounter of course, but you are also reminded of the temporality of the experience you have just had, the conversation you have just taken part in. These candles are markers of a particular kind of time spent with Howells, time carved out from what Hastings describes as the "frenetic, angry, demanding reality of everyday life" (Ibid, p.255). Here, at the end of this one-to-one performance is this time-based image of community; a community of people who have had (and will have) a similar temporal experience – the experience of living and dying – but also the experience of this performance, centred around a particular kind of conversation, one that represents a "suspension of normal business" (Womack, 2011, p.14); a conversation that sits in contrast with the general tenor of life's experiences and interactions, that has the hope, but also the fragility and transience, connoted by the candle flame.

This is a community of audience-participants that never meet that are united in having confessed their final wishes to Howells, but also in having all inhabited for half an hour this rarefied conversational space. There is an empathy generated here with your absent fellow conversers – for the rites of passage, the reckoning with mortality, that you have all gone through – but also an empathy with the desire that the experience reveals for this kind of space and for this kind of interaction, this kind of conversation, to be a possibility for people. At the conclusion of this one-to-one experience which has been focused on intimate, confessional, private conversation with Howells, you are, through the revealed meaning of the many lit candles that surround you, connected with the many others that have been through the same process, that have craved this kind of conversational space as perhaps you have, and you are connected with the imagined voices of others' conversations, others' prayers, others' 'unburdenings'. They, like you, have been given what feels like a rare opportunity to 'say the unsaid'.

The religious connotations are clear. The candles are suggestive of the votive displays in Catholic churches and the prayers for the health or happiness of oneself or loved ones, or the welfare of those suffering somewhere in the world, that are associated with

these. The encounter as a whole, in line with the paradigm of Catholic confession, is an intimate one-to-one exchange where things can be said that perhaps cannot be said elsewhere, where some sort of unburdening can happen through the medium of conversation, and where, through this process, the individual can somehow be better prepared for what follows – for death, for the afterlife, or just for more living. The space of the performance is separate to the world that you have come from; separate and special. The space looks beautiful with hundreds of lit candles and there is the scent of pine, suggestive of the incense of religious ceremony. You have moved beyond the restrictions and conventions of the metaphorical "city walls" and entered a kind of church. You are in a liminal space that clearly nods towards its religious/spiritual equivalents and where, as with these other spaces, different rules apply. Through this prism, Howells is the secular priest and the audience-participant is the penitent, joining a community of penitents represented by the candles, confessing their deepest desires, saying what, to coin Hastings' adverb, they "really" want and what they "really" feel, with an awareness that the wider discursive and social culture perhaps does not provide many opportunities, beyond the religious or professional therapeutic contexts from which Howells borrows, for this type of conversation and connection with another.

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There is a strand that has emerged within British intimate[15] participatory performance since the turn of the millennium – of which *Unburden* is an example – that has been centred around facilitating conversations with and between audience-participants. In this chapter, I argue that conversation has been used in this context as the vehicle for a particular set of qualities or values – conversational attributes that I will describe primarily through the theoretical prism of Buber's philosophy of dialogue – that suggest a positive paradigm for interpersonal relations and communication and that can be seen as a counterpoint to other paradigms of social interaction encouraged by the ethos of 'flexible capitalism'. I look at how the artists practising in this field create

[15]'Intimate performance' here covers the one-to-one form, but also performances involving very small groups, or where one-to-one encounters happen in the context of larger group experiences.

dramaturgical framings within which conversations based on these values might be possible, creating temporary environments where different rules apply, where these radical relational and communicative paradigms can be explored and familiar, hegemonic interpersonal paradigms can be critiqued. At the same time, towards the end of this chapter, I consider potential criticism of the generation of feelings of intimacy using conversation in this practice as somehow a form of 'pastoral' conservatism, given the common focus on framing these exchanges with an atmosphere of care and social togetherness. However, I argue that, in the context of an often alienating everyday relational and discursive environment, there is in fact a radicalism in this approach, in the advocacy through these performances of a kind of conversational pastoral intimacy.

The artists/performances that are used as case studies here are: Adrian Howells, principally his pieces *Unburden* (as already referenced) and *Salon Adrienne* (2005); Jo Fong/Sonia Hughes' *Come Rain or Shine* (2022) and *Neither Here Nor There* (2018); and Rhiannon Armstrong's *Can I Help You?* (2006). These specific performances are chosen because of my familiarity with them, because they illustrate different aspects of the dramaturgy of conversation in this context, and because they each provide a distinct insight into the conversational qualities/values referred to above.

***Come Rain or Shine* – a new stage, new roles and a different script**

I experienced Fong/Hughes' *Come Rain or Shine* in Brighton as part of a small group of audience-participants. These are my memories. We were taken on a short walk from the venue up a steep hill, ending up in a small park. On the walk we were not explicitly encouraged to talk, but everyone did. I chatted to one of the artists, Sonia. We talked about our relationship with Brighton (I grew up near there and went to sixth form college in the city) and about our families. In the playground there was an improvised speech from Fong on a theme that she told us preoccupied her at that time. On that day it was 'permission' – the idea of giving herself permission to behave in certain ways and to be the person she felt like being, resisting the pressure to withhold this preferred expression of herself in deference to the patriarchal forces in her life. We were asked to find someone in the group we had not yet talked to with whom to have a conversation. Following rules that Fong laid out about each of us having several

minutes to talk before the other could join in, we were encouraged to wander around an old netball court, listening and speaking to our partner. The conversation could take any direction, but my experience was that we took Fong's thematic provocation, permission, as a starting point. Finally, we were led back to the venue, continuing the conversation with our partners.

I cannot remember all the detail of the conversation I had, but I remember the feelings it elicited. It felt like an extra-ordinary thing to be listened to, and, more than that, to *know* that you will be listened to. There is that section of the experience, wandering around the netball court, when that responsibility of listening is made explicit – for a short period you can only listen. But even without this prescription, the fact that you have made time in your day for this event, which is focused on walking and talking with strangers, implies that you are there for that reason, that you are ready to take the activity of focused, personal conversation, including the act of listening, seriously. Knowing that your partner and you are there for this purpose, to perform the roles of honest speaker and careful listener, feels like a significant intervention into the normal expectations of social interactions. *Come Rain or Shine* engineers this intervention through creating a new set of rules for social interaction, a new behavioural code, within its dramaturgical frame – to play the game, to help the performance, we need to open up in our speaking and we need to listen carefully. The more familiar games of social interaction, especially with strangers – where we might default to our roles within pre-determined transactional frameworks based on a service being provided or use of shared public space being negotiated; the role-playing 'small talk' of everyday discourse between people; or for that matter the roles adopted on social media, in which the performance of openness, honesty, intimacy and, its corollary, careful, attentive listening are, for many, harder to achieve – are thus temporarily displaced. On this 'stage' you know that you will be given the time to perform a version of yourself, to reveal information about yourself, that is not commonly available in other places. That is what is expected here. Participants know their roles in this new dynamic. It is extra-ordinary to know that you have time, a platform, an audience of one who will listen (and to whom you will then listen), and there is structure, there are rules and new social roles, establishing the ground for this conversation to happen. Thus, the social

anxieties that can come with the everyday scenarios of interpersonal interaction listed above – e.g., worries about not being interesting, of no-one being interested, of appearing egotistical, of revealing too much – that might inhibit the level of discursive intimacy and openness that feels possible in these contexts, recede to some degree in *Come Rain or Shine*. This is a space where you are expected to perform differently and where your co-conversationalist – your single audience member; the representative of sociality and of social judgment in their listening – has a role, shaped by the context of the artwork and the expectation that they will speak and listen as instructed by that context, in how you feel able to perform *your* role as a different kind of conversationalist.

My experience of the conversation I had in *Come Rain or Shine* was that I quickly entered a space of deep reflection, adopting a register which focused on the more significant themes and movements of my life. I talked about relationships with my parents and children, and about hopes, dreams and disappointments. We were outside and we were up high, looking out over the city. The view and the environment – the weather, the sense of the cycles of nature and of the city, an awareness of the 'bigger picture' patterns of life, the "rain" and the "shine" – all contributed to that encouragement to think deeply, to reflect, to step out of the day-to-day. This physical space was imbricated with the framed temporal space with its rules and roles already described. Together they provided a 'stage' and 'playtime', set apart but in dialogue with the places and communicative paradigms of normal life.

My argument here is that much of the practice in this area involves itself with creating a liminal 'time-space', connected to the familiar, everyday world but also separate from it. Borrowing Rachel Zerihan's description of the one-to-one performance that interests her, this is "work that thrives on the possibilities offered by the slash between art/life" (2022, p.195). It uses the framing of performance – with its expectations of audience-participants entering into parallel environments which are both connected and disconnected with the world outside; places where temporary rules, roles and "affective atmospheres" (Berlant, 2011) might be established around the familiar business of human interaction – in order to create the conditions for a certain kind of conversation to happen. These are conversations that might be harder to come by in

other contexts – conversations that are particularly personal, revelatory, confessional, reflective; where feelings of heightened intimacy with others and 'self-authenticity' might be experienced and counter-hegemonic relational and communicative paradigms built on an avowal of these things might be advocated.

**I-Thou and the values of conversation**

But is there anything about conversation as a device – beyond it being recognisable from, and applicable to, everyday life, and the pragmatics of it being readily available for eliciting personal information from participants in these artworks – that lends itself to being the means through which these alternative interpersonal paradigms are proposed? I argue that the form of conversation used by these artists carries with it certain values and qualities which encourage participants into the kinds of self-narrating described above and collectively help suggest a relational and communicative alternative. I will use Buber's philosophy of dialogue as the key theoretical gateway through which to explore these conversational values and how they function dramaturgically within these performances.

As described in chapter 1, Buber (1923) sees conversation as one of the key sites for the I-Thou dynamic. For him, conversation, the direct communion of self and other in a space between each of these entities through the to and fro of speech, is a way of embracing the holistic presence of another human being and achieving something like a pure *relational* state. He contrasts this with the atomised, *experience*-based I-It dynamic in which the other is objectified and instrumentalised, reduced to a collection of generic attributes and thus not seen as a complete, complex individual entity. Buber talks about "meeting" and "sharing" being part of the essence of I-Thou. The artists making intimate conversation-based performance examined in this chapter, such as Howells and Fong/Hughes, appear to be interested in a Buber-like psycho-socio-spiritual idea of meeting and sharing with other human beings, embracing a notion of engaging, through conversation, with the full, complex individual and moving beyond the reductive, transactional I-It dynamics they perceive as prevalent in many contemporary contexts where intersubjective discourse is played out (e.g., in the commercial world, the labour market or on social media). Conversation is seen as

having the capacity to elicit, and indeed *embody* in its form as a forum to meet and share, this openness to a holistic understanding of self and other.

In 2016, Fong produced *Ways of Being Together*, bringing together fifty people, including some other artists and performers like Fong, for two weeks in Cardiff to build a professional and social community and make performance, responding to her desire to have a greater sense of "belonging" (Fong, n.d.). As part of the residency process, participants explored "being together" through "listening, talking, thinking, moving and even swimming together." Fong writes, "The work relies on and cultivates live connections between people. I'm interested in honest, open, fresh conversation – not our prepared scripts or even saying others' scripts or liking something on Facebook". Fong also says, in relation to *Ways of Being Together* but with relevance to other projects she has made:

> I'm trying to design a place where I feel I can flourish [...] and that means that everyone understands me on some level, and I understand [others] more than the transaction which is, 'You will be getting paid this and the time is this,' but actually, 'I know that your mum is not very well or that you've got three children or you have domestic violence happening at this time'. (Fong and Hughes, 2023)

In my experience of *Come Rain or Shine* there was a clear sense, as previously described, of a time-space being established for this personal 'flourishing', or flourishing of the personal, to occur and that I was having conversations that felt like they moved beyond the "prepared scripts" and reductive 'transactional' dynamics that might be characteristics of interactions in other social contexts. Instead, an alternative 'way of being together' with my collocutors was engendered based around feelings of mutual interest in each other. There was an openness in speaking, sharing in a relatively confessional register. There was also an openness in listening; being attentive to, and to some degree withholding judgment from, what is being shared. There was a sense of meeting and sharing with someone which was qualitatively different from many social encounters I experienced in everyday life; a meeting and sharing that was open to, interested in, even forgiving of, the whole person in front of me, and they me.

Buber (1923) speaks of “dwelling” in the space between I and Thou; a sense that, in that state, you fully move into this in-between space with the other, that you holistically inhabit this space even though you know it will be a temporary stay. From this perspective, through dialogue, there is the potential to step outside of your usual discrete subjective position and start dwelling, as a full person, in a new way, within the linguistic exchange that is occurring with the other person. Another way of putting this would be to return to Fong’s term “belonging,” which she contrasts with “unbelonging” (Fong and Hughes, 2023). My experience of the conversation in *Come Rain or Shine* could appropriately be described as analogous to entering a state of “belonging” or “dwelling” because it felt like it had a physical and temporal aspect – I felt like I had stepped into a time-space where I was experiencing myself and the world beyond me differently. I felt I understood myself, my collocutor and the world better – and that I was better understood. I felt that I could more openly and holistically inhabit myself (filling out towards the edges of who I felt myself to be) within the (social) world. I was more rooted within myself and the world; I had a greater sense of belonging, or at least feelings of unbelonging were diminished.

Buber (1923) describes the space between I and Thou, a space inhabited by spirit and dialogue, as the place of “love”. Love, in fact, is Buber’s shorthand for describing this complete immersion in and responsibility for/responsiveness to, an openness to and holistic understanding of, self and other – love is the spirit of pure dialogue, of pure conversation, that Buber was valorising. I would like to suggest that the experience of intimacy through conversation in performances like *Come Rain or Shine* can approach something analogous to Buber’s notion of love. My experience in this performance was of having a heightened awareness of the other – their physical presence, the sound of their voice and what they were speaking about – alongside an opening up of myself, a holistic sharing of myself with, that other. There was a pleasurable sense of finding myself through connecting with someone else, whilst at the same time entering into a liminal space which somehow meant that I stepped out of myself, that I lost myself in the conversation. I was dwelling, I was belonging, in this shared discursive space. This felt something like love.

Referring to the I-Thou relational spheres, Buber talks about the social sphere – "life with men" – being "consummated" in "speech and counter-speech". In conversation the "full reality" of I-Thou can be manifest and this is characterised by a reciprocity in the holistic immersion in, and openness between, self and other that happens in these exchanges: "gazing and gazing upon, knowing and being known, loving and being loved" (Buber, 1923, p.103). As suggested previously, this quality of reciprocity within conversation functions in these performances to open up the psychological-emotional (if not spiritual) "between" space for audience-participants to enter and in which to become immersed; a state that might feel a bit like love, where they feel able to be more open about themselves and to reveal more personal information than they might in other social encounters. There is a sense from artists practising in this area that this "reciprocal openness" (Corradi Fiumara, 1990) might be an emotionally and psychologically necessary thing in a wider socio-cultural context which prioritises reductive transactional or extractive relational dynamics. Reflecting on her own experience of the general tenor of interpersonal relations and the rarity in that context of "moments when people have actually seen and heard [her]", to which her practice is in part responding, Fong says: "There's very few moments where people actually really sit and listen or hear, or there's not those moments where it's like, 'I need to get something out of you'" (Fong and Hughes, 2023).

There are other qualities, or potential qualities, of conversation as a form, beyond reciprocity, that help achieve the sense in these performances of moving towards something akin to I-Thou openness and holistic reception of the other, and act as a counterpoint to the objectifying or transactional dynamics of I-It. Conversation, generally, has a provisional and open-ended quality. It is improvised, it has a spontaneous aspect, and participants are often unsure of the course it will take and where it will conclude. Things are said and then re-said, revised and retracted. New thoughts occur as a result of what is said by oneself or other participants and this results in new verbal formulations which again engender new thoughts (which is Kleist's (1951) thesis on the process of thinking referred to in the introduction). The qualities of provisionality, spontaneity and open-endedness of conversation can inspire a sense of vulnerability in participants; a feeling of embarking on a communicative

journey, and into a social experience, in which there is uncertainty about what will happen and in which interlocutors have limited control, even over what they themselves might say and what they might feel. Things might be said in conversation which are thoughts that unexpectedly 'slip out', things that might be regretted. Things might be articulated that are not settled opinion. Feelings and thoughts might occur that were not pre-empted. Conversation is an uncertain, unpredictable process which can result in unexpected emotional or psychological outcomes for which participants – even if they have shared values and prejudices and are expecting these to be re-articulated and left undisturbed – because of the improvised nature of the communication, were not prepared. There is doubt inherent in the formal dynamics of conversation, a lack of security in the course that will be taken and how things will be when the process is concluded. Will relations between the interlocutors be the same or changed? Will a person's understanding of themselves be changed – will their self-esteem, for example, be damaged or enhanced? The social, emotional and psychological stakes associated with unscripted conversation can therefore be high.

The artists practising in this area, as discussed, establish a framed time-space, a safe(r) space, within which this tendency towards vulnerability in conversation can be carefully encouraged. Audience-participants can lean into this experience of vulnerability, even finding themselves attracted to it, relaxing the social defences of public mask-wearing or role-playing – what Erving Goffmann (1990) calls the "social fronts" that we assume as part of the game of "impression management" we play with others. In these performances, time is given for the provisional, improvised nature of conversation to unfurl itself and for the complexities and contradictions of individual identities, their thought processes, their statements and re-statements, qualifications and retractions, in response to what they are saying and hearing, to play out. The conversational is here the appropriate medium for the expression of self-doubt, for confession of anxiety or failure. The fear of hasty judgment is diminished through the framing provided, allowing this vulnerability to be more readily performed, and this 'facilitated vulnerability' feeds into the potential for a heightened sense of openness and intimacy in the meeting and sharing between individuals. This notion of vulnerability can be seen as eliding with a sense of humility and is suggestive of the

openness and humility in the encounter with God that Buber saw as the ultimate paradigm for the I-Thou relationship between human beings that is "consummated" through conversation.

Whilst hesitant to describe this experience of immersion in open, honest conversation with another person in these performances as a sort of religious-spiritual erotics, as a reading of Buber suggests it could be, I *would* think of it as having the potential to elicit feelings of a kind of transcendent intimacy. Indeed, the nexus of qualities that conversation has the capacity to promote that have been discussed here – holism, openness, reciprocity, provisionality, open-endedness, spontaneity, uncertainty and vulnerability – in these performances are collectively catalysed, in my experience, to achieve these unfamiliar feelings of connection and intimacy with a stranger. In the conversation I experienced in *Come Rain or Shin*e, it felt like I transcended the quotidian with its usual default social settings (its barriers, inhibitions and "fronts"), entering a time-space in which I could think more deeply about myself and my life alongside, or *as a result of*, empathetically engaging with my collocutor. In the performance of myself, I was able to let the vulnerability surface in ways that felt not often 'permitted' (to borrow Fong's theme) in other fora for social relations and discourse. That movement from one state of relations and discourse to another felt analogous to Buber's I-It/I-Thou schema: the eternal pendulumlike "metacosmical movements" (1923, p. 116) between separation and connection. With *Come Rain or Shine* I experienced brief relief from the self-isolated, instrumentalising tenor of being myself and interacting with others in the world (the I-It model), in favour of a sense of more fully uncovering myself through more fully connecting with another through the performance of conversation (the I-Thou paradigm).

**Adrian Howells: conversational values and the evolution of the dialogical**

The conversation I had with Howells in *Unburden* at BAC*,* referred to at the start of this chapter, was the last one I had with him in one of his performances. The conversations in his shows that I remember best prior to that were in other one-to-one performances – whether with his alter ego, drag persona 'Adrienne', in the early to mid 2000s, or in the performances he made after he dropped this persona in the late 2000s/early

2010s.[16] As identified by Deirdre Heddon and Howells himself in *From Talking to Silence – A Confessional Journey* (2011), there was a move in his work over this period from a reliance on verbal communication towards a greater interest in non-verbal dialogue.

I can trace this development through my own personal experience of his practice. The first show of his as a solo artist I saw was *Salon Adrienne* (2005), which I experienced in a hairdressing salon near BAC. Howells, dressed and made up as Adrienne – with short, dyed blonde hair, bold green eye shadow, gold earrings and tabard – was playing the role of 'trainee hairdresser'. I was checked in for my appointment and then over the next hour was encouraged by Howells, who was attending to me throughout, to look at myself in the hairdresser's mirror, to talk about my appearance and how I felt about the way I looked, and also to 'look at myself' in a metaphorical sense. Howells also spoke to me about his own feelings about those things. I remember him talking in a confessional tone about his negative feelings about his body. We also talked about sex and sexuality and our relationship with intimacy, linking that to the conversation we were having about our self-image and tracing some of these feelings back to our upbringings.

I remember fairly non-stop talking between myself and Howells, eye contact mediated mostly through the mirror. He was drawing on the association of being at the hairdressers with the opportunity to have personal conversations with the person cutting your hair. Howells did not cut any hair (Adrienne was not yet qualified after all). Instead, he washed my hair, dried it and ended by giving me an Indian head massage. The reflected contact through the mirror – face-to-face, but not – played to the theme he was exploring around self-image but also provided a modicum of mediation, a thin mask analogous to the Adrienne persona and costume, that it could be argued

[16] Howells' one-to-one 'career' roughly covers the period – 2000-2012 – that Zerihan identifies as the form's "golden age" (2022, p.8). I observed this flourishing closely from my position at BAC, commissioning and programming several of Howells' one-to-ones, visiting festivals in which one-to-ones featured prominently (e.g, National Review of Live Art, Spill and Inbetween Time), and, in 2010 and 2011, programming BAC's 'One-on-One' festivals.

provided some protection from feelings of embarrassment or awkwardness that might come with the personal openness that was being encouraged.

The qualities latent in conversation discussed previously – reciprocity, uncertainty, open-endedness, vulnerability etc. – were activated here to promote feelings of intimacy and openness through these performative conditions, and Howells' presence and approach as an interlocutor consolidated these effects. His personal confessions and his presence as an auditor, focussed on listening and responding to me, opened a discursive time-space in which I felt able to reciprocate in something like an equivalent mode, meeting his perceived honesty and intimacy with my own equivalent contribution.[17] It felt like Howells had opened up this unusual personal, communicative space and invited me to move into it with him, calling me to be present through his presence, there in that moment with me, and, through being present, being open and responsive, there was a sense that the future course of what might happen during that encounter, in that conversation, was not completely decided. He managed to evoke a sense, in the pursuit of intimacy and honesty, of uncertainty and open-endedness being an appropriate tone for our exchange, or to put it another way for the provisionality and doubt of human thought and discourse to be welcomed. His famous mantra was "it's all allowed". He gave permission for things to be said that were difficult to say, or that might be said clumsily, or said and then regretted. I had a feeling that I could engage with the vulnerabilities of conversation with the security of knowing that judgement would appear to be withheld and understanding and forgiveness (in the spirit of Catholic confession or psychotherapy perhaps) would be forthcoming.

As Heddon and Howells detail (2011), one of the outcomes of Howells starting his three-year research fellowship at the University of Glasgow was an evolution in his intimate, 'confessional' performance practice away from his Adrienne persona. Instead, when you attended one of his performances you met "Adrian". Apart from the name

[17] Jennifer Doyle observes that some of Howells' commitment to reciprocity came from "the scale of his own need […] He holds because he needs to be held, he cares because he needs to be cared for" (2016, p.319).

change and the abandoning of the Adrienne outfits, Howells developed an interest in non-verbal dialogue. So, across performances such as *Held* (2006), *Foot Washing for the Sole* (2008) and *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding* (2010), some of the 'chattiness' of Adrienne was replaced with periods of intimate silence. For example, in *Held*, which I experienced at Home in Camberwell, which doubled as a family home, I remember Howells holding hands with me across a kitchen table and then us sitting close together on a sofa in the living room and having verbal conversations with him in each location. The final act though was when Howells led me to a bedroom and explained that, if I was happy to do so, we would lie next to each other on the bed with him spooning me and it was my choice whether we talk or not. I think I said something like 'let's see what happens, what feels right'. So, we talked a bit, but we were also silent, communicating in these silences through the intimacy of our bodies being next to each other – holding, allowing to be held, feeling the heat of each other's bodies, noticing the smell of each other.

This move towards speaking less, or at least Howells speaking less and giving more agency to each audience member to decide how much speaking and how much silence they wanted during each performance, was a noticeable shift in *Held* from his previous practice and continued to evolve in his future work. In *Foot Washing For the Sole*, the next piece he made, whilst washing and drying my feet in a small room at BAC he initiated a verbal exchange with seven questions that he asked [18] – all of them asking me to reflect on the process of having my feet washed, my relationship with my feet, whether I had previous experiences of having my feet washed in this way and whether I would be willing to do the same thing for a stranger. Howells then applied oils to my feet and massaged them. During this section there was silence, no further questions were asked. Howells writes about his intention here being to create an opportunity for "...a bodily 'conversation' between my hands and their feet" (Heddon and Howells, 2011, p.7). As with *Held*, and with later pieces including those with near complete silence such as *The Garden of Adrian* (2009)[19], this was not a move away from the

[18] Detailed in Heddon and Howells (2011).

[19] Described in Heddon and Howells (2011).

dialogical for Howells. As Doyle says, reflecting on an experience Howells recounted to her of an audience-participant in *The Pleasure of Being…* who prevented his full weight impacting on Howells as he was cradled by him at one point, "Language bridges. All kinds of languages do this, including the language of a man's body lifting its weight off of you with the ball of his left foot" (2016, p.315). The periods of silence were a continuation of conversation in another form, and, from Howells' perspective, a default reflex towards the 'kind of language' that is speech (in particular *his* speaking) that he identified in his earlier one-to-one work, without the allowance for silence, prevented a full, honest dialogical exchange. It prevented a complete I-Thou meeting and sharing: "reflecting on my practice [...], I realised that I had used 'talking' as a mask, something to hide behind. Removing my incessant speaking had, in fact, felt more risky than speaking intimate details" (Heddon and Howells, 2011, p.10).

Implicit here is recognition of another potential quality of conversation, or of the 'good conversation', namely that speaking and listening, the "give-and-take of talk" (Buber, 1923, p.102), should include an openness to silence during which internal reflection can happen, what has been said can be digested and new thoughts and responses can be formulated (all things that might increase the "risky" feelings of vulnerability for Howells and his audience-participant). During these interludes, the task of listening can be extended into a listening to the non-verbal presence of the other person; noticing their physicality, their touch, making eye contact, listening to their breathing; but also unpicking the emotional and intellectual consequences of what has been said, or anticipating what might be uttered in the future. Silence also provides space to notice these things in oneself, to question these things in oneself, and to speculate that the other is reciprocating in this business of listening – they are listening to you. It is a reminder that the other is the audience for your self-projection. Howells writes: "silence rings out loudly, offering another place to 'be' or to become: to reflect, to imagine, to project, to re-connect – with self and others and other selves" (Heddon and Howells, 2011, p.11). This active, conversational silence, that "rings out loudly" and establishes "another place" where self and other have a chance to explore each other and themselves through being more fully present, and more fully in each other's presence, is one manifestation perhaps of what Buber describes as the "responsibility

of an I for a Thou" (1923, p.15) that is part of the dialogical encounter in-between self and other which he saw as synonymous with love.

Howells' embracing of this expanded idea of conversation, with its foregrounding of silence and listening, also resonates with the argument in Gemma Corradi Fiumara's book *The Other Side of Language* (1990) that since the Greeks, in Western thought and culture, our understanding of verbal communication, with its emphasis on "logos", has privileged the author and the speaker, and the activities of expressing and asserting, over the other indispensable activity involved in communication of being open to what is said, to listening. Listening has historically been seen as secondary and passive. Corradi Fiumara uses the phrase a "radical reciprocal openness to listening"[20] (Ibid, p.8) when referring to Gadamer's contention that the act of listening – certainly the kind of focussed listening we are talking about here which embraces the other's subjectivity, their status as a "Thou" – implies an openness on both sides of this conversational dynamic and, without this, "no genuine human relationship exists" (Gadamer, 1979 cited in Corradi Fiumara, 1990, p.8), since it is from this kind of open listening to each other that understanding and agreement, which for Gadamer is at the heart of social relations as established through these linguistic processes, can be engendered. Following from this is the idea that what Corradi Fiumara calls "listening silence" is an active process, a fundamental constituent of communication that has been undervalued.

The notion of listening and silence being active, dialogical conditions and co-dependent states is one that is reflected in the evolution in Howells' understanding of the form that conversation could take in his one-to-one practice. He started leaving more space

[20] Borrowing from Corradi Fiumara, Kester uses "reciprocal openness" (2013) to refer to the potential radicality of dialogical arts practice – that, through the openness within these artworks and in the process of creating them to others' subjective specificity, pre-determined, abstract categorical systems might be disrupted. This corresponds to Corradi Fiumara's idea that it is in the undervalued attentiveness of one to another (i.e. open reciprocal listening) that the hidden possibilities of language and its "inexhaustible metaphorical complexity" (Corradi Fiumara, 1990, p.95), that might otherwise be denied by the over-assertive logos, can be discovered.

for silence and listening as the ground on which he considered a fuller dialogical exchange might happen[21]:

> At the end of this first post millennial decade, swamped by the mass-mediatisation of confession and the proliferation of such manifestations as they occur in 'Reality TV' shows, it occurs to me that what people perhaps really crave are opportunities to escape from this version of synthetic 'real life'. Rather than contributing to the deafening 'white noise', an alternative performance strategy might be to carve out other spaces, modes of connection other than spoken exchange, other forms of the dialogic. (Heddon and Howells, 2011, p.11)

This was not an absolute rejection of speech, however. Although *The Garden of Adrian* had very little speaking, his last one-to-one piece, *Unburden*, returned to some sort of balance between speech and silence. In *Unburden*, after all, audience-participants are asked to '*say* the unsaid' [my emphasis], and, as previously mentioned, it is clearly referencing the spoken confession of Catholicism and the talking therapy of psychoanalysis. The conclusion he appeared to reach with his practice was that periods of silence, of quiet reflection, allowing space for a wider sensory dialogue and bodily conversation, *alongside* opportunities for verbal exchange, provided the best conditions for an unusual and 'craved' form of openness, intimacy and connection to be established.

Through this dramaturgical evolution in his work – a refining of the dialogical to give space to the non-verbal and somatic, based on a wider understanding of how to enable intimacy and connection through conversation – Howells amplified what was already

[21] As Heddon and Johnson (2016) note, LJ Waks' (2010) concept of open, non-judgmental "apophatic listening," is relevant here. Emphasising Howells' belief that many people are burdened by guilt and shame, they suggest that his apophatic approach, which is contrasted with the pre-determined categorisation of "cataphatic listening," looks to undo some of the "closure" that creates these feelings – closure here being a lack of openness about difficult aspects of one's psychic life, but also the closure inherent in the judgment that comes with conventional, cataphatic listening: "apophatic listening seeks to disclose (to dis-close is to open)" (2016, p.20).

there in his work. I look back on my experiences across his oeuvre, through the periods of playing "Adrienne" and "Adrian," and remember moments of verbal and non-verbal conversation and connection that had a similar quality, even if in the later pieces the non-verbal elements were given more space. In all these performances, I recollect the affect of Howells' *conversational* presence – his comfortable physicality, the sound of his voice, his responsiveness to what I was saying and what I was doing, his eyes looking in mine (whether via a mirror as in *Salon Adrienne* or more directly in *Unburden*). The "aesthetics of the invitation" (White, 2013) inherent in that presence, that quality of engaged listening, offered to me as an audience-participant the prospect of an unusual experience of connection, honesty and intimacy. I was thus 'invited', *enticed* even, into what Lauren Berlant might describe as an unconventional "affective scene", a reimagined "space of attachment and identification" (2008, viii-x); an unfamiliar dialogical environment, a place where a new conversational paradigm for interpersonal relations and communication was being proposed based around reciprocal openness in speaking and listening, where I could be vulnerable, where I would be loved. I felt that having these performative conversations with Howells did satisfy a 'craving', providing fulfilment in terms of being able to project a self that I felt was 'more authentic', "an autobiographical subject […] produced anew in the intimate sociality of [these] interactions" (Cairns, 2016, p.164); a kind of sociality and scene for interpersonal discourse that did not feel like it was readily available to me elsewhere.

***Neither Here Nor There*: conversation, relatedness and capitalism**

Howells recognised that commercially-minded 'mass media' culture – TV reality shows etc.– were crowding his 'confessional patch'. From his perspective, they were commodifying this interest in authenticity and the confessional and in doing so were contributing to a cultural "white noise" that, paradoxically, made it harder for people to find the genuine connection they were looking for (Heddon and Howells, 2011). The space of attentive conversation, conversation made up of speaking but also non-verbal "listening silence" (Corradi Fiumara, 1990), that Howells aims for in his later one-to-one practice is seen by him as an antidote to the "synthetic" and "mass-mediatised" general cultural context (Heddon and Howells, 2011). In his performances he looks to establish a time-space in which what he considered the inauthentic and de-

personalised interactions of this cultural backdrop, can be left behind for a while so that audience-participants and himself can experience a sense of becoming a fuller, more open, more honest version of themselves.[22] This resonates with Fong's reference to wanting to create the conditions for social interaction where she and others can "belong" when the experience of "unbelonging" is so prevalent. There is a strong sense from artists practising in this area of a pressing personal and cultural need to create these environments where a different sort of subjectivity and ontology can be explored – a new way of being oneself. Since we are social beings framed by discourse, that new way of being oneself can only be realised through a new approach to inter-subjective encounters, through community building and a fresh approach to how we communicate with each other – through new "ways of being together".

Fong's contrast of belonging and unbelonging, Howells' notion of the authentic contrasted with the inauthentic and the personal with the de-personal, and Buber's contrast of I-Thou with I-It, have similarities. For each, there is a state of existence and of relating to others that is characterised by unfulfillment and isolation – that alienates us from ourselves (including preventing the imagining and performance of new versions of ourselves) and from other human beings – that they want to move away from or hold in abeyance. This state (the I-It etc.), for all of them is exaggerated by the conditions of modern Western society and its culture. Howells' positioning of his practice in relation to 'mass media' and reality TV culture has already been referenced, and there was an explicit impetus in his work to create offline, direct face-to-face encounters as relief from this dominant cultural register. Fong and Hughes refer to an intolerance for uncertainty, contradiction and complexity in contemporary discourse to which they are responding. Referring to a contentious political issue of the day, Hughes says: "You can't be speculative about it or unsure about it. You have to take a position and then hold it" (Fong and Hughes, 2013). "Can somebody say something they're not sure of?" she asks exasperatedly. And Fong, referring to the conversations in their

[22] See Walsh (2014) for a more sceptical view of the "production" of intimacy in Howells' and others' work in this period, including his argument for some of this practice being congruent with, rather than disruptive of, the "increasingly choreographed and commodified" experience of intimacy "in the neoliberal public sphere" (p.57)

shows which allow an extended time for each participant to speak, says: “You can start off and say something else and then actually disagree with yourself because hey that’s what we do. You can change your mind. You can do that”. This links also to their understanding of the complexities and contradictions of personal identity. As Hughes says on the views, the experiences, the preferences and prejudices that make up those identities: “I am this and I’m this and I’m that and I’m this and I’m that and I’m this and I’m that”. Hughes is articulating the multi-dimensional, multi-positional nature of self-hood from her perspective; an understanding of subjectivity that resists, to use Buber’s verb, being “disintegrated” (1923, p.8) into its constituent elements in order to be reductively categorised. As mentioned in relation to *Come Rain or Shine*, in their projects Fong/Hughes are looking for an “honouring of [the] whole person” (2023) – referring to both themselves and their audience-participants – echoing Buber’s ideal in which all elements of another being are “all present in a single whole” (1923, p.8).

*Neither Here Nor There* is another intimate participatory performance project by Fong/Hughes that, in a similar way to *Come Rain or Shine*, involves a small group of audience-participants going for a walk together, before then arriving in a space (an indoor space in this case, like a community centre or village hall) in which audience-participants have a one-to-one conversation with another audience-participant before then switching to have a second conversation with someone different. These conversations follow something like the rules of *Come Rain or Shine* with each member of the conversing pair speaking for six minutes, but in this instance doing so in response to a specific question from Fong/Hughes, with the other person silently listening, before the roles then swap for the next question. These are the questions that audience-participants respond to, in the order in which they are asked:

> “How does *where* you live inform *how* you live?”
>
> “Where is your dad from?”
>
> “Is it getting better?”
>
> “What battles do you need to give up, what battles do you need to pursue?”
>
> “What is the truth of your life?”

"In these times, what do you hold dear?" (Fong and Hughes, 2023)

The questions are simple in their phrasing but complex in their scope to be interpreted in many different ways. For example, the question "where is your dad from?" can be interpreted as one about your father's place of residence, place of birth, nationality, cultural heritage and/or about their background in terms of social class and values. It also leads you to think about your relationship, or lack of, with your father and how 'where they are from' might impact not just on them but on you as their child. As well as musing on where your father is from, you are inevitably drawn into the business of measuring the distance between your father's origins, their geographical and cultural environment, and your own, and what that might mean for the relationship that you have with them. You might also think about the social/cultural position of the father figure, how your own father relates to this *idea* of fatherhood, and how this wider notion of the patriarchal figure impacts on you and your life. The six minutes of thinking through and answering each question – which involves to some degree an unpacking of what that question might mean – through the medium of improvised conversational discourse, with all of its previously referenced qualities of provisionality, uncertainty and open-endedness, inevitably leads the speaker beyond any immediate, simplistic response into a space of complexity and nuance, of statement and re-statement. As an audience-participant you are encouraged into a discursive space which is "neither here nor there", in which "here" and "there" are the simplistic answers, fixed (possibly polarised) positions, and the pre-determined identities of stereotype and cliche. Fong/Hughes see the discursive mode that they are looking to encourage as an alternative to the simplifying, binary tendencies of much contemporary discourse, encouraged perhaps by some social media:

> We are presented with dichotomies, they are easier to manage, the question can be answered yes or no, but we know from our own lives that it is far more complex. Complexity takes time [...], a very long conversation. This is not encouraged by the contemporary modes of communication from texts to Twitter. (Fong and Hughes, n.d.)

In relation to Fong/Hughes' desire for the allowance of greater complexity in everyday discourse and in understanding individuals' identities, it is apposite that at the

beginning of *Neither Here Nor There*, the audience are led on their short walk by the artists who are carrying placards with the title of the show written on them. Made in a DIY-style out of cardboard, these are referencing placards carried on protest marches. But rather than being a statement of clear political positioning, signalling a particular demand or antagonism, these are appealing for "Neither Here Nor There" – an urgent desire for the opposite of what you might expect from the polarised political discourse and reductive in-group/out-group dynamics familiar from some fora. The phrase "neither here nor there" also means something that is inconsequential. Again, this appears to be contrasting the absolutist positioning of polarised discourse which is a feature of the contemporary 'attention economy' – which rests on an ethos of its own importance; if the 'wrong' language is chosen or the wrong statement is issued, it cannot easily be withdrawn or revised without significant reputational consequences – with a more conversational approach to discourse which values complexity, nuance, uncertainty and open-endedness and that, through this, treads more lightly in its demands for loyalty, is more forgiving of a position taken then revised, and makes less of a claim for self-importance. It makes a virtue of being "neither here nor there" and in the humility of its claim, ironically, it makes a case to be a consequential alternative to hegemonic relational and discursive paradigms.

The title and ideological concept of "neither here nor there" also speaks to Buber's notion, referred to previously, of dwelling in the space between interlocutors – meeting and sharing in the space of language, language being synonymous with this state of between-ness. The subject, for Buber, in its most ideal, fulfilled form, is dependent on this between-ness. This is the essence of the I-Thou relation: "I become through my relation to the Thou, as I become I, I say Thou" (Buber, 1923, p.11). It is in the act of speaking to another, addressing them intimately and holistically as Thou, rather than in an objectifying and instrumentalising manner as "It", that the fullest sense of "I" starts to come into existence. In less metaphysical terms, the establishment of the subject depends on intersubjectivity; or as Fong/Hughes would argue the self (its well-being, its manifestation in its most authentic form, its sense of "belonging") depends on community. Whether in *Neither Here Nor There* or *Come Rain or Shine,* they create physical, discursive and ideological space that is "neither here nor there", that is

shared, that exists between people, and fosters and is fostered by community. These "neither here nor there" spaces are seen by the artists, with justification, in contrast to the atomised, privatised and polarised spaces – 'either or', 'for or against', 'mine or yours' spaces – that foster and are fostered by capitalist individualism.

As Buber states, "I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being" (1923, p.3) and the corollary is that I-Thou can only be *heard* if the whole being opposite is received. Conversely, "I-It can never be spoken with the whole being" and the "It" is reduced to a quality or series of qualities which will always be experienced, or heard, as less than the whole. Thus, the I-It dynamic tends towards atomising, quantifying and abstractifying the external world, seeing it as made up not of things in themselves, but of things to be experienced as exemplars of an abstract quality or series of qualities (not unlike the Platonic Forms) to be instrumentalised. In this process of instrumentalisation, human beings' sense of their own and others' subjectivity is diminished, and they experience alienation. Erich Fromm, writing in the post war period, posits a dichotomy like Buber's to describe the way that humans relate to the external world between "concreteness" and "abstractification", with the latter side of this binary coming to dominate with the acceleration of Western capitalism: "In contemporary western culture this polarity has given way to an almost exclusive reference to the abstract qualities of things and people, and to a neglect of relating oneself to their concreteness and uniqueness" (1956, p.114).

Fromm sees Western capitalism as compounding the alienation of individuals from an atavistic sense of "relatedness", creating an environment in which they see themselves in terms of "exchange value" rather than "use value". Their sense of self (and self-worth) and their understanding of the selfhood of others is hollowed out through an emphasis on the saleability of everything and everyone, including themselves in the marketplace of social (including romantic) relations:

> "Each person is a 'package' in which several aspects of his exchange value are blended into one: his 'personality', by which is meant those qualities which make him a good salesman of himself […] [E]ach person strives to exchange this package for the best value obtainable" (Ibid, p.147).

In post war capitalist society, Fromm believes the cultural tendency is for individuals to see their life stories through the abstract paradigm of a balance sheet: "The whole process of living is experienced analogously to the profitable investment of capital, my life and my person being the capital which is invested" (Ibid, p.148).

In *The Selfish Capitalist* (2008), Oliver James builds on and updates Fromm's arguments. His thesis is that there is a particularly extreme form of capitalism – "selfish capitalism" – that has developed since the 1970s in anglophone Western countries that puts a particular emphasis in all aspects of life on the primacy of materialism, leading to the notion of "relative materialism": materialism not simply to survive (or even survive well) but materialism which is about a constant striving to consume more and to consume better than others; a measuring of ourselves and others through that prism of material acquisition and consumption. James, like Fromm, argues that this leads to measurable "emotional distress" in populations. He points to feelings of isolation and stress that are often part of this distress, and quotes Fromm on another aspect of this societal psychological condition – boredom:

> Boredom comes from the fact that man has become purely an instrument, that he cultivates no initiative, that he feels not responsible, that he feels like a little cog in a machine that someone could replace with another at any time…he tries to compensate for it through consumption. (Fromm and Funk, 2014, p.45)

Fromm links this bored consumption with necrophilia. Human beings are waiting for something meaningful to happen, but consumer capitalism has removed or undermined value from the experiences and encounters that might have fulfilled that desire for genuine meaning. To distract ourselves from this "boredom of waiting" (Ibid, p.46), we find ourselves attracted to those dead things which ironically have generated those feelings of boredom and meaninglessness, passing the time by exchanging these things with others.

James looks to Fromm's contrast of the "sane society" with the "insane". He says that Fromm,

> proposes a definition of sanity which is applicable to individuals in all societies: relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, sense of identity, morality based on

> realistic rather than mythical ideas, and first-hand experiencing rather than the de-personalised, second-hand living that is common in our society. (2008, p.51)

The emphasis from Fromm and James on relatedness, first-hand experience, and some sense of transcendence being achieved through personal, direct encounters, rather than an abstract, generalised view of the external world which instrumentalises and thus diminishes these relationships, mirrors Buber's schema. They each describe the socio-economic context in their respective time periods – their own versions of the alienated, disconnected I-It dynamics – with Fromm identifying these values prevailing in a post-war corporate capitalist world, and then James noting their exaggeration in the service/experience economies of the late twentieth/early twenty-first century.

Richard Sennett's analysis (1998) of the effects on people and their "characters" – their sense of self – of the "flexible capitalism" he saw developing in the last two decades of the twentieth century, helps to further develop this picture of the socio-economic and cultural milieu and its effect on individuals' psychologies and relations with others, that provides context for this move at the start of this century, towards artists creating intimate performance centred around conversational exchange to explore alternative relational and discursive paradigms. He states that the motto of this new form of capitalism is "no long term". This short-termism penetrates all aspects of economic and social life creating a society and culture where the tendency is for social relations to be relatively superficial. There are not the ties to place or bonds of loyalty and identity to the workplace, a corporation or a class as there used to be prior to the advent of this form of capitalism. Nor, in general, are there deeply held values or persuasive narratives sustaining any sense of purpose behind the work people do. The values instead that are prioritised in this environment are flexibility, independence, networking, mobility and the ability to *perform* attachment and loyalty and many of those values of the old 'spirit of capitalism' whilst wearing them lightly, in the knowledge that the 'project' that you are working on will shortly come to an end and the people that employed you, and for whom you are expected to be an advocate, are likely to lay you off at that point. As Sennett says, "Detachment and superficial cooperativeness are better armour for dealing with current realities than behaviour based on values of loyalty and service" (1998, p.25).

This is the socio-economic and cultural context, with all of its implications for interpersonal relations and communication, that artists such as Fong/Hughes and Howells are on some level responding to, looking to establish time-space in which the prevailing I-It dynamics of contemporary capitalist society – with its "detachment and superficial cooperativeness", interactive but "abstractifying" technologies[23], polarising (and unforgiving) discursive tendencies and media saturation – can be suspended in favour of something akin to the "relatedness, transcendence, rootedness" of I-Thou. Sennett talks about how all the conditions of this flexible capitalist environment, experienced most immediately through the sphere of work, "impel people to look for some other scene of attachment and depth" (1998, p.138), to satisfy the "longing for community" and desire for purpose and meaningful connections. Echoing Berlant's emphasis on the socio-political efficacy of the "affective scene" and the feelings of "belonging" that it engenders (2008), Sennett identifies some of these new "scene[s] of attachment and depth" focused around nationalism and ethnicity – based on the exaggerated in group/out group dynamics of some community-building – as problematic. He calls "we" "the dangerous pronoun" (1998, p.136). But he sees this as an understandable consequence of the anomie that can accompany globalised flexible capitalism. The artists I examine here, however, are creating more positive and inclusive scenes of attachment and belonging and using the framing of performance to create those scenes. These are scenes that respond to the desire for the experience of relatedness, for I-Thou, in a world in which access to these kinds of scenes can feel scarce, using a relational, communicative paradigm based around the conversational values I have identified rather than around discourse based on fixed positions, group conformity and hostility to those that lie outside any clearly drawn ideological or identity-based parameters.

[23] Sherry Turkle (2016) writes on the role of smart phones and social media in what she calls a "flight from conversation", arguing for the need to restrict use of these technologies to "reclaim conversation". Whilst her arguments for the positive qualities of face-to-face conversation resonate with the proposals of the artists covered here, her singular focus on digital technology as the cause of interpersonal dysfunction can appear over-simplistic and the tone of her behavioural prescriptions can feel reactionary.

Like Buber, these artists, through their practice, propose that it is through dialogue or conversation (verbal, but also non-verbal) that this alternative way of being, and being together, might be realised. It is through the attributes associated with conversation that have been examined here – reciprocity, openness, uncertainty, listening/silence, vulnerability etc. – all leading to an unfamiliar sense of intimacy and personal connection, that these artists are countering the "white noise" of the prevailing culture. A culture in which they perceive an emphasis on discursive certainty rather than doubt; of personal competition, comparison and instrumentalisation rather than generosity and empathy; of "impression management" or 'personal branding' rather than openness and acceptance of the complexity of subjectivity. What is proposed is an alternative *conversational* "way of being together" that is "neither here nor there".

**Rhiannon Armstrong: negotiating dialogue in public space**

Armstrong is another UK-based performance maker that has developed practice in this area, using conversation (both verbal and non-verbal) as a way of interacting with strangers to elicit unfamiliar (for both artist and audience-participant) feelings of connection and intimacy. Her project *Can I Help You?* is a good final case study which brings into focus many of the themes explored in this chapter and, in particular, by dint of where it is located, engages directly with its socio-economic context, providing what Bourriaud describes as a "social interstice" (a term borrowed from Marx), "a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system" (2002, p.16).

In this piece, Armstrong spends time in public, or "semi-public privatised space" (Armstrong, 2023) – in shopping malls or on the street in town centres – where the commercial/consumerist imperative is coded into the design and aesthetics and where those present tend to have familiar roles (the shopper, the shopworker, the security guard, the homeless beggar etc.) and established expectations within the transactional dynamics. Unlike with the performances from Howells and Fong/Hughes discussed previously, in *Can I Help You?* Armstrong engages with those who happen to be passing by expecting to use, or 'perform in', the space as they would normally rather than those who have made a prior choice to attend a performance. Armstrong wears a T-

shirt that reads “Free Help” and a toolbelt which has several items in it that might be of practical use in the exchanges with strangers that will follow, from a needle and thread (for fixing a button perhaps), to change for a five-pound note. Armstrong makes eye contact with people passing by, trying to appear “attentive and expectant”. Some people stop and ask her what she is doing. The exact course that the encounter then follows remains open-ended. But, according to Armstrong (2023), a conversation is likely to follow in which she explains that she is offering free help to anyone that wants it and that this can take any form, including performing practical tasks like carrying shopping or giving someone a hand massage (she has cream for this in her toolbelt). She might also explain that she is doing an art project if they ask who she is working for, where the money for her to be there is from or what she is promoting, familiar as passersby might be with people on the street or in malls in bright T-shirts like hers working for charities or giving away free samples as part of a marketing campaign. This looks like it might be that, but it is a different sort of transaction that is on offer.

For Armstrong, verbal conversation is not necessarily the end goal, although it can be that the “free help” that is required is for her to listen, carefully and non-judgmentally, to what someone wants to say. There are examples she gives where the conversation goes in a confessional direction with audience-participants using the encounter with a welcoming stranger, willing to listen, as an opportunity to ‘say the unsaid’[24], to get something off their chests that they might not speak of to someone with whom they are more familiar. Armstrong talks about one conversation she had with a couple doing *Can I Help You?*:

> I came away thinking, ‘I think this man is contending with the fact that he was a domestic abuser, maybe with this woman that he’s with. Maybe he’s done some work and isn’t doing that anymore. That’s been discussed between them, but it hasn’t been discussed with the kids.’ (2023)

[24] Prior to Howells’ use of that phrase for *Unburden: Saying the Unsaid*, Armstrong created *The International Archive of Things Left Unsaid* (2015) in which she asked people to “think of a time when you wanted to say something to someone, but didn’t” (Armstrong, n.d.).

Referring to these kinds of conversations, she says that people, “have found how you can help them in their own way, and you don’t have to do anything other than just be there”.

Armstrong expands on this idea of “just being there”, and the importance that she sees in her role as active listener and witness in these conversations: “I’m listening to you and I’m seeing you and I’m responding to you and what you’re choosing to bring to me of yourself in this moment because my only aim is to meet you.” There is a clear echo here of Buber’s ideas of the I-Thou encounter – an open meeting between different human beings that is responsive to the concrete presence of the other rather an abstract notion of the other based on atomised qualities and the baggage of prejudice that attaches to these; being open to receive, to “meet”, without prescription. This also reflects Fong/Hughes’ desire to create time-space where people can be fully and holistically “seen and heard” in ways that are rare in their experience, and Howells’ aim of creating direct face-to-face dialogical interactions where both he and the audience-participant have a heightened sense of being authentically present to each other.

Armstrong stresses that for her in *Can I Help You?*, mirroring to some extent the evolution of Howells’ thinking and practice in relation to the dialogical, although verbal conversation could be the final outcome from the encounter between her and audience-participants, it was just as likely that verbal conversation was a means to negotiate the instigation of a non-verbal dialogue. For example, this might be a relatively silent hand massage or a quiet walk to someone’s home helping to carry their shopping (Armstrong, 2023). These physical exchanges retain their status as dialogue or, to borrow from Howells, “bodily conversation” for Armstrong. Referencing another of her projects, working with a young non-verbal disabled artist, Armstrong says, “this work I’m doing now, which is non-linguistic, non-verbal, [...] it’s still conversation”. She describes this non-verbal conversational process as based in “heightened listening, looking, vibing with a person”. She goes on to say, “I’m trying to locate your desire in this moment [...] I’m going to try and pick up on it and I’m going to try and move towards it. You’re going to do that to me”, suggesting something of Buber’s I-Thou encounter overlaid with a concern for the subjective desires of the other informed by psychoanalytical paradigms.

This idea of conversation being linked to the process of negotiation is central to Armstrong – that the verbal conversations that happen and any non-verbal exchange that might follow is not predetermined, it is open-ended and needs to be agreed in the moment between both parties: "the main thing is that the conversations that happen are not determined. That's probably the important thing for me, [...] that they get shaped by the two of us who are having them, and our interaction with one another". The potential values of conversation previously identified and Armstrong's particular emphasis on the attentiveness that comes with "heightened listening, looking and vibing" and the idea of the audience-participant "shaping" the experience, are distilled in this idea of negotiation: "That was the starting point. That was the offer [...] I was going to turn up in the street and that there would be a negotiation" (Ibid).[25] Negotiation is synonymous here with conversation and is an ongoing process of each participant "locating the other's desire" and "trying to move towards it", however provisionally, however uncertainly.

This dialogical negotiation is seen by Armstrong as the basis for her "offer" through her performances of an alternative kind of relational exchange to those that are usually offered in the public spaces in which she is performing. She talks about how people passing her performing *Can I Help You?* can find it hard to "place her", to work out how she fits in with the behaviours, relational dynamics and imperatives they are familiar with in these environments.

> That uncertainty, trying to place you, is very much part of the work. The way I see it, most relationships are extractive in some way between strangers. Often in public space or semi-public privatised space, there's an extractive or financial relationship going on. The idea that something is there for you in a way that you can shape, it's not something we're used to. (2023)

[25] "Negotiation" for Bourriaud (2002), as noted in the introduction, is also at the heart of the post '89 imaginary that gave birth to relational art and is linked to a political credo which is sceptical about utopian socio-political manifestos, and believes instead in incrementalism, compromise and dialogue leading to concrete social change.

Armstrong is using conversation, and dialogical dynamics, to suggest a relational paradigm which is not circumscribed by the imperatives of financial transactions or what she sees as "extractive" relationships, but is rather based around an encounter that is undetermined and open-ended, where doubt, complexity and vulnerability is expected, and where, through these values of conversational exchange, feelings of heightened connection and intimacy between strangers can be elicited. This is a different kind of 'deal' that is being negotiated; "other trading possibilities" are being proposed. Like Buber, Armstrong refers to these encounters as "meetings" (2023), meetings without a predetermined agenda in which the 'terms of reference' of that meeting are in some way to "locate the other's desire", not to instrumentalise that relationship to sell somebody something, but for that open negotiation, the connection and intimacy involved in that process, to be an end in itself. As her T-shirt says, she is offering "free help", a deliberate confusing of the more familiar commercial, or extractive, terms of exchange and pre-determined objectives expected between 'service provider' and member of the public. This is not a service that you must pay for, there is no price to be negotiated, no commitment to monthly subscriptions to be signed up to. The service on offer is not specialised. As Armstrong explains: "I'm here offering free help. I'm just a person, though. I don't have any special skills" (2023). The offer is deliberately nebulous and malleable in its form; it is not a fixed, efficient, commodified product. In fact, it is the offer of conversation, intimacy, empathy, negotiation. It is the offer of process rather than product. It is in some ways a brief offer of the I-Thou or the relatedness that Fromm felt capitalist society was alienating us from; a short "scene of attachment and depth" amid James' "selfish capitalist" environment. From this perspective, Armstrong, whilst adopting its costume and taking up residence on its stage, is offering an alternative conversational dramaturgy that is working to re-assert a paradigm of social relations and interpersonal discourse outside the conventional parameters of the contemporary capitalist "affective scene." Bourriaud describes the activities of this kind of relational art, in which artists adopt familiar roles and relations from the extant socio-economic scene (e.g., service provider–client), as "a set of tasks carried out beside or beneath the real economic system, so as to patiently re-stitch the relational fabric" (2002, p.36).

Armstrong (2023) talks about that moment in her encounters when there is a recognition for the audience-participant (and perhaps herself) of these unusual terms of reference, that opportunity to "re-stich the [conventional, extractive] relational fabric": "That meeting moment where we come to understand what we're here for, for each other." This hints at some sort of epiphany that resonates with Buber's understanding of the dialogical and the psycho-social-spiritual "shudder" that he believes occurs on a personal and societal level in those moments when the urgent need for, and awareness of the alternative possibility of, the I-Thou connection comes into our consciousness in a world dominated by the I-It; an epiphanic awareness of the possibility of "relating" (being *with* or *of* the other) rather than "experiencing" (instrumentalising the other, being *without* the other) and the world and the culture we have built/might build in the future around these contrasting paradigms for social interaction and communication.

The performances by Howells and Fong/Hughes that have already been described include a similar eliciting of "meeting moments" where there is an epiphanic realisation of the different time-space – with its unfamiliar rules, roles and expectations – that has been entered into. This can feel like a shedding of the usual "armour" of social role-playing, "saturat[ing] and soften[ing] the hard edges and cold surfaces of our daily lives" (2016, p. 245) as Fintan Walsh describes the potential effect of Howells' practice; a stepping into the conversational or the dialogical with its attendant values bringing with it a sense of engaging in an encounter with new terms of reference built on empathy, intimacy and connection; in effect a 'shudder of intimacy' or what artists practising in this field, as already noted, can refer to as the unusual, surprising sensation of "being seen and heard."

**Performing conversational intimacy – a radical practice?**

Dominic Johnson (2012) makes the point that intimacy is not *necessarily* positive; it can facilitate many forms of interpersonal relations, both good and bad. He writes about there being a continuum of intimacy. At one extreme there is intimacy as abuse and, at the other, the profound lack of a desired intimacy resulting in some form of desolate solitude. Both extremes are undeniably appalling conditions to experience and the fact that they are present in any society raises significant moral and political questions. But,

drawing on Berlant, Johnson talks about how the centre ground of this continuum, which he characterises as a place of "pastoral securities", is also politically problematic. This conservative centre is often the place of intimate relations that are deemed socially, and legally, acceptable. For example, certainly seen through an historical lens, this would be the base for the hegemonic position of conventional heterosexual relationships including the state/religion-approved institution of marriage. Johnson talks about how this centre ground is "populated by pastoral, banal intimacies [...] where people come together without asking much of each other" (Ibid, p.90). This is a kind of intimacy that is sanctioned by the socio-political and cultural hegemony and is passed off as 'natural'. As such it can eschew any need to be held accountable for its prejudices, its exclusions, its conforming and unchallenging undercurrents.

Johnson links this to Bishop's (2012) critique of much participatory or relational art practice which, as described in the introduction here, she says can default to conviviality, compromise and consensus and in so doing loses it political and social radicality. Johnson implies that some relational practice that is engendering feelings of intimacy locates itself in this place of "pastoral securities", existing in the convivial, unchallenging and potentially conformist centre of his continuum of intimacy. In part rebutting Bishop who he thinks is too broad in her dismissal of participatory practice and performance art and too generous towards the artists that she favours as exemplars of a more "antagonistic" aesthetic, his argument is in favour of intimate body-based performance practice, like that of Ron Athey and Scott O'Hara, that "intervene[s] between [the] pastoral centre and intimacy's destitute limits." (2012, p.91). In other words, whilst not replicating the experience of abuse or destitute solitude at either end of his continuum, the work that he is acclaiming moves away from the "pastoral centre" of conventional intimate relations in the direction of these two extremes, de-naturalising the hegemony of the centre-ground, exposing its politics and challenging the audience's and our prevailing culture's sense of what kinds of intimacy are acceptable. Here Johnson is providing his own alternative examples of artistic practice that is antagonistic, uncompromising and anti-convivial – the qualities that Bishop is extolling.

The question raised then is whether the conversation-based intimate practice that has been examined in this chapter is susceptible to the same critique that Bishop levels at much participatory practice and that Johnson intimates might be a pitfall for some performance focused on producing the effect of intimacy. Are Howells, Fong/Hughes and Armstrong, in their work in this area, occupying the centre-ground on the continuum of intimacy, engendering a form of 'pastoral intimacy' that elicits feelings of easy conviviality and leaves the fundamental paradigm of conventional relations promoted by the political/cultural hegemony unchallenged?

In the performances cited, it is clear that efforts *are* made to ease audience-participants into the experiences they will have and a commitment to 'care' for participants is demonstrated. The "invitation to participate" (White, 2013), is framed in ways that emphasise negotiation and co-authorship rather than coercion or confrontation. The audience-participant has significant agency around how they choose to participate. They can choose to speak or be silent. The questions that are posed are open ones. Audience-participants are given time to think and have space to choose their own words when they respond. They are not crudely put on the spot and made to speak or act in an overtly prescribed manner. There is no audience they are performing to other than their interlocutor/s. And, implicit in the conversational values that these artists are harnessing, there is an inclusive, forgiving ethos that is communicated, encapsulated in Howells' "it's all allowed" mantra. Thus, this practice looks to mitigate perceptions of the risk of exposure, embarrassment or lack of control – feelings that can be associated with 'audience participation'[26] – that an audience-participant might have before or during these performances. It is true that the artists referenced in this chapter are not presenting the more immediately challenging (visceral/erotic) images and scenarios of Athey or O'Hara, and Howells, Fong/Hughes and Armstrong have all stated how they see care towards audience-participants as an

[26] It is because of the potential for these feelings to be elicited that White says, "There are few things in the theatre that are more despised than audience participation" (2013, p.1).

important principle guiding their approaches.[27] In their use of conversation, as we have seen, they are foregrounding values – such as reciprocity, holism and openness – that are imbricated with this ethos of care. This leans the tenor of these interactions towards mutual understanding, a humanistic sense of fellow-feeling perhaps. It can therefore be fairly argued that all this amounts to this practice having a "pastoral" ethic and that this ethic – a commitment to care, empathy and generosity – bleeds into its aesthetics.

However, the argument here is that the dialogical experience in these performances and the intimacy and sense of connection that is arrived at through this, underpinned by a "duty of care", is a radical alternative to the more familiar interactions with strangers that prevail in many people's everyday lives and to the dynamics of discourse that dominate our prevailing culture. It is through care, openness, reciprocity, vulnerability and the other values of conversational exchange, that these performances propose a kind of intimacy with others that does not feel like it is located on the centre ground of Johnson's continuum. It is not experienced as conventional or as conservative. Rather, in its dialogical form – resisting the conventional binary dynamics of production-reception and the polarised discourse familiar from other social fora, and promoting a non-instrumentalising sense of inter-subjectivity, an I-Thou-flavoured approach – this work suggests a radical intimacy, even a radical *pastoral* intimacy, a "radical softness" (Wyver, 2016), where the pastoral is detached from the centre ground because there is not enough care at the centre.

The argument in this chapter is that this practice, through its use of conversation, elicits an unusual sense of intersubjective intimacy and connection based around the values that have been explored here. In doing so, it opens an epiphanic window into radical paradigms for being and being together. Through these dramaturgical interstices, the possibility of, and hope for, a particular kind of conversational intimacy can be revealed, like a field of flickering candles.

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[27] Armstrong refers to a discussion she had with Howells at BAC's One-on-One Festival in 2010 about the "duty of care" they both felt towards audience-participants and how they thought the structure of the festival, that I was responsible for, was not helping fulfil this (Armstrong and Evans, 2018, p.51).

## Chapter 4. Re-staging the Discourse: changemaking through conversation

The focus in this chapter is on performances – *Not I* (2017) and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* (2023) – by the disabled-led company Touretteshero that feature audience-participant conversation with the explicit goal of contributing, through that device, to an agenda of socio-political change. I argue, with significant reference to Freire's theories on the dialogical, that the involvement of audience-participants in conversation at the centre of the artistic experience has the capacity, as demonstrated in these examples, to challenge dominant, 'oppressive' discourses and their attendant hierarchies, to make visible/audible otherwise more marginalised identities, voices and narratives, and to use the theatre/performance context to disrupt established production/reception paradigms both for that artform and for knowledge production and consumption more generally. I contend that conversation employed in this way in performance can highlight the overlap of the discursive, dramaturgical and material realms and can act as a catalyst for socio-political change both within the cultural sphere and in the external, material world.

### Touretteshero's *Not I*

The central element of Touretteshero's *Not I* is a performance of Samuel Beckett's short play in which the character "Mouth" – the mouth of the performer visible "about 8' above stage level" (Beckett, 2009, p.85) surrounded by darkness – delivers an approximately twelve-minute stream of consciousness monologue. It is performed by Jess Thom, one of the artistic directors of Touretteshero, who introduces herself beforehand: "I'm sitting in a very cool wheelchair. I also have Tourette's syndrome, which means I make movements and noises I can't control, called tics" (Touretteshero, 2017a, p.1).

Given Thom's involuntary movements, to follow Beckett's vision of having a light focused on the performer's mouth whilst the rest of the stage remains in darkness, she wears a specially designed hood ringed with lights that can follow her mouth wherever it moves. To achieve the height for Mouth required by the stage directions, after Thom's introduction, a counter-balanced see-saw lift raises her on her wheelchair into the air. During the performance, Thom follows Beckett's script with occasional

interjections because of her vocal tics – 'biscuit' is the most commonly occurring of these. Instead of the "Auditor" that Beckett dictates should be the only other figure on stage – silently facing Mouth, moving only four times during the script to raise and lower their arms "in a gesture of helpless compassion" (Beckett, 2009, p.83) – Touretteshero's production has a British Sign Language interpreter. The interpreter translates all of Beckett's text as it is delivered as well as Thom's tics and the other spoken elements of the production.

The auditorium is a mixed environment of benches alongside cushions and mats on the floor for people to sit on. Each performance of *Not I* is a 'relaxed performance'. Thom explains it to the audience in this way:

> If you want to tic, shout, or move about, you're more than welcome. You can sit or stand wherever you like but please make sure those around you have a good view too. It's likely to feel quite intense so if you want to leave at any point, please feel free. You can come back at any time. We've got ear defenders in a box at the front of the stage to my left so grab a pair if you think they might be useful. (Touretteshero, 2017a, p.2)

The intention is clear – that the company are attempting to create a space, in its physical arrangement, the provision of facilities, but also its values, that is inclusive of disabled and neurodivergent people. In this regard, *Not I,* along with other Touretteshero activity at BAC around this time, was a precursor to, and catalyst for, a wider 'Relaxed Venue' project that the two organisations worked on from 2018 to 2020. The aim of this was to make BAC more inclusive of, and accessible to, disabled and neurodivergent people (artists, audiences, staff etc.). I worked closely with the company on aspects of this, including making almost all the performances in the programme relaxed (Touretteshero, 2016). It culminated with BAC launching itself publicly as "the world's first relaxed venue" (Snow, 2020).

These developments at BAC, co-led with and inspired by Touretteshero, can perhaps be read retrospectively as a practical manifestation of the "Ethic of Accommodation", a manifesto developed by deaf and disabled practitioners and scholars in the 1990s focussed on prioritising – as political, ethical and aesthetic principle – the

“accommodation” of difference within theatrical processes and structures for both theatre-makers and audiences (Galloway et al., 2007). It is based around the fundamental tenet of recognising the “Actual Lives” of disabled people rather than an abstract, generic notion of them and “revis[ing] traditional theatre ideals and practices from the ground up” (p.228) to accommodate the specific needs of heterogenous disabled individuals.

Returning to Touretteshero’s *Not I*, the performance of Beckett’s play is followed by a short documentary film that provides some context around the company’s decision to make a version of this piece. This highlights the artistic, political and practical challenges and opportunities that they encountered as a disabled-led theatre company approaching this text and the wider culture surrounding it. One key aspect of this is the meeting of a traditionally prescriptive vision for how Beckett’s plays should be performed – communicated in various ways including through the precision of his stage directions and the attitude of the Beckett Estate who had an historical reputation for being particularly protective of his prescriptions for how the plays should be performed (McMahon, 2006) – with the ‘actualities’ of Thom’s body and voice; her involuntary tics and energy levels that fluctuate because of her impairments. The Beckettian aesthetic emphasises the precision of the language on the page and of the minimalist mise-en-scene. In *Not I*, with its excessive sequence of short imagistic non-sequiturs usually spoken rapidly, the demands of this ‘aesthetics of precision’ suggests the need for a particularly virtuosic performance delivery – an ability to control voice, breath and energy; to command lips, tongue and body. For this reason, the performance of *Not I* is associated with experienced stage actors like Billie Whitelaw, who Beckett reportedly referred to as the “perfect actress” (Billington, 2014). Thom is not a formally trained actor experienced at delivering difficult canonical texts according to strict authorial prescription and fulfilling the expectations of literary and theatrical orthodoxy. Nor would her impairments enable her to have this kind of complete physical and vocal command and control. She is not the “perfect actress” if this is the paradigm for perfection.

Although this is the challenge of approaching Beckett’s text, the film that is shown, as well as what follows, makes clear that this is also an interpretative opportunity.

Touretteshero identify that in the character of Mouth there is a resonance with Thom's experience of being a disabled woman living with Tourette's syndrome. As she says as part of her introduction at the start of their production of *Not I,* "I was stunned to find line after line that spoke deeply to my lived experience" (Touretteshero, 2017a, p.2). She connects these lines to her experience of living with involuntary verbal tics and the desire to suppress or hide that natural behaviour in a disabling social environment where such neurodivergence is not understood and accommodated but rather stigmatised and made shameful. As an example, after she has performed Beckett's play, she explains (Touretteshero, 2017b) that when she was a teenager, during a period when her tics were intensifying, she used to go to the toilet frequently when out in public in order to have the privacy to freely tic, and she connects this to the following line in Beckett's play: "…sudden urge to...tell...then rush out stop the first she saw...nearest lavatory...start pouring it out...steady stream...mad stuff...half the vowels wrong...no one could follow...till she saw the stare she was getting...then die of shame..." (2009, p.92).

There is a tension in Beckett's *Not I* between the restrictions of the visual field and the excessive quality of the language vocalised, which can be interpreted through many different existential and psychoanalytical frames. For example, it can be seen as expressive of the dichotomy between the mortal body and the (fearful) mind craving immortality. Or it can be read as representative of the turbulent dynamics between id, ego and superego. It can also be interpreted, as is suggested in Touretteshero's production, through the prism of lived experience of disability as the tension, following the social model of disability, between a disabling environment which limits, controls and polices bodies and minds and their behaviours, and the disabled, neurodivergent individual's identity and natural behaviours.

Touretteshero see an opportunity here to claim a character from the theatrical canon as disabled, or, at least, open to powerful reinterpretation through the frame of disability. In doing so, they are also able to question the presumptions noted above about the kind of performers that are appropriate to perform roles such as this, and by extension the broader lack of opportunities for disabled actors/performers in the performing arts. As Thom says about their production, "*Not I* spoke about who gets to

perform what roles and the claiming of existing characters as disabled characters" (Pountney and Thom, 2023). Rather than privileging the trained, virtuosic body and voice, Touretteshero emphasise the insight into the role that comes from relevant lived experience and the expanded interpretative possibilities that come from having disability centred in the frame of this canonical artwork.

Beckett's *Not I* appears amenable to Touretteshero's treatment – the discourse around disability and Tourette's syndrome flows easily from his text and the prescriptions of the mise-en-scene. However, as suggested, there is also an antagonism here, not so much with Beckett's play as it exists on the page, but with the wider modernist-influenced culture of precision, command and control, of perfectionism in the theatre space and beyond, and with the assumed hierarchies and exclusions that support this and for which *Not I* and Beckett more generally can be seen as an emblem. Touretteshero's *Not I* will never be this kind of perfection. There will always be unintended verbal and physical tics from Thom sitting alongside Beckett's text and stage directions and there will be different expectations of the audience in the 'relaxed' environment that they create, challenging the modernist ideal of audiences adopting an attitude of "silent, absorbed attention" (Sedgman, 2018, p.19). Galloway et al. say, "The Ethic of Accommodation means making room for difference possible, letting go of preconceived notions of perfectibility" (2007, p. 229). As I return to later, this letting go of these notions of "perfectibility", on stage and in the auditorium, in the name of an avowal of difference, is a significant part of the dramaturgical and socio-political project of change-making here.

This is some of the discursive context established by Thom's introduction, the performance of *Not I,* the 'making of' film and the physical environment Touretteshero create. The fourth and final section of the production is titled "Conversation" in their score (Touretteshero, 2017b). It functions to further explore some of these themes and focusses attention on the role of dialogical discourse in engineering socio-political change. This section begins with each audience member being invited to have a short conversation with an audience member next to them on their feelings about the performance. Thom then draws everyone back into a single group conversation, asking people to share what they talked about in their pairs if they would like to, to offer any

further thoughts they might have on the experience of watching *Not I* and to ask questions they might have about the process of creating or performing it. From my experience as an audience-participant and drawing on my interview with the company, the contributions here included questions for Thom about the production process or the challenge for her in performing the text, questions about Beckett's text and thoughts on the company's interpretation of it, personal testimonies that connected the play with audience members' own lived experience of disability, and political questions or commentary on a disabled-led company and disabled performer engaging with this play.

These contributions from audience-participants that then initiated conversational exchanges with Thom, came from a mixed demographic including disabled and non-disabled people. However, my experience of watching *Not I* as a non-disabled member of the producing team at BAC was that there was a significant presence of recognisably disabled people in the audience that was unfamiliar there and in other theatre spaces at that time. Prior to this BAC did not have an established track record of programming performance by disabled artists/disabled-led companies and only had occasional and relatively ad hoc accessible performances (e.g., those with captioning, BSL interpretation or audio-description). This demographic tilt in the auditorium towards a disabled audience, allied to the authorial voice in the space located in someone with lived experience of disability and the 'relaxed' performance environment, resulted in the conversation appearing to privilege a disabled perspective. Matthew Pountney from Touretteshero (2023) describes this as the "pretty unusual" experience for both disabled and non-disabled people of being in a discursive environment where disabled people can talk to each other and are facilitated to feel like their contributions, their perspectives and lived experience, are particularly relevant to the conversation and might have greater value than those of non-disabled people.[28]

[28] There is an echo here of the scholar and performance-maker Petra Kuppers' description of watching a show by a disabled company surrounded by other disabled people: "In my wheelchair, I sat wheel to wheel with many other people who rarely find themselves in the company of so many others who move through the world in similar ways: that alone was an exhilarating experience" (2011, p.15).

***Burnt Out in Biscuit Land***

*Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* is the touring production that followed Touretteshero's *Not I* and consolidates the approach of creating an opportunity within the frame of the artistic experience for audience-participants to engage in conversation and, within that discursive space, prioritising the contributions of disabled people. The structure of *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* mirrors that of the previous production – a prepared 'art object', in this case a short fictional film rather than the performance of a play, follows an introduction by Thom. There is then time for conversation on themes suggested by the film. The key context for the performance is that it was made in the aftermath of the most critical period in the Covid-19 pandemic and engages directly with the experience of disabled and chronically ill people, particularly those who were considered Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV), and their carers, who were advised and/or made their own decision to self-isolate for much longer periods than those not in these categories because of a heightened risk to their health.

The film (Touretteshero, 2023b) is set in some sort of bunker – a window-less room with shelving stacked with boxes, food and other things that might be required in an emergency. There is a door, referred to as "the door that goes outside", on one side of the space. Three performers inhabit this world, including Thom who initially emerges out of a body bag in which she has supposedly been sleeping. They play out what appears to be a daily routine regulated only by them moving the hands of a broken clock from one hour to the next. This routine includes eating meals from tins, re-packing their "bugout bag" (an emergency survival kit that includes their health passports featuring the statement that they do not consent to 'do not resuscitate' (DNR) orders)[29] and singing upbeat songs, one of which has the repeated lyric "I am not dead…I am not even dead yet". They send emails to the health authorities from a broken computer that has a large hole in it, never receiving replies, and they play games where they pretend to be Siri because their phones do not work. They are

[29] This references stories during the pandemic of DNR orders being attached to disabled people without medical justification and proper consultation: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/13/new-do-not-resuscitate-orders-imposed-on-covid-19-patients-with-learning-difficulties

isolated and disconnected. In a monologue in the film captioned “Raging”, Thom’s character (apparently a thinly veiled version of herself, reflecting her lived experience and opinions) critiques the principle of segregating CEV people from the world in the way illustrated by the characters in this scenario. As she sees it, there is an aspect of this extended self-isolation which amounts to hiding people in these categories away from general view and ignoring them, and in so doing signalling that who they are and what they contribute is not valued. She argues instead for societal adaptations to protect these people out in the world and recognition that things cannot return to exactly the way they were pre-pandemic without implicitly diminishing the human rights of this community of disabled and chronically ill people.

The characters start to lose track of time, question how they are managing to fill the hours and, towards the end of the film, the hands of the clock fall off. With its sense of the characters waiting for something to happen, time looping, the objective external world receding in favour of an abstract environment where inter-subjective (language) games are the only real reference points, there are clear thematic and aesthetic influences from the company’s previous work with Beckett. As they lose their tempers and boredom kicks in, the three characters start to debate whether, despite the efforts they have made to survive in this bunker and the risks involved, it has come to the point where they need to go through “the door that goes outside” to prevent themselves disappearing completely from the world, having lost any belief that the authorities are paying attention to their plight. In colourful knitted balaclavas and stab vests with “No DNR” written on them, the performers open the door and exit into bright light, wind and ash, suggestive of a nuclear winter, Beckettian purgatory and a socio-political ‘hostile environment.’

Following the film, Thom comes on to stage wearing her costume from the film – the “No DNR” stab vest etc. The set from the film – the shelves and “the door that goes outside” are there in front of the audience-participants (Touretteshero, 2023b). This emphasises the theme of the speech that Thom then gives in which she talks about some of the ideas the company were looking to engage with. Central to this is that for Thom, whilst the world they are describing in the film clearly relates to the experience of disabled and chronically ill people isolating during the pandemic and the life and

death choices that people had to make in those circumstances, it also conjures the broader experience of exclusion, discrimination and invisibility for disabled people. This is about an ongoing state of affairs. In a metaphorical sense, connoted by the set from the film there on the stage in the here and now surrounding Thom in her wheelchair, she suggests disabled people often experience life in a bunker wondering whether and how to engage with a hostile external world and living under the threat of being forgotten, devalued or dehumanised. She draws the connection, again there in the setting for the film and in the set on stage, with "preppers" – those who might have a well-stocked bunker and bug-out bag ready to survive civil breakdown, nuclear war, natural disaster or any other extreme emergency. The analogy Thom makes is that disabled people are constantly required to adopt a prepper's mindset, planning for how to survive in an uncertain world. She says, "It's not about one specific crisis, it's about the reality of being disabled and trying not to die" (Touretteshero, 2023a, p.1). She expands on the relationship between the "unique" experience of the pandemic for much of the population and its resonances with the more everyday experience of disabled people: "We were suddenly talking about 'social distancing' and 'self-isolation'; new terms to us all, but somehow they managed to reflect an eerily familiar experience of marginalisation."

What then follows is an invitation to the audience to engage in a conversation with Thom and with each other about the film and some of the themes that Thom has directed attention towards in her speech. She encourages questions for her but also expressions of people's thoughts and feelings on what they have experienced up until that point. This begins with a question for the audience to consider: "If you found yourself in our bunker in Biscuit Land, would you have gone through the door?" (Ibid, p.3). This is an invitation for people to think about and share their own experiences of life in lockdown and, in particular, given the discourse established in the film and emphasised by Thom's monologue that follows, experiences related to being CEV, or caring for someone who is CEV, during the pandemic. Given Thom's framing, it is also an invitation to consider wider personal experiences of, and the politics related to, being a disabled person trying to negotiate everyday life in a hostile environment.

In the performance that I saw (Touretteshero, 2023b), people responded in different ways to this initial question. One person said they would have gone through the door and got visibly upset when explaining that the reason for thinking that was because, even though they were chronically ill, they found the solitude of extended self-isolation "the worst." Another audience member spoke about the fact that they were registered blind and for them the complicated consideration determining whether they would leave the bunker was whether someone would come with them. They would need someone to be with them for support and to protect them in the world beyond the relative safety of the bunker (i.e. their home). Someone joining online (all performances of *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* were live streamed to make them accessible for those who could not join in person) said that she had not decided to leave "her bunker" yet – she was still isolating at home. In each of these cases a short conversation happened. Thom listened carefully, sometimes asked follow-up questions and responded with an anecdote from her own lived experience that linked to what had been said or made a wider point about disability politics based on what was being talked about.

Even more than with my experience of *Not I*, the conversation in *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* was dominated by contributions from disabled and chronically ill people. Thom is clear that this is part of the design:

> "Who we prioritise is so clear within our work now. […] People who have direct lived experience of barriers are going to recognise stuff or recognise that they have a particular permission to speak, freedom to speak, encouragement to speak, in those spaces". (Pountney and Thom, 2023)

For me, as with *Not I*, it was a surprising and unusual experience to have these disabled perspectives encouraged and prioritised in a theatre space and in a public discourse in this way.

**Redistributing 'naming rights': Freire's model and conversation in Touretteshero's practice**

This paradigmatic shift, engineered in part through conversation in *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, towards prioritising the otherwise de-prioritised, or even ignored and

dehumanised, voices of people with marginalised identities (in this case disabled people) within a discursive space sitting within a theatre/performance environment, and the capacity of that shift in that context to offer the potential for real-world material change, is what the remainder of this chapter examines. It will focus on using Freire's understanding of the dialogical and its revolutionary potential as a way of more fully understanding Touretteshero's use of conversation as part of a practice of change-making.

For Freire, the fundamental cause of, and, in turn, consequence of, the oppressor-oppressed relationship is "the problem of humanisation" (1996, p.25). That is that an oppressor class dehumanises another group, reduces them from subjects to the status of objects; treats them as something that can and should be "possessed". As such, the oppressed are not afforded the same claim to humanity as this dominant class. For Freire, "humanity", having the right to be treated as "fully human", is something that is considered another possession that some feel themselves more entitled to than others: "Humanity is a 'thing' and they possess it as an exclusive right, as inherited property" (Ibid, p.41). For Freire this sense of entitlement, this "strongly possessive consciousness" (Ibid, p.40) runs deep. It has a material aspect of course – it is about the ownership of wealth and resources – but there is a symbiotic relationship between this objective, material possessiveness and subjective, discursive equivalents. As noted in chapter 1, for Freire, the battle to subvert the oppressor and liberate the oppressed is linked to a need to challenge who has the rights to describe the world, whose narrative is heard, who has naming rights when it comes to speaking about how the world is and how it should be. He thinks that these naming rights have been owned, like their material equivalents, exclusively by the oppressor. It is in that discursive possessiveness that the dominant class establishes their possession of humanity and the lack of humanity of others is communicated. From a pedagogical perspective, this discursive oppression manifests for Freire in the "banking" system in which a singular narrative, one that sustains the capitalist status quo, is "deposited" in students who are expected to be relatively empty and uncritical.

For Freire, it is only in disrupting this underlying pedagogical dynamic, and by extension challenging the way that ideological narrative is communicated more generally, that

the oppressed can be liberated. The point here is not just that that the narrative is the wrong one, but that the way that the narrative is produced and communicated, using the banking system, even if that system were to be adopted by a new ruling class, dehumanises people because it does not acknowledge the full humanity of everyone. It does not give all groups the agency to contribute to the narratives that are being constructed, it does not equitably distribute the right to be part of the process of naming the world. Instead, a "humanising pedagogy" (Ibid, p.50), which would also be an emancipatory pedagogy, where these naming rights are properly shared, must be dialogical: "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Ibid, p.69). The inherited authority of the teacher and their mono-directional transmission of an unquestioned narrative on how the world is, must be replaced by a process of learning, understanding and naming of things that gives the student as well as teacher a voice. It is only in this fundamental rewiring of the pedagogical process for Freire, which is also the process of developing ideological understandings and political awareness, changing what are the standard terms of discursive exchange in many contexts, that oppressed or marginalised groups can be made fully human, can be transformed from objects to subjects. It is only in this dialogical approach to learning, to knowledge production, that the issues, concerns and lived experience of oppression can be properly acknowledged and understood and that those perspectives can feed into new learning, new knowledge, and the humanity (i.e. the agency, the hopes, the desires – the subjectivity) of everyone involved in a society can be affirmed. Thus, the need to distribute ownership of the world more equitably relates to the material realm but also the discursive one (as noted these two areas are inter-dependent) and radical change is not possible without dialogical action as the means of this re-distribution.

Disability Studies scholars Mairain Corker and Sally French talk about the "reciprocal relationships between the discursive, and therefore socio-cultural aspects of our experience as disabled people and our material existence in a disabling society" (1999, p.7). For Touretteshero, it is on this site, where the discursive, the "socio-cultural" and the material overlap and inform each other, that they see their practice catalysing socio-political change. As Thom says:

> I often talk about this idea that, as a disabled person, you receive messages constantly through your environment […]. Often within theatres and cultural places those messages aren't great. They're like: 'you haven't been thought about, this isn't for you.' And we want to actively change those messages. More recently, I've also thought about the fact that actually non-disabled people are being sent messages by their environments all the time and often the messages non-disabled people get are: 'your time is more important and your way of doing things is the priority.' And it's also important to change those messages if we want to really democratise and share power and build community in more inclusive and accessible ways. (Pountney and Thom, 2023)

Thom is recognising here that, in changing the physical conditions of the theatre experience for audience-members, through the 'relaxed' approach – different kinds of seating arrangements, permission to move and make noise and come and go from the auditorium etc. – the ableist 'messaging' embedded in more traditional theatre environments and the conventions associated with them, is being challenged. In Freire's terms, the "anti-dialogical" narrative, which privileges non-disabled perspectives and interests and actively excludes or "conquers" disabled identities and perspectives, that Thom sees as commonplace in theatres and other cultural contexts, with its dehumanising effect, is being subverted in the environments that Touretteshero create for their shows.

As well as these environmental changes to the audience experience, which carry a discursive value as Thom states, implicitly admitting the perspectives of disabled people as valid to whatever discourse is being generated in that space, there are other ways that Touretteshero's projects counter the anti-dialogical banking model that can be argued underpins ableist orthodoxy. In both *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* – through the discursive framing of the event both in advance and from the stage, through the themes of the play and films, and through the presence of Thom as a disabled performer – lived experience of disability is placed centre stage. In this theatre space, disability is not a marginal identity or concern; here it is the dominant interest. Freire argues that "once a situation of oppression has been initiated, anti-dialogue becomes indispensable to its preservation" (1996, p.119). In centring disability, a

disabled perspective and voice, in the circumscribed time-space of these shows, the anti-dialogical dynamics that usually propagate and 'preserve' the dominant ableist discourse, are revealed as such, a move towards the dialogical – giving status to discursively marginalised voices – is initiated, and a turn towards changing the "situation of oppression" begins.

As described, Touretteshero, from the stage and in the 'relaxed' environment they create, clearly prioritise disabled lived experience and this helps create an interpretative frame that encourages a privileging of disabled perspectives and politics and opens up dialogue as part of the private interpretative process for audience-participants with the dominant anti-dialogical narratives referred to above. But then the use of conversation with audience-participants extends that dialogical process. It makes clear that the familiar ableist, anti-dialogical narrative should not simply be replaced by a different, monological (but this time disabled-led) narrative. The use of conversation is an opportunity to make public that within both disabled and non-disabled communities there are a plurality of experiences and perspectives. It highlights that at the heart of the violence of the ableist hegemony is an unwillingness to acknowledge and respond to difference and that difference is not a binary arrangement and can only be revealed in a dialogical process in which a range of participants feel enabled to contribute. But also, revealed through the qualities of the conversational that resist the categorical and the absolute, that for each of those participants there is difference and dialogue within each individual's 'voice', within their sense of self – that the disabled person's voice, as with any non-disabled voice, should not be seen as indicative of a different but fixed and unchanging (i.e. easily categorisable) perspective. On this, Tony McCaffery, writing about making performance with learning disabled performers, sees a danger in ideas based around "liberating the 'authentic' voice of a marginalised group of people, or 'giving voice to the voiceless'" which he sees as "a kind of (neo)liberal chimera that posits 'voice' or representation as a marker of fixed, static identity when such concepts as self and identity are context dependent, fluid, and fugitive" (2023, p.12). My argument is that Touretteshero, through their avowedly dialogical approach including the use of audience-participant

conversation, appear to avoid that risk and embrace the subjective voice, along with other discursively informed constructs, as “context dependent, fluid and fugitive”.

As well as describing dialogue as the process of human beings working together to “name the world”, Freire describes it as “the encounter of women and men seeking to be more fully human” (1996, p.73), countering the dehumanising effects of the anti-dialogical approach which denies people their subjectivity and perpetuates their oppression. Conversation with people, particularly in a public forum such as that created for *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, gives people the opportunity to make their contribution to naming the world, to force their way into the public conversation in this dramaturgical reimagining of the public sphere, to use their personal discourse to speak of how the world is and to talk about how it should be in the future. It is in the act of being able to contribute to a conversation around these things that people can be “more fully human”, to have their status as subjects rather than objects exercised and acknowledged by others. For Touretteshero this connects with their desire to create spaces in which disabled people can be enabled to be more fully present and express themselves as they wish – as Thom puts it, “where everyone has total permission and freedom to be themselves, exactly as they are” (Turney, 2017). To see one’s “whole being” (Pountney and Thom, 2023), in all of its fluidity and contradictoriness, acknowledged and responded to, and as part of this to be involved in the ongoing process of naming the world in the form of a public conversation, is a humanising and radical act. It is a refusal of the self-denial and suppression encouraged by conservative forces looking to preserve an anti-dialogical status quo which excludes certain voices from that naming process and in doing so denies their full subjectivity.

**Transforming the status quo: changing the discourse and people’s lives through conversation**

Through this extension of dialogue to everyone in the room, centred around discourses related to disability, in the form of conversation with and between audience-participants, Touretteshero believe that real-world change can occur. This relates to Thom’s own understanding, previously referred to, of the way that discourse shapes and is shaped by the material world and also how she sees everyday conversation playing such a critical role in her negotiating her own “survival” in the world. For her it

is a means of managing other people's understanding of her identity and needs, even if these conversations can sometimes feel inequitable and, in some sense, coerced:

> Conversation for me every single day is part of me being able to access the world. Whether I was having those conversations on a bus with an Under 11s football team, or conversations with a woman in the supermarket, I was needing to explain my body and my experiences. And that didn't always feel like a choice. What making art that includes conversation gives me is choice, control and agency and power within those conversations that I don't always have in other parts of my life. (Pountney and Thom, 2023)

Conversation here is seen as a means to elicit some kind of understanding with strangers of her impairments and her needs in order that she can negotiate the barriers, whether physical or attitudinal, that the world, including her interlocutors, are presenting her with. Thom points to conversation as the mechanism she employs to deliver action and change in her everyday life in the world, even if this can be essentially ameliorative (temporarily removing a barrier) rather than transformational. Despite this, conversation as the agent for reaching understanding and negotiating change, does have the potential to have a transformational effect. Again, Thom cites her own lived experience:

> I think for me as a disabled person and a disabled artist, connecting with other people and connecting with other disabled people and connecting with ideas has been transformative. They are the things that have made the biggest difference in my life. And often that's through conversation.

Conversation, in its ideal form, is here seen as a means of connecting across difference, as a means of learning about new ideas and of establishing a sense of community and solidarity. Returning to Freire, as described, he sees dialogue as the encounter between people in the act of naming the world, learning about each other and the problems of the world and – in that process of learning, self-validation and community-building – striving to become fully human. He also says that it is: "the encounter of women and men in the world in order to transform the world" (1996, p.110). These different aspects of the dialogical encounter are imbricated with each other. The

dialogical approach to knowledge production and politics is about acknowledging the full subjectivity of people who have previously been dehumanised and key to that is to give those people equal status in the discourse that names the world, and, through that, an equal share in *ownership* of that world.

In the conversations that happen in both *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, Touretteshero create a space where a Freirean transformative dialogical process can play out. This is a discursive space in which they create the conditions where people are encouraged to meet as equal participants in a conversation about the world (positively prioritising disabled people and disabled perspectives to address prevailing inequalities in these areas). It is a learning process of listening to and respecting the validity of previously marginalised perspectives[30], and a discursive environment where connections made between different experiences of disabling barriers and oppression can create or consolidate a sense of community. My experience of the conversations in both performances was a radical sense, through this process, of the ownership of the world, the rights to name it, being wrested away from what Freire calls the "possessing class" (Ibid, p.41), with me as a socially and economically privileged non-disabled white man a self-declared member of that class. In each conversation, given the thematic framing, the 'relaxed' set up and Thom's hosting, it felt like the implicit terms of these exchanges dictated that disabled contributors should speak first and should speak most; that the goal of community-building was centred around this group. Within this unusual dramaturgical frame, generated through audience-participant conversation, disabled experience became the default rather than, as is the general hegemonic presumption, the privileging of the non-disabled as if it were the universal subjective

[30] Galloway et al. write: "The [Ethic of Accommodation] includes the politics of listening as well as the politics of speaking. Whereas most minority groups maintain they have been 'silenced' by the majority and thus place speaking at a premium, disability communities often place listening on the same plane. People with disabilities often feel they have not been listened to or even addressed […] Listening, here, means being taken into consideration, being attended to" (2007, p. 229).

position. Freire says that there is a "tendency of the oppressor consciousness to 'in-animate' the oppressed" (Ibid, p.41). Through the focus in these conversations on disabled people's personal narratives, and the expressions of empathy, solidarity and sense of community from other disabled people and their allies that followed, it felt to me like my version of an "oppressor consciousness" was being revealed as such as the assumptions underlying it (including its privileged status) were disrupted and, as part of that, the objectified, "in-animate" disabled other was being animated, turned from object to subject, in that consciousness.

Freire expands on the potential of the dialogical approach to learning and political action to animate and re-subjectify the "dominated, conquered thou" and for it to be the route to transformational change:

> In the theory of anti-dialogical action, conquest (as its primary characteristic) involves a Subject who conquers another person and transforms her or him into a 'thing'. In the dialogical theory of action, Subjects meet in cooperation in order to transform the world. The anti-dialogical, dominating *I* transforms the dominated, conquered *thou* into a mere *it.* The dialogical *I*, however, knows that it is precisely the thou ('not-*I*') which has called forth his or her own existence. He also knows that the thou which calls forth his own existence in turn constitutes an *I* which has in his *I* its *thou*. (Ibid, p.148)

It is notable here that Freire replicates Buber's (1923) counterpoint between the "I-Thou" dialogical ideal and the anti-dialogical "I-It" dynamic. He is taking Buber's understanding of the instrumental, cataphatic quality of the I-It and emphasising its imperialist connotations. This is not just Buber's instrumentalisation and atomisation of the other, Freire's anti-dialogical I-It is about conquest and erasure of the other's subjectivity. The use of the term "not-I" is apposite in this context. "Not-I" here is every person who is not I, who is different, who is other, and this multitude of not-Is "call forth" the I's existence. Freire is emphasising the dependency of any given subject on others; that the existential and social realm exists as a network of these dependencies and that, viewed from the position of the dialogical, this dependency, this reliance of I on not-I, is affirmed as a positive, mutually uplifting meeting of subjects rather than the anti-dialogical attitude to not-I which is about negation, denial or objectification – i.e.

not-*allowed-desired-human*-I. Touretteshero's shows, including the eponymous *Not I*, echo Freire's dialogical embracing of "not-I". Not-I in this sense being a politics and a discourse that resists the hegemonic dominance of one identity and set of behaviours over others, that says 'I is not everyone', and that instead foregrounds recognition of identity plurality and behavioural diversity. As Thom says in her final speech after the conversation in *Not I,* again in the spirit of the Ethic of Accommodation, "Being inclusive isn't complicated. It's the difference between assuming everyone does things the same way and understanding that people do things differently" (Touretteshero, 2017b, p.2).

*Not I* is also Beckett's play of course and one of the things that makes it a relevant choice for Touretteshero as a starting point for a conversation focussed on the lived experience of disability is that the not-I here is not primarily an external other but rather it is the protagonist's own self. *Not I* is an internal stream of consciousness monologue in which the selfhood, the subjectivity, of Mouth is constantly denied by itself as it desperately insists on the third-person address: "what?...who?...no!...she!...SHE!..." (Beckett, 2009, p.93). In the context of Touretteshero's production this has the connotation of internalised ableism. Mouth, even within her innermost discourse, is denying her identity as a disabled person or is ashamed or embarrassed by that identity and wants to distance herself from it. This results in a literal form of self-denial – it is "she" not "I" that is disabled. This is the anti-dialogical attitude to not-I, but rather than denying the humanity and agency of a separate oppressed group, this negation is addressed inwardly, questioning the disabled person's right to exist and have "fully human" status. If Touretteshero's presentation of Beckett's *Not I* deliberately speaks on one level of an oppressive anti-dialogical ableist hegemony and in particular the aspect of that that results in internalised ableism, the context around it – the centring of the disabled lived experience, the opportunity for diverse disabled voices to be heard – establishes a dialectical alternative. It suggests an embracing of the dialogical attitude to not-I in which the individual's own subjectivity as well as others are fully embraced, where not-I becomes *thou*, and in that – that fundamental rewiring of the possessive, anti-dialogical consciousness and that sharing of ownership of the discourse amongst all of

the *I*s/all the *thous* – there is the possibility in those performances for transformation through dialogue, through conversation.

This is a transformation, through discourse, of attitude and consciousness and the hierarchies that support an oppressive, anti-dialogical stance. Drawing on her own life, Thom makes clear though that having conversations, sharing experiences and "building the language to talk about" disability – as Freire would say "naming the world" from the perspective of disabled people – has effects which are not contained purely within the discursive realm but have material consequences for people's lives:

> I went from not talking about something I found really challenging, to ignoring something that was that was within my life that was having a big impact, to looking at it and talking about it and building the language to talk about it. And I felt that transformative power in my own life, and when we talk about increasing understanding and […] talking about disability and disability culture, I think sometimes those things are seen as nice things to do, as a nice bonus, when actually I understand them to be absolutely crucial, life-saving, life-changing, vital tools. Conversation and connecting and understanding each other is absolutely key to lots of people's survival. (Pountney and Thom, 2023)

This point about how critical discourse can be in disabled people's lives and how open conversation can be a means to create material change in the world, and how Touretteshero create dramaturgical environments in their shows where this sort of conversation is possible, is emphasised by an example they cite of an audience-participant for a performance of *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* in Stoke who made a contribution towards the end of the conversation section:

> One of the audience basically said that they had, during Covid, decided that they were going to have a 'do not resuscitate order' and had accepted that and signed the paperwork. And they said that, as a result of seeing the show, they were entirely questioning that and might make a different decision. Whether they did or didn't, that space and their contribution to a conversation and the conversation that surrounded it meant that the upshot was that they might do something that was potentially literally life-saving to them.

**Conversation: a process of learning and community-building**

Freire says, "to speak a true word is to transform the world" (1996, p.68) and, as indicated above, there is evidence in Touretteshero's work of this link between changes to the discursive paradigm – to whose voices are heard and whose are prioritised, changes from the anti-dialogical to the dialogical – and transformative "life-changing" real-world effects. It is important to stress at the heart of the notion of the dialogical for both Touretteshero and Freire is the notion of learning. The arrival at these transformative "true words" is a pedagogical process that happens through conversation:

> [It's] about action and change. I think that we are making work where we want to understand something, change something, draw attention to something. We tend to make work around stuff that we're still learning about, and we're learning about it through the conversations with audiences. But it's also about the change that that then makes in the world. (Pountney and Thom, 2023)

Thom connects the use of conversation here to a process of learning and understanding, for them as artists, but also by implication for audience-participants. That process of learning is then linked to change. Transformational, democratic change, using this model, does not happen through broadcasting complete, pre-existing truths and expecting others to silently coalesce under this monological banner (i.e. the banking model). Instead, it involves a dialogical process based in incompleteness and open-endedness in which people are engaged in an ongoing way in trying to understand themselves, others and the wider world. Using Freire's vocabulary, this form of dialogical learning is an approach based around "problem posing" rather than answer-giving. Learning and the ongoing *process* of understanding through discourse is not something that simply happens prior to an argument for change being advanced but is the actual locus where paradigmatic change can happen. For Thom, this process of learning – about/through oneself and others – is deeply connected with conversation: "I'm really interested in the process of conversation and the process of learning and evolving my relationship with my own body and brain and experiences and circumstances and how that relates to others and finding connection." Conversation is the natural ground for a learning process where the world, and in

particular one's understanding of it and attitude to it, is not a fully revealed finished object, but rather something that always needs to be better understood and that can only happen through a radical democratic process which recognises the extent of the differences between individuals and groups in terms of their lived experience and interests. This is a form of learning, a kind of dialogue, that, as Freire says (1996), requires "humility" – an acceptance of the need to learn from and share discursive territory with others. There is always likely to be knowledge and life experience beyond one's pre-existing frame of reference and its reflection in the discourse with which one is familiar. Learning through conversation is a means of reaching into those discursive and experiential corners and bringing what is there closer to the centre. In so doing, the learning that happens not only gives one a better understanding of the world as it is, the people in it and the "limit situations" (Freire's term for the circumstances of oppression that inhibit the oppressed from being fully human) that they experience, but, as Thom suggests, through that dialogical pedagogical process, through this inter-subjective insight and empathy, one's understanding of one's own self and one's own limit situation (one's "own body and brain and experiences and circumstances") is developed.

Freire says that "no one can say a true word alone" (1996, p.69) and it is through the uncertain journey of the dialogical, based in learning from others, learning about oneself and one's "circumstances", and attempting to respond to problems collectively, that these "true words" (the words of the oppressed and the marginalised), this transformative discourse, this transformative understanding, with its consequence in real-world action, can result. So, part of dialogical learning is about community-building as people, in their difference, through conversation, find insight, empathy or 'connection' in their lived experience, the circumstances of their oppression, and shared purpose in resistance to it. Reflecting on the process of making community arts projects with "mental health system survivors", Kuppers, drawing on Jean Luc Nancy, describes it as a "leaning" of the individual, in their difference and the singularity of their personal "story", towards others, towards a temporary, improvised and fluid sense of community, built around a shared, if provisional narrative: "We lean, connecting I's and others, singular story and myth" (2011, p.86). Touretteshero

highlight the importance of building community through conversation in their practice, establishing shared interest and understanding around experiences of disability and in doing so beginning to establish what Kuppers calls a "substitute myth" (Ibid, p.85), in the face of an oppressive anti-dialogical culture where this community identity, this counter hegemonic narrative, particularly when founded on political opposition and demands for action, is suppressed by dominant ableist discourses. Pountney says:

> I think that internalised ableism, as a phenomenon experienced by a lot of disabled people, is by definition quite isolating. And because that internalised ableist narrative is often around effectively blaming a person with impairments for having those impairments and disconnecting them from an awareness of the systems that are bringing about that isolation, the opportunity to be in a space with other disabled people, particularly who are politically disabled, means that you can start to find resonance. (Pountney and Thom, 2023)

The example cited above of an audience-participant reappraising their decision to sign a DNR order as a result of experiencing *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* and participating in its conversational element, points to the changes that might be possible as a result of Touretteshero shows as they create the (unusual) opportunity to be "in the company of so many others who move through the world in similar ways" (Kuppers, 2011, p.15), to speak with and learn from others, establishing a sense of community and solidarity that might elicit a deeper understanding of the systemic oppressions that they might share in common. Through that solidarity, established through conversation, the isolating anti-dialogical ableist discourse is challenged. In speaking "true words" together, a different, collectively-held narrative, which acquires significant intellectual, emotional and socio-political power – and by dint of these things *dramaturgical* power – for those in the room from being the articulation of a provisional community as well as an individual, leads directly to the possibility of real-world change: the rescinding of a DNR, changing attitudes to disabled people's rights etc.

At the end of Touretteshero's *Not I* – after the performance of Beckett's play, the contextualising film and the conversation – Thom asks the audience-participants, in solidarity with Mouth, cast here as a disabled neurodivergent protagonist, to

collectively "vent", to express themselves through words and noises in the spirit of the character's stream of consciousness:

> For one glorious moment tell your own story – vent frustrations, declare love, or say the same thing in a hundred different ways. We'll do it at the same time, but all different. Do it fast, slow, gently, loudly, silently, fiercely or tenderly. Use any language you like. But let your conscience off the hook. This is our chance to make some noise in solidarity with Mouth. (Touretteshero, 2017b, p.3)

This is perhaps the apotheosis of the expression of dialogical community and solidarity in *Not I*. Thom says, "Mouth is only as isolated as her community makes her" (Ibid, p.2) and this is a final demonstration to all of the 'Mouths' in the room – disabled and non-disabled – that they have a voice (they have *voices*) and they sit alongside other voices capable of expressing their lived experience, and each voice can be amplified through dialogue, community-building and collective articulation with those others. This final "limit act" (the acts of resistance that Freire saw as challenging the oppressive terms of any given limit situation) is a cacophony of difference, each person telling their "own story", taking possession of the narrative and filling the dramaturgical frame, audibly occupying the sonic space of the theatre. It is a representation of the dialogical ethic of community emerging from the "leaning" of a diversity of *I*s towards each other, singular stories connecting with each other to form a "substitute myth", and that then leading to the possibility of personal or public action and material change which is the paradigm that underlies Touretteshero's practice.

**Making noise and behaving 'unreasonably': conversation as a "trespass" into the 'perfect' theatre space**

As referenced previously in the description of the discursive context audiences are introduced to in *Not I*, a key aspect of this strand of Touretteshero's change-making practice is that it happens in a theatre environment. As well as entering into a discourse that challenges the oppressive anti-dialogical assumptions that shape the external world and inspiring socio-political change there, they are doing something similar in relation to the conventions and expectations associated with theatre spaces and the live performance artwork. In fact, I will argue here that Touretteshero's

practice suggests that many of the oppressive anti-dialogical narratives that support an oppressive hegemony in the world at large are distilled in many ways in the established modern Western paradigm for the theatre experience and that acting to change the dynamics in that environment is a way of challenging this wider paradigm. Acting in this way in a theatre context is also a way of directly acknowledging, and engaging with, the cultural aspects of the material conditions of oppression – the fact that, as Freire says (1996), at the roots of material oppression is the oppressor's dehumanising narrative of supremacy and objectification which for him is a "mythologising" of reality. If the anti-dialogical culture can be changed – if, in this context, anti-dialogical dramaturgical precepts can be challenged – it follows for Freire, that these narratives can be changed, the world can be "demythologised" and can thus be made more available to being changed; to use Kuppers' terms, "storytelling" can follow "story-breaking" (2011).

In the theatre show *Backstage in Biscuit Land* (2014), that Touretteshero made prior to *Not I*, the company initiated a discourse around the exclusionary, anti-dialogical quality of the standard contemporary Western theatre-going experience. This show focuses on the barriers confronting disabled people as potential audience-members, drawing on Thom's experience of going to the theatre and meeting challenges to do with physical access but also direct and humiliating prejudice and hostility from both artists/performers, venue staff and other audience members. One of the central anecdotes that Thom tells in that show is when, for one performance she was at, her ticcing was complained about to staff as being disruptive and for the second half of the performance, despite her having had extensive communication with the venue in advance about her visit, she was moved to a soundproof booth at the side of the stage. She was literally side-lined, muted, her presence in the auditorium erased, in response to normative expectations of the appropriate conditions under which theatre should be experienced, including expectations of how audience members should behave.

The shows that follow, *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, continue to explore the politics of theatre/cultural spaces. In the 'relaxed' ethos that surrounds each – the practical arrangement of the space, the provision of facilities for those with different needs to access the performances, the explicit lifting of conventional prohibitions

around movement and noisemaking in the auditorium – there is a direct response to the barriers that Thom talks about experiencing as an audience member in *Backstage in Biscuit Land*. But with each of these later performances, this attempt to create an environment in which audience-participants, and in particular disabled audience members, are encouraged to feel like they are welcome and do not have to suppress, disavow or be embarrassed by some inalienable aspect of their identity, is extended through the use of conversation. These conversational moments switch the implicit invitation to audience-participants from 'if you make noise, it's fine, be yourself' to, 'we *want* you to make noise and contribute; we value what you have to say'. In these Touretteshero performances, the anti-dialogical ableist paradigm of the conventional theatre experience is challenged with a more dialogical one. Key to this challenge is that the assumed hierarchies underpinning the dynamics of these cultural spaces are questioned and this relates again to Freire's understanding of the relationship between teacher and student in the banking pedagogical model with its inherently conservative values. The teacher-student dynamic in this model is that, borrowing from Hegel, between "master" and "slave" (Freire, 1996). Boal in *Theatre of the Oppressed,* who famously translates Freire's theories into a theatre context, makes a clear analogy. The teacher here is the "dramatist" and the student is the "spectator". Boal points to the hierarchy implicit in this well-established theatrical model and its implication for the way that ideology is narrated there: "The spectator, who sits stock-still, is encouraged to think in a way which is presented as being the right way of thinking, the Truth. It is the dramatist that tells this Truth, who points the way: he is affirming, not asking" (2008, p.xx).

Whilst not fully adopting any particular Boalian methodology, Touretteshero, in their dialogical approach, including the use of conversation and the emphasis on their performances being part of a learning process, do establish an environment in which the conventional hierarchies between stage and auditorium are disrupted, where the "Truth" is an open, porous entity, the shaping of which is only partly determined through the company's authorship, where no-one (performer or audience) is expected to sit "stock-still" (ticcing and coming and going from the auditorium are explicitly welcomed) and where the audience are 'asked' as well as being recipients of

'affirmations'. Touretteshero's "asking" of the audience, the "invitation to participate" (White, 2013), in the conversations in *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, comes in the context of the assumed hierarchies of theatre/cultural spaces, but also the external world, being challenged. Received notions of appropriate audience behaviour in theatre environments based around an attitude of quiet receptiveness are immediately disrupted in the way that Thom welcomes audience members into the space, chats with them and then sets the terms of the relaxed performance. There is the challenge here to the idea of prioritising, *at all costs*, the uninterrupted flow of communication from stage/author to auditorium/audience and the implicit hierarchy therein between the (genius, visionary, practised) artist with their (honed, perfected) work of art and the audience who, in that moment, in any audible/visible contribution they make, whether voluntary or involuntary, can only be imperfect, unpractised and demotic, whose contribution can only be seen as a disruption of the ideal. Seen through the prism of Touretteshero's practice, this hierarchical underlaying of theatre convention and standard dramaturgical dynamics, is revealed as symptomatic of more fundamental social hierarchies – most clearly in this context between the disabled and the non-disabled. The framing of the relaxed performance, which includes the explicit permission for audience members to make noise, throws into relief, as Thom experienced herself as an audience member in her removal to a soundproof booth as retold in *Backstage in Biscuit Land*, that in the conventional culture surrounding Western theatre and the dramaturgical assumptions on which it is built, the non-disabled body and mind and their natural behaviours are prioritised over the disabled person's body and mind.

As noted in the introduction, in *Audience as Performer* Heim says that expectations around audience "performance" became more restrictive from the late nineteenth century onwards. Within this conventional culture governing audience behaviour she says, "The 'do not' list of strictures overwhelms the 'do' list which generally only includes breathing, laughing quietly, applauding at the end of a performance only, wearing deodorant and sitting up straight" (2006, p.38). Expanding on Heim's analysis, Sedgman (2018) points out that the demands of this standard "theatre etiquette", which emphasises audiences being quiet and immobile and dealing stoically with

physical discomforts, can function to exclude certain demographics as a particular tradition of "perfection" in culture and the reception of culture is enforced. As well as the disabled or chronically ill, this might include those from working class or Global Majority backgrounds. Sedgman traces these conventions, and the occasional public campaigns that have emerged to support them in response to the perception that audience behaviour is 'deteriorating'[31], back to the ideals of Matthew Arnold's Culture and Civilisation movement of the nineteenth century and the belief of that movement in perfection *in* culture being a means to spread perfection – in terms of 'civilised' behaviours, attitudes etc. – *through* culture, in line with a pervasive European imperial project. In other words, that through protecting and promoting "the best which has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold and Garnett, 2009, p. 5) – the notion of a cultural canon defined from a white, (privately) educated, Euro-centric perspective – the ideals (and privileges) of that class would be safeguarded and even extended to parts of society and areas of the world that would otherwise be 'uncivilised'. As Sedgman says:

> Any history of cultural value must therefore acknowledge the subjugation of cultures outside Europe under a white elite idea of 'perfection.' In this way, the vision of audiences as the quiet recipient of great art is undeniably imbricated in a history of white supremacism and anti-working class prejudice. (2018, p.32)

Sedgman argues that a lot of the discourse around theatre etiquette and the notion of perfection in art which has its roots in this nineteenth-century imperial mindset also reflects the modernist ideal – described both in the introduction and chapter 2 – which emerged towards the end of that century and privileged the autonomy of the artist and the artwork, emphasised the importance of the great work of art's "aura" and promoted a receptive attitude for audiences/spectators based on "quiet absorption". The paradigm that is suggested here overall is based around a cultural hierarchy – certain types of art and culture that are part of a canon of great art and certain ones that are not. But this is imbricated, as Sedgman suggests, with a social hierarchy – the

[31] For example, the publishing of a Theatre Charter on audience 'dos and don'ts' in 2014: https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/aug/02/stephen-fry-theatres-switch-off-mobile-phones

deterring or exclusion of certain types of people and prohibition of certain behaviours as a perceived threat to the "elite idea of 'perfection'" when it comes to producing or consuming art, when perfection here is actually the projection of the male, white, European, non-disabled, upper/middle class sensibility as if it was a universal, objective standard.

Earlier in this chapter I touched on how Touretteshero's version of *Not I* disrupts the concept of perfection and precision as it relates particularly to Beckett's play, including his prescriptive attitude on how it should be performed and by *whom*, and in so doing challenges the wider modernist ethic that fiercely privileges the auteur's vision and protecting their intention, safeguarding the autonomy of the artist and artwork from the influences and disturbances of the audience and external world. What is clear in the light of Sedgman's analysis is what is at stake in *Not I* and *Burnt Out Biscuit Land* in Touretteshero's challenge to the inherited anti-dialogical conventions of the theatre-going experience, to established theatre etiquette, and to the dramaturgical traditions based around the 'great artist' and the 'great work of art'. In the dialogical paradigm they establish – which includes the relaxed performance environment and ethos, centring a disabled performer and her non-intentional movement and speech, framing interpretative discourse around disabled lived experience, as well as the overtly conversational elements – all of which feels unfamiliar in terms of the conventional theatre-going experience, the Arnoldian and modernist-influenced idea of perfection in the artistic sphere is revealed as marked by imperial hierarchies and violent exclusions. In its 'perfection', and its policing of that perfection,[32] it has racist, ableist, sexist and classist implications. As Sedgman argues, referring specifically to the conventions/rules around theatre etiquette that are a key part of this Arnoldian, anti-dialogical ideology, "If we keep insisting that the pleasures of absorbed silence are worth preserving, we have to face up to the fact that others will continue to feel (or literally, physically to *be*) excluded from taking part in these events" (2018, p.132). Sedgman argues that the discourse around theatre etiquette which can result in these exclusions of certain

[32] Sedgman says "even when grounded in the best of intentions, this is what the theatre etiquette campaigns are doing: working to police the behaviour of others" (2018, p.7).

people and behaviours from the "polite"[33] Western theatre space often presents itself in terms of common sense or "reasonableness", falsely suggesting that it is underpinned by a system of universal values and is articulated from a neutral subject position. In doing so they naturalise and make appear ahistorical its prescriptions. As Sedgman makes clear, this naturalisation of these discriminations and exclusions, presenting the privileging of an established elite subjectivity as inevitable through "discourses of reasonableness" (Ibid, p.88), is evident in the discourse around theatre etiquette but is also a common trope within socio-political discourse more generally. As Thom says, in relation to the experience of disabled people's experience in various contexts, "sometimes the exclusion of disabled people feels like it's presented as natural and inevitable" (Pountney and Thom, 2023).

In Touretteshero's *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, the use of conversation can be seen as an extension of the company's multifaceted dialogical approach and its challenge to the conventional ideology of theatre-going described above. In the relaxed performance framing, it is made explicit that "absorbed silence" is not a necessity and the opportunity for conversation within the frame of the artwork takes this further. Making noise, speaking, having a voice, conversing, is not here a dilution or pollution of the sanctified modernist artwork. Instead, it is an expression of what artworks, and artistic cultures, that insist on that silence are actively excluding. It is an insistence that the voices, specifically of the disabled and the chronically ill in this context, are audibly acknowledged within the frame of the artwork and that those voices can have a role in shaping that artwork, that they are given some authorial control, a share of the 'naming rights'. It is a way of wresting some of the discursive control over rule setting, whether that control is embodied in the conventional discourse around theatre etiquette or the ghost of Beckett, and instead establishing alternative terms for the debate. Conversation in the context of these shows is what Boal would see as a necessary "trespass" of the spectator into the frame of the performance, taking ownership of the discourse as a step towards taking a more equal ownership, as

[33] "Ideals of politeness are […] subjective and contingent, designed to entrench systems of privilege to prioritise the ease and comfort of the elite (often white, abled, middle-class) subject over the ease and comfort of everybody else" (Sedgman, 2018, p.109).

otherwise marginalised and disabled people, of the external, material world. Boal says, “to speak is to take power: whenever we become the speaker we are empowered” (2008, p.xx) and the conversational elements in these two performances are an explicit attempt to address a profound power imbalance in the external world but which is also represented in the embedded ideology of the anti-dialogical theatre experience. In theatre spaces marked by these assumptions about who (what kind of people) gets to speak and who gets to listen, Touretteshero’s shows provide an opportunity for those with lived experience of disability to become speakers and to be listened to and in so doing “to take [some] power”.

Conversation in these shows happens after audiences have experienced something approaching a conventional art object – the Beckett play in the case of *Not I* or the Beckett-influenced art film in *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*. Through this, audiences are reminded of the conventional world of art/theatre into which the company are trespassing and encouraging the audience to trespass. With both the play and the film, the conventional expectation based on theatre etiquette would be that audiences sit silently and do not answer back. But with the conversation that then follows, the prepared, to some extent ‘perfected’, artwork is de-centred; it does not have the final word. Instead, unprepared, imperfect conversation trespasses into the public space of the theatre. In this, the status afforded to the singular authorial voice (the voice of Beckett, the voice of the company or the filmmaker), the perfectionism of the honed artwork and fluent, practised expression, are subverted. There is a dramaturgical movement from something like what Boal calls “finished theatre” towards “rehearsal theatre” – from something relatively closed and decided to something more open and undecided.

Touretteshero acknowledges that whilst conversation – in the opportunity it offers to foreground plurality, the process of learning from others, immediacy and spontaneity – has the potential to challenge the anti-dialogical social hierarchies of conventional theatre and the external world, this is *not* inevitable, and it can be as marked by privilege and advantage as other genres of communication. Thom sees the currency given to “fluency in speech” (Pountney and Thom, 2023) in hegemonic non-disabled culture as an indication of how, even in conversation, ableist hierarchies in which

"certain types of brains get prioritised over others" can undermine their dialogical project. However, she says:

> What feels important about conversations and supporting conversations within our work is it that they don't have to be perfect, it's not about finding the most beautiful way of saying something. It's about finding ways to connect ideas and people and thinking up with each other, and to hear each other and bear witness for each other and to then allow that to change our thoughts.

Touretteshero are thus looking to an understanding of conversation as central to a relational and discursive paradigm that emphasises dialogue as a process based in embracing imperfection, that is "rough around the edges", that is "relaxed" and inclusive. Conversation here is a learning process happening between people who are both teachers and students, that know some things but are uncertain about others, that might have extensive expertise when it comes to the lived experience of disability but less expertise in public speaking, or vice versa. It is a Freirean process that needs to be embarked on in a spirit of humility, knowing that the contribution of any individual to the discourse will always be partial and imperfect, that others' contributions will always hold value, and there is always the possibility that conversing based on an ethic of openness to, and learning from, difference will lead to one's original thinking changing in some way. Essential here for Freire and for Touretteshero is that conversation, to be a meaningful dialogue which has the capacity for transformational change, "cannot be an act of arrogance" (Freire, 1996, p.71) and "founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence" (Ibid, p.72). In *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, as described, Touretteshero attempt to dismantle some of the assumed hierarchies prevalent in the external world and the theatre environment to create something more like a "horizontal relationship" between people which might be an unfamiliar experience for some in the audience, whether disabled or non-disabled. It is in this horizontal relationship based on love and humility, that views 'imperfection' as the honest expression of the meeting between the I and not-I in which there is always more difference (more 'not-I') to experience and more to be learnt about others and the world, that community-building and therefore change can occur. This

relationship between humility, doubt, learning, and the consequent creation of "new meaning" and "new community", chimes with Kuppers' view on her practice working with other disabled/neurodivergent people: "By destabilising the founding story, we fight for entry into the realm where new meaning can be founded at the same time as we continue to be suspicious of founding stories and their exclusionary effects. And it is our loss of certainty, our anxiety, that allows for new community to come into being, in being-together, and in joint exploration" (2011, p.84).

The challenge of imperfection through conversation in Touretteshero's shows is the challenge to the anti-dialogical paradigm of the conventional theatre experience and dramaturgical model with its elevation of, and defensiveness around, singular authorial and interpretative authorities. It is the challenge to Beckettian prescriptiveness and the anti-dialogical quality of the fixed and final art object. It is the challenge to a knowledge production system that narrates a finished version of the world based around "founding stories" that exclude inconvenient, discordant and uncontainable perspectives. It is also a challenge to notions of the perfect mind or body; the ableist ideal. Through the voices of the disabled interlocutors contributing to the conversations in *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land,* disabled people's bodies and brains are trespassing into the 'perfect' performance space, drawing attention to the customary ableist violence involved in perfecting that space and spaces of social and political spectacle more generally.

In this avowal of imperfect conversation within the dramaturgical frame, there is an avowal of discourse being the ground on which any challenge to oppressive socio-political hegemony needs to happen, and that a discourse of plurality, difference, imperfection and process is the way to counter established anti-dialogical discourses that promote singularity, exclusion and closure under the cultural cloak of perfection and the finished artistic product. From Freire's perspective, it is from an acknowledgment of what he calls "incompletion" that a genuine dialogue can proceed. This incompletion is linked to hope: "Hope is rooted in men's incompletion, from which they move out in constant search – a search which can be carried out only in union with others" (Ibid, p.72). Without hope for one's understanding of oneself and the world to be advanced, for problems posed to be answered through dialogue with

others and the establishing of common cause with them in pursuit of these answers, then the change in thinking and in action in the material world that would lessen those feelings of being incomplete, of not being fully human, would not be achievable. Conversation in *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* opens up the space for those feelings of incompletion to be expressed in this way as a positive embracing of difference and humility in the face of the other (the not-I) as it allows for a form of 'hopeful searching' through/with others for ideas and actions that will make both the individual and collective 'I' of those who are marginalised and oppressed more fully itself, more fully human, and, through this process, for the world to be made a little better, or more 'complete', for these people to inhabit.

For Freire, as for Touretteshero, the incompletion of conversation functions to both demythologise the anti-dialogical, oppressive narratives that have been internalised in both oppressor and oppressed but then, through the imbricated process of learning and community-building inspired by that sense of incompletion, that dialogue results in new internal understandings and new, collectively held ideas and agreements on future action. As Thom says, "I think that conversation helps us unpack the assumptions that are layered up in us all, it helps us pick those apart and actually connect with each other and think about the humanity and the community and the potential of what we can make together" (Pountney and Thom, 2023).

**The materiality of conversation in Touretteshero's practice**

The hopeful conversation here has an avowedly material quality. It is a discursive representation of the otherwise marginalised bodies and brains of disabled and neurodivergent people. The conversation is making visible in the theatre space, within the dramaturgical frame, the materiality of these bodies and brains, including their impairments, and, in the recounting of lived experience, it is bringing the sometimes oppressive material conditions (including its disabling barriers) of the external world into the discourse. Going further, as well as this conversation being a medium for representing these material conditions, it is also a *product of* those conditions and disabled people's reaction/resistance to those material inequities. Material conditions have created the need for this discourse – this "sudden urge to tell" (Beckett, 2009, p. 92) – and have brought people together to communicate in this way in response.

Conversations in these two shows also have a materiality in that, by providing this discursive opportunity that centres lived experiences of disability, they are functioning as speech acts; they are 'doing things with words' or, to adapt Thom's words, these conversations are about 'making things together'. In the act of occurring, these conversations that prioritise disabled interlocutors and disabled experience, establishing a community within the theatre space with this as its discursive centre of gravity, are radically changing the standard, ableist terms of the debate, asking audience members (whether disabled or non-disabled) to see the physical and discursive world from this rarely privileged perspective, creating the potential for new material relations as part of a new politics, built on new linguistic understandings. Disabled people, through their contributions to these conversations, take up space and time – physical and sonic spacetime and dramaturgical time-space. They become the physical as well as the discursive centre; a temporary, alternative, discursive, dramaturgical and material hegemony. Drawing on White's enactivist-inspired analysis of participatory performance (2024), an unusual "environment" is established which audience-participant "organisms" must "couple with" and negotiate their way through using their "embodied minds". A new "situation" is established with the potential to generate new meanings.

In my experience of these performances, as a non-disabled person, this functions as a challenge to assumptions about what is natural and normal, a challenge to what is conventionally centre stage – i.e. me (white, male, middle class, non-disabled). It is a challenge to what Lennard Davis (2006) – writing about the role of the novel in the nineteenth century in consolidating in narrative form the ideals of "middleness" and the "average" as standards for all aspects of human life – calls the "hegemony of normalcy" and the creation, as a result of that hegemony, of the disabled (amongst other groups) as the deviant, abnormal other. This challenge in Touretteshero's practice to the "hegemony of normalcy" echoes what Kuppers says about her projects with disabled and neurodivergent people in public spaces such as in the green hills of the Brecon Beacons National Park: "Through performance […] we inscribed our right of access to these spaces, making our presences felt. The performance act became the

performative act: a conscious inscription of difference into sedimented patterns of naturalised 'law'" (2011, p.72).

The discursive and material defamiliarisation of ableism that happens in Touretteshero's performances, with its apotheosis in these conversational moments, bringing to the fore what is conventionally hidden and unheard, creating a sense of community around these marginalised identities and perspectives, acts to change both how the world is seen now with its barriers and inequities – who gets to name it, to be visible in it, to 'inscribe' it – but also how it might be in the future; a future potentially re-shaped around the different perspectives and different priorities suggested here. This a future that might be helped in a small way into being from the establishment within the walls of the theatre space of this counter-hegemonic paradigm in which the material, discursive and dramaturgical presence of disabled people, their humanity and agency and their identity as individuals and a community (their difference) within each of those overlapping realms, is properly acknowledged, and that problematises the "sedimented patterns" of normalcy that denies or marginalises these things in the world beyond that theatre space (and also *within* that theatre space, or others like it, at other points in time).

**A Successor to Brecht and Boal – a contemporary theatre of dialogue and change**

In their use of conversation with oppressed or marginalised audience-participants, bringing their material presence and material experiences into the frame of the artwork, and, in turn, using that as a way of creating the possibility of both discursive and material change for those groups, Touretteshero are building on the precedent of Boal. Boal himself, with his notion of "spect-actors" involved in debate and then re-shaping the fictional scenarios they are presented with to challenge an oppressive socio-economic limit situation, is developing Brecht's logic for how to create a theatre of change (2008). For Brecht though, as Boal says, it was primarily a consciousness raising exercise, activating the audience out of what Brecht saw as the bourgeois intellectual lethargy encouraged by traditional dramatic theatre based on the Aristotelian model and instead inspiring pro-revolutionary critical thinking and conversation but without an expectation that, in the moment of the performance, the critical thinking and debate that he wanted to inspire would play a role in shaping the

performance itself.[34] As Boal says, "Even in Brecht, it is the dramatist, not the citizen, who chooses the word" (2008, p.xx). Ultimately, although interested in liberating the audience's critical consciousness from the anti-revolutionary assumptions promulgated by the dramatic model with its emphasis on the world as it *is* being an ahistorical inevitability, the alternative Brecht offers is still rooted in many ways in what Freire would have seen as an anti-dialogical pedagogical model which maintains a clear hierarchy between teacher (dramatist) and student (audience) and in which the audience are essentially expected to receive the dramatist's teachings, their "word", without a means to challenge or change what is represented – this is a version of the "affirming, not asking" of traditional theatre of which Boal is critical. Instead, Boal says: "The audience must not just liberate its Critical Conscience, but its body too. It needs to invade the stage and transform the images that are shown there."

This 'liberation of the body', which is also a liberation of the physical voice, of the audience-participant, which is allied for Boal, and Touretteshero, to a liberation of the "critical conscience" (one's internal moral/ideological discourse), returns this to the imbrication of the discursive, dramaturgical and material and the possibility of change-making through conversation as part of performance. In the audience-participants trespassing on or "invading" the stage or, in practice, in these conversational moments, the stage expanding to include the auditorium – in the materiality of audience-participants' bodies and voices, and their material experience expressed through discourse, taking its place on that stage[35] – a Brechtian understanding of materialist

[34] See Mueller (2006) on Brecht's *Lehrstücke.*

[35] This metaphorical "trespass" of disabled bodies on to the stage emphasises the potential of the dramaturgical space to explore and critique paradigms of social relations in the ways in which they include or exclude disabled people. As Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander say: "At one level, the question of disability is a question of the deployment of bodies in space, the question of which deployments are normative and which are not, together with the articulation and enforcement of norms. At another level, because of their unique cultural and somatic experiences, disabled bodies relate to and define space differently than normative bodies. Performance provides a valuable conceptual model for the consideration of disability because it, too, is fundamentally about the deployment of bodies in space" (2005, p.9).

contingency is made evident and a defamiliarisation of the assumed 'natural order' of things occurs. These 'liberated' bodies, voices and ideas reveal through these conversations, the contingency and temporality, the historicity, of the material and discursive realms in their confluence within the dramaturgical frame. They highlight both *their* material and discursive contingency but also that of the hegemony of normalcy that they are temporarily replacing and critiquing that has hitherto repressed or contained them. They are revealing that hegemonic paradigm as unnatural, the product of historical conditions, built through collective narration that includes decisions about how and in whose interests the material world should be created, but subject to being re-created through an alternative collective conversation that includes a greater centring of disabled experience. In this way, in *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, Touretteshero fulfil Brecht's appeals for a theatre that stresses the "impermanence" (Brecht and Willet, 1964, p. 190) of extant socio-political arrangements, that emphasises what Freire calls "the process of becoming" (1996, p.65), and therein the possibility of change: "'he did this' has got to become 'he did this, when he might have done something else'" (Brecht and Willet, 1964, p. 195). The use of conversation in these pieces brings the discourse of "he might have done something else", "the process of becoming", out of the confines of the individual's critical consciousness or the post show discussion between audience members on the journey home. Instead, it becomes one of the central materials of the artwork; placing the plurality of life experiences, of *something elses* – of difference and contingency – and the learning and community-building that is possible when connections across difference are recognised, at the heart of an aesthetic focussed on socio-political change. In doing so Touretteshero point to a post Brechtian theatre which eschews ideological didacticism, Brecht's fetishisation of the rational, and the modernist inheritance of precision and control. Instead, it sees inclusive, pluralistic, non-hierarchical dialogue, operating across rational and affective registers, mixing the personal and the political, functioning as a device through which to democratise authorship and interpretation, at the core of a radical, and *radically imperfect and incomplete*, dramaturgical practice. Conversation used in this way in performance helps promote a democratic paradigm that highlights the limited parameters within which hegemonic understandings of 'democratic discourse' sometimes operate, the voices

that it commonly fails to give a platform to, and instead temporarily extends participation in that discourse to marginalised and lesser-heard groups. This is a counter hegemonic paradigm based on a broader understanding of the differences between people and their lived experience and that offers a challenge to any socio-political order and the discourses that support them in their claims to be democratic – it asks, 'who is being excluded here?'

The argument in this chapter then is that conversation in the practice of Touretteshero helps stage a radical democratic paradigm, with an embracing of difference, imperfection and incompletion at its heart. This radically inclusive conversational paradigm acts as a powerful proposal for an alternative way of thinking, speaking and acting, particularly with regards to the power dynamics of social relations, and in that has the capacity to achieve meaningful discursive and material transformation within the contemporary theatre space and in the world beyond.

## Chapter 5. Sharing the Stage, Finding the Words: moves towards conversation in Uninvited Guests' practice

This chapter focuses on the practice of Uninvited Guests, the theatre company, formed in 1998, of which I am co-artistic director with Jessica Hoffmann and Paul Clarke. It traces the emergence of audience-participant conversation as a device within our performances, highlighting the ethical, philosophical and aesthetic values and interests attached to it and the dramaturgical effects of the conversational within our practice. I argue that audience-participant conversation is a manifestation of a set of artistic and existential concerns that pre-date the use of this specific device. Analysing the evolution of our work through this conversational lens is a useful way to understand it, revealing recurring questions within it about how one might relate to a world that has other people in it. I make the argument that the conversational ethic/aesthetic in Uninvited Guests' practice – which emphasises the values of doubt, humility and plurality, and stresses both the intimacy and distance involved in interpersonal discourse and witnessing the other – suggests a paradigm for how to approach those social relations that embraces both 'questing' and failing. Bakhtin and Levinas provide the philosophical framing in this chapter. In their theorising around conversation and the dialogic as fundamental to the dynamics between self and other, they provide related but distinct perspectives which help me to explore the rich possibilities for meaning in Uninvited Guests' evolving approach to the conversational.

In charting a trajectory towards conversation, this chapter begins by examining examples of Uninvited Guests' earlier shows – *Film* (2000) and *Schlock* (2003) – before giving significant attention to *Love Letters Straight From Your Heart* (2006) (hereon referred to as *Love Letters*). It then dwells at length on *Make Better Please* (2010), the first project to explicitly use conversation between audience-participants as part of the performance.

It should be acknowledged directly that I am not a neutral observer here. I have played a key creative role – as writer, deviser and performer – in all the projects I write about. I aim to embrace the positive aspects of that familiarity – the detailed knowledge of each performance it affords, the experience of how performances have played out on

different occasions, and the long-term thinking (from being involved in early R&D to now looking back on these projects from a distance) that can be drawn on. At the same time, I recognise that when I am making arguments based on the interpretation of any given performance, I do not write from the typical position of audience-participants. Having said that, I want to note that I *have* experienced versions of *Love Letters* and *Make Better Please* as an audience-participant (even if not a typical one given my pre-knowledge) when they were performed by alternative casts. It is also important to recognise that, particularly in this kind of participatory practice, the boundaries between performer and audience member are blurry, as evidenced in my consistent use across this thesis of the hybrid term 'audience-participant.' This works in both directions, so as well as audience-participant, there is scope to recognise the perspective of 'performer-as-audience.' In many of these Uninvited Guests shows, despite ostensibly being a 'performer,' I have felt something analogous to the experience of being an audience member. I have found myself listening to audience-participants speaking, or text that they have written being read, and being surprised, moved, or finding something funny, and almost forgetting the conventional 'responsibilities' of my role as performer. I have found myself acting as an audience. This can be seen as the corollary of one of the central contradictions White (2024) identifies in the experience of being an audience-participant in participatory performance – the experience of "watching and being the thing watched" (p.20), "being at the same time the artist, the artist's medium and the viewer" (p. 3). So, the fact that I have performed in the shows that I am writing about here does not necessarily discount me from some insight into the experience of what it is like to be an audience-participant in them. Despite this, I return to the fact that I am not a neutral or typical observer and my aim here is not to suggest my interpretation will be a standard reading for audience-participants. It is born out of my experience of making these shows, performing in them, noticing audience-participant responses to them and reflecting on their possible meanings over years. I recognise that the position from which I approach this material is likely to result in a partial analysis but one that will nevertheless have scholarly merit given the positive aspects that I have already detailed of having such a close and long-term relationship with the subject matter.

**Plurality, Collaboration and Co-Authorship: the beginnings of a 'conversational' ethic and aesthetic**

On the origins of the move towards using conversation between audience-participants within Uninvited Guests' performances, Hoffmann says:

> I think it goes back to the first show, it goes back to *Guest House* and *Film* and those early shows, when we had conversations with people to gather content. Those conversations pre-show, pre-performing of the work, those conversations would form the content for the work. And so I think the idea of having a conversation with your audience, whether that's in the performance space or outside of the performance space, has always been there. (Clarke and Hoffmann, 2023)

Hoffmann is referring here to the documentary theatre-influenced practices of shows like *Guest House* (1999), *Film* and later *Schlock* in which a key part of the research and content-gathering process involved interviewing people (at this stage they tended to be people we knew) on a particular subject. For example, for *Film*, people were asked about their memories of scenes from movies. They were asked to recount what happens and how they remember those filmic experiences making them feel. *Schlock* is a performance that explores horror movies and TV hospital dramas – cultural representations of accidents and violent events – alongside real-life experiences of these things. Again, the process of "gathering content" for this show involved interviewing people about their memories of these things. Text from these conversations, in the examples above, was then, via a devising and editing process in which extracts were identified as having a particular poetic/dramaturgical efficacy, used to form the script for these performances. In line with others responding to the move towards "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud, 2002) or the "social turn" (Bishop, 2005) in the 1990s and into the 2000s, Uninvited Guests were in the process of re-imagining the artists' role as that of "context providers" (Kester, 2013)[36] and assigning the function of "content providers" to others. The content provision at that early stage in the company's life, as Hoffmann says, happens as part of the creation process, "pre-

[36] Kester is using the artist Peter Dunn's term.

performing". The context provided by us as artist-authors comes in the framing of that conversation-based text-gathering process – the thematic focus we have determined and the questions that we ask – rather than at that stage providing a context for more unpredictable, spontaneous provision of content in the moment of live performance itself.

What were the roots of this focus on using other people's words as a central element of the artwork in those early Uninvited Guests performances? I argue here that interests and concerns can be identified in this approach that are instructive in understanding how this later develops into the use of live conversation with audience-participants within performances such as *Make Better Please*. Firstly, the use of other people's words was part of a wider approach of working with 'second-hand' material – e.g., studying scenes from movies or TV and creating movement sequences based on them. In *Film*, for example, there is an episode inspired by the opening scene of *Apocalypse Now* in which Martin Sheen's character is in his room in Saigon, apparently losing his mind, fighting imagined foes. My version of this sees me in my underpants playing (and failing) at being Sheen. I spin around on stage, mimicking Sheen's tai chi, knocking over a glass of water standing in for whiskey, and then slipping and sliding dangerously around the stage. The modernist visual art and literary practice of working with 'found' objects and text and the postmodern development of this kind of approach is an identifiable part of the inheritance here. This manifests as recognition of the inevitably recycled nature of language and cultural expression. Taking the postmodern perspective in particular, the proliferation of cultural production and the over-exposure to images, TV, film etc. is seen to have created an environment where an avowal of the practice of cultural re-appropriation seems to be an axiomatic and socio-politically relevant artistic strategy.

This philosophical inclination towards the second-hand is imbricated in a theatre context with postdramatic moves to disavow the unique authority of the playwright in the dramatic model and the corollary of that which has the word as the defining feature and interpretative centre of the theatre experience. This de-centring of the playwright and their "fable" (Lehmann, 2006) as the creative act around which all of the other theatre arts should coalesce in deference/support is interpreted in some

postdramatic practices, including Uninvited Guests', as a general inclination towards problematising singular centres of authorship and in turn a tendency towards adopting co-authorial approaches in their creative processes.

This idea of co-authorship, evident in Uninvited Guests' early shows, perhaps begins as an internal company dynamic and, looked at from this perspective, can be seen as synonymous with collaboration. A key part of the company's process positions all members of the creative team for each project as artist-peers and authors who are expected to originate text, movement, image and sound etc., engage in relatively open, non-hierarchical conversation around the creative process, and have a role in determining final authorial decisions across all the constituent aspects of each performance. Charles Green cites an embracing of collaboration in visual arts practices in the 1960s and 70s as "a crucial element in the transition from modernist to postmodern art" (2001, p.x). For Uninvited Guests, this idea of internal company collaboration and co-authorship elides into a collaborative approach to authorship more generally, which brings things back to the interest in cultural re-appropriation, in the second-hand, and in using other people's words generated through conversation, which is evident in those early shows. This focus on collaboration on various fronts speaks to the work's connection with the long tail of that postmodern shift that Green refers to – a response to an increasingly mediated experiential landscape, the discrediting/questioning of political and philosophical metanarratives including those around selfhood and, as a consequence of all these things, a sceptical attitude to cultural expressions predicated on strong notions of the autonomous, the linear and, as already referred to, the singular (whether a singular vision, truth or author). Many other theatre-makers in the UK working through the 1990s and into the 2000s in a postdramatic vein took the idea of collaboration as a cornerstone of their ethic and aesthetic. Most influential perhaps on Uninvited Guests, and others whose ensembles were formed in the 1990s/early 2000s, was Forced Entertainment. Tim Etchells writes about collaboration here:

> John Ashford, now head of The Place Theatre, once called experimental theatre 'a compromised art…a mucky, mutable, dirty, competitive, collaborative business,' and we always liked the quote recognising in it the great mess of our

> own process but also appreciating the fine word compromise – no clean single visions in our work, no minimalist control freak authorial line – since by collaboration – impro, collage, the bringing together of diverse creativities – one gets an altogether messier world – of competing actions, approaches and intentions. (2002, p.55)

A connection is made by Etchells between a collaborative authorial process ("the bringing together of diverse creativities"), a heterogeneous aesthetic ("no clean single visions") and, perhaps, the implication that this 'messiness' reflects the world beyond. As with Uninvited Guests' early practice, notions of collaboration, co-authorship and an embrace of recycled, second-hand language and culture are part of Forced Entertainment's aesthetic/ethic of plurality, "of competing actions, approaches and intentions", in which the postdramatic and postmodern overlap.

**Polyphony, heteroglossia and centrifugalism: a Bakhtinian perspective**

Considering the centrality of *plurality* to the aesthetics of Uninvited Guests' practice, from those early performances on into the later work that includes live audience-participant conversation, it seems appropriate to bring in Bakhtin's ideas around the dialogical now. Echoing Etchells' view of his ideal theatre aesthetic reflecting the plural intentions of a number of collaborating artists, Bakhtin refers to the polyphonic quality of a Dostoevsky novel: "It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the intention of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (1984, p.18). For him, the medium of the novel has the best potential to reflect some essential truths about language, the social world and human consciousness and the fact that each of these overlaps with each other and is founded upon dialogism. The novel, albeit usually authored by one individual, has the capacity to give voice to a plurality of heterogeneous consciousnesses, to represent different characters that each has its own will, its own "intentions", and that is not simply subservient to a monologic authorial voice (Etchells' "clean single visions").

For Bakhtin, those "competing" yet inter-dependent consciousnesses exist in, and through, language, which, even within the apparent unity of a single national language,

has an inherent plurality and each instance of utterance is marked by the consciousness that has uttered it but also by the social conditions in which it is uttered and the many previous times and contexts in which those words have previously been uttered. Each utterance also reflects the speaker's anticipation of how what they say will be received by an audience of others – both the concrete other embodied in the presence of other human beings and imagined others (whether specific individuals or abstract entities) who act as "the listener, the witness, the judge" (Ibid, p.237) hovering over both vocalised and unvocalized language (i.e. over speech and thought). For Bakhtin, at the level of the individual consciousness, at the social level and when considering the play of language in constructing identity, meaning and relations across these spheres, there is an inevitable "dialogical orientation" (1981), an orientation to the "already uttered", the "already known", and to anticipated contradiction (the "rejoinder"). Ultimately this is an orientation towards the *other* and towards *otherness* in its plurality and complexity. Dominant literary/ideological approaches that deny this in favour of emphasising the monologic – the singular style, the closed semantic system, ideological surety, the Aristotelian dramatic arc (or, in Etchells' words the "control freak authorial line") – are reflective of an "orientation toward unity" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.242), a desire for closure, for a resting place for language, consciousness, ideology and the social. This approach is a negation of the chaotic "historical becoming" that these things are inevitably subject to, as they are being shaped by the plurality of the world as it exists now, has done in the past and will in the future. In this state of becoming, things are never fixed, alternatives are always available. For Bakhtin, focussed on the potential of novelistic discourse, and with Etchells looking at theatre, an appealing, honest aesthetics reflects these "centrifugal forces", rather than the "clean", "centripetal", "monologic" ones that have historically prevailed in each medium. For each of them the ideal is a 'messier' kind of aesthetics.

Returning to the trajectory towards conversation occurring within the frame of the performance in Uninvited Guests' practice, in the early projects there was a Bakhtinian emphasis on heteroglossia. This is evident in the focus on the second-hand – the quoting of image, sound, movement and text from multiple and diverse film and TV sources and use of text gathered from conversations – and in the emphasis on

collaboration and co-authorship in the creative process. Performances like *Film* and *Schlock* as a result have something akin to the centrifugal quality Bakhtin admired[37]. This centrifugal, collage-like aesthetic, based around the plural and polyphonic, as well as resisting the monological in its inputs (the sources it draws on, the voices it incorporates), is also attempting to resist the monological in its outputs. Implicit in it is an antipathy to unified and singular meanings and, instead, a desire for open-endedness and interpretative complexity.

In describing the approach of Dostoevsky's novels, Bakhtin writes, "the object is precisely the passing of a theme through many and various voices, its rigorous and so to speak, irrevocable multi-voicedness and vari-voicedness" (1984, p.265). In the early Uninvited Guests practice referred to there is some of the same sense of attempting to better understand a theme or area of cultural interest through immersion in the plurality of other people's speech/writing/art/filmmaking on that subject. There is that sense of the "passing of a theme through many and various voices" and that only in this dialogical process – in examining a theme through a social, heteroglossic prism – can it really be revealed and understandings start to emerge given that all meaning, all understandings of the world from a Bakhtinian perspective, are based in language which is inherently inter-subjective and socially (over)determined. Similarly, there is a reflection in Uninvited Guests' practice, evident from the earliest performances, of Bakhtin's belief that selfhood and consciousness and one's own point of view on something is subject to the same dialogical processes. Or to put it another way, it is only through the words of others (and the cultural expressions of others – the TV, the films etc), that one's own thoughts, one's own words, one's own position, can start to form. As such, in representing a matrix of social/cultural perspectives on a topic, one is also providing a means for the individual (both artist and audience member) to start finding a route through, enabling one to enter into a dialogue with the ideas and the

[37] There is also a more literal centrifugalism in both these performances with the performers spinning and sliding – on water in *Film*, on fake blood and ketchup in *Schlock* – losing control and sending ourselves and objects on stage flying.

"intentions of others" and through this to find a position for oneself, a sense of one's own intention in relation to those of others in this social/cultural matrix.

**Embodied co-authorship in *Love Letters***

The next significant step towards live conversation featuring in Uninvited Guests' performances was *Love Letters.* At the centre of this show are dedications written by audience-participants to loved ones, alongside pieces of music chosen by them that they associate in some way with those people. These dedications can be to lovers, friends or family and regularly cover themes including first love, long-term relationships, new or enduring friendships, unrequited love, relationship break-ups and bereavement. Here are some short extracts taken from much longer dedications to give the reader a flavour:

> Here's to many magic moments: from late night trips to the garage, propositions in a Mexico bar, beach huts in Thailand and temples in Guatemala, the birth of our children, friends and family, drunken falls while waiting for a taxi, an incontinent dog, and the daily routine that never stops. [Newport performance] (Uninvited Guests, 2013b)

> I don't think there could be a stronger bond of love than between two nerdy brothers. I remember a childhood full of a shared love of videogames, sat around our fat old school TV and trying to beat each other up at Smash Bros. [Plymouth performance] (Uninvited Guests, 2024)

> Our relationship ended in April this year and I haven't seen him since. This song on a memory stick was our last communication, from me to him […] I loved him so *well*, without drama, and I had never seen what that looked like before. In fact, neither had he, and he couldn't cope nor could he ask for help. I still love him and I think I always will. Tears spring into my eyes even as I write this, and my heart feels full to burst. [BAC performance] (Uninvited Guests, 2013a)

> He was a family friend, we grew up on the same street and used to race down the road on skateboards and in go-karts. He died in a car crash in 2001. He was

> in his early 20s. Too young. We miss him. [Preston performance] (Uninvited Guests, 2015)

Audience-participants write these dedications in the days leading up to their attendance and they are integrated, verbatim, into a new script as part of the pre-show preparation. In each performance the two performers (I am usually one of them) play the chosen tracks and read these dedications, like radio DJs. Although conversation is not happening within the frame of the performance, this is a clear move on from previous practice in that direction, providing space for audience-participants to express themselves in their own words (and music) more autonomously. For the first time in Uninvited Guests' practice, the content-providers are the audience-participants there in the space and there is a move towards extending to them some of the agency and autonomy associated with the collaborative ethic underlying relations within the creative team. They acquire some of the attributes of co-authors and this evolves the aesthetics of Uninvited Guests' practice in a way even more suggestive of Bakhtin's polyphonic, heteroglossic, dialogical paradigm.

As with previous pieces, a theme is explored – love – in a Bakhtinian manner by passing it through "many and various voices", but in this instance those voices have much greater autonomy, much greater ability to present a fully formed and individualised perspective on that theme. They are the "unmerged consciousnesses" that Bakhtin describes in Dostoevsky's novels, consciousnesses that resist being easily integrated into the monologic projection of the author's consciousness, or in this case resist being neatly subsumed within the company's unifying authorial imperatives. An aesthetics develops here in which the postmodern and postdramatic commitment to questioning traditional centres of authorship and the pursuit of singular, unified meanings is given human body and face. In *Love Letters* the contribution of plurality, of heteroglossia, of social and historical contingency – in short, Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic – to the aesthetics of the performance comes through the embodied presence of the audience-participants.

The other consciousnesses whose text is heard, whose chosen songs are played, are *there,* both through the lives and histories made visible through each of these individually authored dedications, but also in the concrete sense of being physically

present in the space. The show draws attention to their presence and to their dual role as participants and audience, as collaborators and witnesses. The audience is relatively small – usually forty people. Half of them sit along one side of a long table opposite the rest of the audience-participants sat at an identical table. Each table is dressed as if for a wedding reception with red tablecloths and vases with flowers. In between the two sections of audience facing each other is a two-metre gap. For most of the performance this space is empty, a space across which the audience are encouraged to look at their fellow audience-participants. This is initiated towards the start when people are asked to "look into the eyes of the person sat directly opposite" whilst Johnny Cash's *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* plays (Uninvited Guests, 2023). Soon after, I say, "It is worth knowing that all of the dedications you are going to hear tonight were written by people who are here with us in the room right now". Usually, it becomes clear who has written each dedication – that person or someone they are with cries, embraces the person they are with, raises a glass in tribute (the audience are served sparkling wine), or responds in another way that identifies them or the person they are with as the author. All this foregrounds the embodied nature of the co-authors in the audience for each performance, and gives the stories told and the emotions expressed in the texts read an embodied quality. It points to what Bakhtin sees as the key quality of embodiment to the dialogical dynamic:

> logical and semantically referential relationships, in order to become dialogic, must be embodied, that is, they must enter another sphere of existence: they must become discourse, that is, an utterance, and receive an author, that is, a creator of the given utterance whose position it expresses. (1984, p.184)

In *Love Letters* audience-participants have their words read for them and there is no live backwards and forwards between interlocutors – it is not conversation yet. Nevertheless, it is approaching the embodied characteristics of the dialogical as Bakhtin conceived of it. In listening to the dedications read, there is a heightened awareness of the presence of the individual human beings from whom these utterances originated. You can look into that person's eyes if you wish. You know that, if the invitation to participate was different in this show, you could respond to their utterance with your own and they would be able to respond – a conversation could

proceed. The utterance here, via its expression by the performers, is indirectly attached to the body of the person in the audience whose utterance it is, and, in that process, they are avowed as authors. In Bakhtinian terms you are on the cusp of "another sphere of existence", that of discourse, which only proceeds in that acknowledgement of, and engagement with, other human beings in their status as authors – something that the sphere of monologic aesthetics and ideologies seeks to diminish or negate.

This avowal of those in the audience for *Love Letters* that have written dedications as embodied authors also opens the possibility for *all* audience-participants, including those that have chosen not to submit a dedication, to be considered potential authors. Each is an embodied presence that has the potential to tell their own story in their own way, that has the capacity to make their own dialogical contribution to the discourse. In fact, whether spoken aloud or not, that consciousness, sitting behind that face and body, *is* contributing to the discourse. It is writing its own dedication, formulating its own critique of the dedications and the music it is listening to, reflecting on memories evoked, having an unspoken dialogue with what is said. As Bakhtin says (1984) human beings cannot *be* without that dialogue. The analogy of the Tube train occurs when considering the arrangement of the audience-participants in *Love Letters*. As in that scenario you look across a gap, an aisle, at strangers and can reflect on the separate consciousnesses, the separate lives, the web of social connections extending from these bodies and faces opposite – the narratives, the discourse, unheard in that moment, connected to and giving definition to these people. On the Tube train you are presented with the profound plurality of other lives represented in the small sample of different bodies, faces (and minds) that happen to be there. With *Love Letters*, in becoming aware of the often extraordinary stories of love and heartbreak – moving across time and place, through tragedy, joy and quotidian ups and downs – that are embodied in individuals within the audience, the invitation is to consider the other stories, the other lives, the other histories and futures that might be signified through the presence of those people sat alongside and opposite. The dialogical aesthetic here becomes one of embodied plurality and otherness. The other is not an abstract, diffuse other whose text can simply be reappropriated into the company's authorial project. In

this case, the other is here, a physical being claiming the status of author for itself and other human beings.

*Love Letters* asks its audience to think about how we relate, how we tell our own story and experience affect in a world of co-authorship, amid the plurality of other people's words. It sets up a scenario where, through the lyrics of familiar love songs and through the words of love expressed in the dedications that are read, through an internal dialogue with what is heard, through empathy, through witnessing this embodied discourse, you might feel a stronger sense of your own subjectivity, your own position as a co-author or collaborator through, and in relation to, others' attempts at authoring. For Bakhtin, intersubjectivity is the inescapable condition of subjectivity, and language, the material of subjectivity, is "populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others" (1981, p. 294). In this sense the individual, as they contribute to any discourse, has the excessive plurality of the human world, of otherness – past, present and future – running through them. But for Bakhtin, and as suggested in the aesthetics of *Love Letters*, despite the inseparability of the self from the social through this interpenetrative characteristic of discourse, those others nevertheless remain endlessly plural, mysterious and never fully knowable. Others have an embodied presence and, through discourse, have a purchase on our understanding of the world and ourselves, but at the same they remain separate consciousnesses that can never be neatly overlaid with our own. They are tangible yet intangible. They are alien to us despite the best efforts of dialogism to diminish this. Bakhtin says that in using language, in speaking, the interlocutor "breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory" (Ibid, p.282). It is this paradox of connection and alienation which *Love Letters* conjures, or to borrow from Doyle's reflections on Adrian Howells' practice, "the wild properties of language as a site of intimacy and distance" (2016, p.306). Each dedication read, each piece of music played, is an attempt by the authors in the audience to reach out using this shared, overpopulated language, to announce to that audience that it has a contribution to make to this discourse – that it wants to reveal a slice of the internal discourse which forms its conscious existence. In so doing that author "constructs [their] utterance on alien territory", making themselves visible

within the conceptual field of others, connecting through empathy, through insight, through the intimacy of their physical presence, helping the listener to understand the speaker and themselves better through this discursive process. But at the same time, in making this connection, in breaking through the other's conceptual horizon, they are reminding themselves and the others witnessing that, through language, they are straying into "alien territory" and are making visible the centrifugal plurality of human experience and the infinitely regressing otherness of human beings to each other.

**"Bashing against the edges" – Levinas and *Love Letters***

This is where Levinas, who places more emphasis on the alien nature of the other, provides a relevant reference point. If Bakhtin's model is predicated on the inevitable interpenetration of (albeit separate) consciousnesses through the dialogical, heteroglossic nature of language, Levinas is focussed on the other being "absolutely foreign" (Levinas, 1991b) and interpersonal communication being a symptom and expression of "the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other" (Ibid, p.34). The "face" of the other, in a literal and figurative sense, is the location of this alterity and exteriority, this otherness "exceeding the *idea* of the other" [my emphasis] (Ibid, p.50). In other words, any attempt to reduce, to categorise, to thematise other human beings by incorporating them into a pre-determined notion of what/who they are (as Levinas would say, to "totalise"), is always resisted by the presence of the actual human being before one. This face-to-face encounter always brings the other's infinite quality into focus and, from that, Levinas contends, a "primordial" ethical imperative towards other human beings flows. Conversation is the form that this open, ethical encounter with the other takes: "To renounce the psychagogy, demagogy, pedagogy rhetoric involves is to face the Other, in a veritable conversation" (Ibid, p.70). Conversation affirms the absolute otherness of the other implicit in the conceptual and experiential reality of the face and it resists the tendency of more "rhetorical" forms of linguistic communication to deny this fact.

In *Love Letters* as previously mentioned, the faces of others are foregrounded. Unlike in the more conventional Western theatrical model, the audience-participants here are lit and sit opposite each other. They know that the texts read aloud have been authored by some of these faces. In Levinasian terms, the presence of the face, and a face

(almost) speaking its own words, offers the potential for the individual to experience being overwhelmed by the otherness of the other; a "traumatism of astonishment" (Ibid, p.73) that can arrive with a heightened awareness of the rich, complex, subjectivity of other people.

Alongside the reading of dedications and the playing of music chosen by audience-participants, we as performers make repeated attempts to express *our* love for people in our lives. For example, I run around the space, throwing off my jacket and tie and then, desperately out of breath, shout my love for my partner into the sky whilst Kate Bush's *Hounds of Love* plays loudly: "This is for how we drive fast through the city and I show off like I'm a boy-racer! And this is for how we might die! And how I don't care! And how if I died with you that would be ok! It would be a good way to go!" (Uninvited Guests, 2023). In an improvised section, Hoffmann tries to speak from the heart about a loved one (the person she is referring to changes with each performance) and when she feels she cannot find the words to express what she really feels she stops and starts again, resulting in a halting sequence of abbreviated sentences and agonised silences. Later I dedicate a dance to someone that I love, moving in an unrehearsed manner to a piece of music that the audience have chosen, getting more and more chaotic in my movements to the point of exhaustion. This is a litany of attempts to achieve some kind of ecstatic expression of the love that we feel. This is the territory of the sublime, attempting to represent the unrepresentable, where the unrepresentable is the emotion that we feel, but is also the wider notion of our infinite subjective selves and the extent of our desire for connection with the other. Levinas says that "desire is desire for the absolutely other" (1991b, p.34) but that this will always be met with dissatisfaction because of the ultimate exteriority of the other; the interiority of the subjective self will always fail in attempts to supersede itself, to reach the object of its desire which is external and foreign to it. In any attempt at transcendence, the perfect 'words' will never be found. As an audience-participant in Newport said in a dedication: "Your quiet, gentle (and vicious in some instances) presence is much more profound than any words I can say here" (Uninvited Guests, 2013b). To return to the influence of Forced Entertainment and their distillation of the media-saturated image of postmodernity, as Terry O'Connor from that company says, the people represented

in their shows are “bashing against the edges of the world they’re born into, bashing on the edges of the language that they have” (Etchells, 2002, p.44). In *Love Letters* when the conversation takes another form, movement or song perhaps, this “bashing” gets more exaggerated, drawing attention to the limits, the “edges”, both of more conventional linguistic efforts but also, ultimately, the inadequacy of these new approaches. In these attempts to move beyond the isolated, singular, interior position – beyond “the edges of the world [we’re] born into” – the limits of interpersonal discourse in all its forms and the overwhelming plural otherness and incomprehensibility of other people and the world asserts itself.

**Witnessing co-authors in *Love Letters***

As already suggested, another important aspect of the move towards conversation in Uninvited Guests’ practice that *Love Letters* foregrounds is the *witnessing* involved. The set up of the space accentuates the audience-participants’ position as witnesses to the personal narratives that are spoken and the emotions that are publicly displayed – they are cast in the role of guests at a wedding. Irene Kacandes (1999), writing about literary texts that narrate traumatic real-life events, refers to the significance of “narrative witnessing” in the psychotherapeutic process. These events resist being easily made sense of and narrativized, and to integrate them into a personal narration that will contextualise and rationalise those events, requires a witness, a “sympathetic listener”. It is in that witnessing that the primary witness (the traumatised person) might begin to see themselves as a full and valid protagonist in what has happened to them. As Heddon says, examining this concept in relation to autobiographical performance, “The very presence of the second witness, to whom the testimony is made, confirms for the primary witness their status as subject” (2008, p.57). In *Love Letters* there is an audience of “second witness[es]”, listening to the personal narration involved in each dedication. The events that are narrated are not necessarily traumatic, although there are regular instances of texts read that focus on bereavement and difficult relationship break ups. Almost all the dedications are written in a mode of heartfelt honesty. As is possible at a wedding or a funeral, there is a sense of things being said in a public forum that have never been said in this way before. Sometimes the rarity of this

opportunity is recognised explicitly in the dedications. One audience-participant, selecting Stevie Wonder's *I Just Called to Say I Love You* for their mum, writes:

> She was the most unselfish person I have ever met. Always put others before herself and should have sometimes had things she desired. She was my best friend and a wonderful mum. I am requesting this piece because I never said it to her while she was alive and wished I had. [Plymouth performance] (Uninvited Guests, 2024)

If there is a general trauma here it is that sense of people living much of their lives unable to find form or forum for this kind of testimony of their internal, subjective selves. Despite spending much of our lives surrounded by other human beings – their bodies and faces passing in and out of vision day in and out – it is uncommon to find a discursive/cultural environment in which to speak of oneself and listen to others face-to face in that register. The "narrative witnessing" in *Love Letters* comes then against the background of the general, often self-imposed, repression of this narrating of formative experiences and deep emotion.

Witnessing here, following the psychoanalytic paradigm, confirms the individual's "status as subject", which is also their status as author. It validates their view of the world, the life they have led, the emotions they feel and the way they make sense of all that through self-narration. The physical presence of the author of each dedication in the performance space generates a particular responsibility in the narrative witnessing that goes on in *Love Letters* – a feeling, experienced also by us as performers as we read and listen to each other reading. There is a need to pay attention, to show respect, to do justice to that witnessing. This is a responsibility that comes from knowing that the way something is received and responded to, how it is witnessed, affects how the author/speaker understands the thing they have said and its therapeutic value. The way it is witnessed, the quality of the "sympathetic listening", affects the quality of the confirmation of that person's subjectivity and, by implication, the confirmation of the subjectivity of *other* audience-participants. For Levinas also, moral responsibility is inherent in witnessing the other (1991a). Drawing on these ideas, Kelly Oliver argues that "addressability" and "response-ability" is what constitutes witnessing and is necessary for establishing one's own and others'

subjectivity: “The subject is the result of a response to an address from another and of the possibility of addressing itself to another” (2015, p.484). Oliver argues that an ethical paradigm flows from acknowledging one’s role in response, or in the decision not to respond, to another’s address, and from an awareness of the infinite possibilities for what that response – the form of one’s witnessing – might be.

Of course, as noted previously, witnessing itself also has a traumatic aspect to it. This confrontation with the other is intimacy but also distance, as Levinas says an “inspiration” but also a “trauma”. What is being witnessed here is the hope, the release, of the interior self finding its way into a glimmer of external light, but also in these moments, through the discourse and faces of other audience-participants, there is a reflexive reminder of the profound otherness of human beings to each other. The witnessing of the faces and discourse of other audience-participants in *Love Letters* is a witnessing of the conceptually astonishing and aesthetically beautiful field of human experience and histories that constitutes human social life and presents itself through the physical form of other human beings. But it is also the traumatic witnessing of how other people in their distinction and plurality can never fully be known, connected with, or satisfactorily communicated with. This experience of (almost) conversation between audience-participants is ultimately a witnessing of the trauma of mortality, of how most of an individual’s subjective life is unknowable, unexpressed and inexpressible, and will disappear at death, never having been seen. The responsibility in witnessing then, in any discursive exchange, is to witness what is said but also what is not said, to take account of the silence as well as the noise, what has been authored and what not, to be there at the moment of metaphorical death to acknowledge and give status to (because there is solace, beauty and *inspiration* in that for both the primary and secondary witness – speaker and listener) the unknowability of that otherness.

In this foregrounding of the witnessing of the other, the co-author, embodied in the here and now, there is also an emphasis given to the “event-ness” (Lehmann, 2006, p.106) of each *Love Letters* performance. In the spirit of the postdramatic paradigm, attention is focussed on the fact that a live event is occurring in that moment that is contingent on the real, human bodies and consciousnesses gathered together in the

space (both performers and audience-participants) rather than something playing out in a more abstract representational field in which the relationship with the particular moment, the specific audience, and the physical context in which it occurs, is less relevant (as might typically be the case with the traditional dramatic model). The script is never the same and things are being expressed that will only ever be expressed in this way on this occasion and, similarly, the combination of responses to what is being said, given prominence in the visual field – the tears, the handholding etc. – is unique to each performance. Thus, in the event-ness of *Love Letters*, an event-ness that originates in large part from the distribution of significant authorship responsibilities to audience-participants present in the room and the encouragement for those there to play their role as witnesses, there is a heightened liveness, an indeterminateness and contingency that connects with the qualities of the conversational.

**Conversation in *Make Better Please***

What has been described above is the conceptual and aesthetic ground that was laid in *Love Letters* and the shows preceding it as part of the journey in Uninvited Guests' practice towards the incorporation of live, direct conversation between audience-participants into performances. To recap, this can be described as an evolution along several methodological, aesthetic and conceptual tracks that run through the company's practice, have their origins in our early work and together point towards a paradigm for social relations and interpersonal discourse based around the conversational. It includes a focus on an aesthetics and ethics of plurality, distributing authorial responsibilities in various ways (through different approaches to, and expanding notions of, collaboration and co-authorship), problematising notions of the singular, autonomous authorial position. Part of this evolution is the move towards an overt acknowledgement of the embodied presence of the audience-participants as "content-providers" within the frame of the artwork and an interest in the act of witnessing these contributions. Connected to this is the development through this practice of an exploration of the complex – inspiring but also traumatic – dynamics between self and other and the function of linguistic/cultural discourse within this. Imbricated with these moves there is the postdramatic interest in event-ness and

liveness which develops through Uninvited Guests' practice and links to the increasing tendency to avow the audience's presence and authorial role.

The first Uninvited Guests show to include conversation between audience-participants within its frame, in a form that is clearly recognisable as such, is *Make Better Please*. Clarke refers to how, after *Love Letters*, this was a natural next move:

> In a sense [*Love Letters*] is still a conversation with the audience and the work differs every night. So, it's not a big step to then think […], as we did with *Make Better Please*, let's shift that so that the decisions are made on the night and the conversations take place there and then and the content emerges out of what matters to people on the evening. (Clarke and Hoffmann, 2023)

*Make Better Please* continues with the trajectory described above, evolving the concept of "conversation with the audience" – in the form of collaboration/co-authorship with the specific audience for any given performance, that Clarke identifies in *Love Letters* – into *actual* conversation. In doing so, Uninvited Guests make explicit within the frame of the performance an interest in conversation and conversational aesthetics/ethics that, as demonstrated, runs through previous practice. With this, interests and qualities such as plurality, the distribution (and problematising of) authorial authority, the witnessing of the embodied other expressing their opinions on matters that they care about, and the indeterminateness of performance as live event, are further developed. At the same time *Make Better Please* continues with an exploration of the paradoxical qualities of discourse –the desire for connection between self and other, between self and the world, and the sense of intimacy and understanding that it can engender, but, at the same time, the ultimate inadequacy of these attempts at connection between interior and exterior realms that it can reveal. The terrain on which this connection and disconnection is staged though, unlike the personal, private territory covered by *Love Letters*, is the political/societal public sphere as it is received by us and navigated through via the news media.

It begins with comfortable, convivial conversation. The audience enters to find a series of low round tables. At each table there is a performer-host and local and national newspapers from that day are laid out alongside the provision of tea and biscuits.

Audience-participants are asked to browse through the papers to find “a bad news story”, one “that frustrates you, angers you or riles you in some way” (Uninvited Guests et al., 2013). The headlines from these stories are read aloud and a conversation is then facilitated about the issues raised. These might be stories about global politics, international wars, global poverty or, nearer to home, health stories, stories about closures of local facilities, or about crimes or accidents in the town or city where the show is happening. In these conversations audience-participants are encouraged to expand on their reasoning behind their choice of story or to express an opinion on what someone else in the group has chosen. The conversations sometimes draw in people’s own personal anecdotes – how their own lives, their families, their jobs, the experience of people they know, connect with the stories in the newspapers.

In a reflection of the effect of listening to audience-participants’ dedications in *Love Letters*, these personal, conversational responses to stories in the news provide glimpses into the internal subjective lives of the audience-participants and create a sense of a plurality of lives and experiences being represented in the room. Again, authorship responsibilities are clearly shared in this moment with audience-participants. In this instance though – due to the immediate, extemporaneous character of the conversation, with each contribution immediately appearing within the frame of the performance without the possibility of mediation by an Uninvited Guests editorial process – this co-authorship includes in it a more pronounced sense than in previous practice of control over this discourse shifting from the company to audience-participants. Allied to this, there is an even stronger sense here of event-ness – of liveness, indeterminacy and unpredictability being emphasised through the medium of conversation. This sense of event-ness correlates with the thematic focus and methodological approach of *Make Better Please* – the use of responses to that day’s news as its content. As Clarke says, its form is “date specific” (2014, p.10) rather than site-specific, and the immediate, easily accessed nature of conversation, as well as having aesthetic, ethical and ideological value, has practical merit as a mechanism for realising this theatrical form that takes current events and the ‘feeling in the room’ in the present moment as its subject matter.

In these conversations at the start of *Make Better Please*, in the vein of their everyday equivalents, audience-participants' personal anecdotes and opinions are vocalised by themselves rather than through the performers. These conversational articulations thus augment the sense present in *Love Letters* of the embodied nature of this discourse, locating it in this case explicitly with specific interlocutors and again positioning audience-participants as witnesses to these embodied narratives. Here, the narrative witnessing, the confirming act of being a sympathetic listener, involves a witnessing of personal takes on a world gone wrong. This is sometimes a secondary witnessing of accounts of direct personal trauma related to wider socio-political failure (e.g., listening to a first-hand account of an experience in an underfunded local hospital), but is more commonly a tertiary witnessing of narratives articulated by those who are already removed, as we are much of the time when we engage with events through the news media, from the first-hand experience of the events/trauma being described. What is being confirmed in this face to face witnessing through conversation then, to some extent, are the shared experiences of witnessing the world – witnessing the witnessing[38] – from where we are now, physically present in this theatre space together (not in a war zone, a hospital or prison); a confirmation of the familiar act of observing the world from a distance through the medium of the newspapers. In this embodied discourse, this conversation, and the confirmatory process of witnessing that happens as part of this, there is then a coming together, a sense of solidarity, of consensus, of shared perspectives, but also the seeds of the opposite. As in *Love Letters*, this embodied discourse carries in it a reminder of the solipsistic position of the individual, but also in the case of *Make Better Please* the limitations (the limited horizons and limited sphere of control – the *located-ness*) of the audience group physically gathered together in this particular room on this particular day; the distance between what Levinas calls "the same" and the other; between what I am, what we are and what the rest of the world is; between the articulation of our desires and the

[38] Oliver says, "witnessing is always bearing witness to the necessity of the process of witnessing itself, the process of address and response" (2015, p.484). What is being witnessed here in other people's witnessing is the necessary process of addressing oneself to the world – showing that one is conscious, showing that one cares – and the desire to see the world respond in some form to affirm these things.

overwhelming, uncontainable (and often unresponsive) character of the exterior world. What is being witnessed in these conversations then, perhaps more evident to audience-participants in retrospect in the light of how the rest of the performance proceeds, is, again, both intimacy and distance. It is our common experience of being alive in the world at this moment in time, on this day in this place, but also our isolation, insignificance and ineffectuality in the embodied encounter with that world.

Primarily though, in this initial section of *Make Better Please*, which is the one focussed on an activity most recognisable as everyday conversation, the emphasis is on staging connection and consensus. With the papers laid out, tea and biscuits on the go and radios playing classical music, the set-up suggests a familiar conversational scene (whether familiar through personal experience or nostalgic cultural cliché) – the bourgeois family weekend breakfast table or, similarly, a convivial time spent with friends on a Sunday morning, reading the papers and chatting about the state of the world. The resonance with the 'civilised' Habermasian ideal (1992) of the Enlightenment coffee-house – the paradigm for the bourgeois rational-critical public sphere which he sees as the basis for functioning liberal democracy – is clear.

What follows this are further opportunities for audience-participants to speak about some of the issues raised in the small group conversations. In some ways, these are like refracted versions of conversation. Firstly, there is a section which takes inspiration from Quaker meetings. The full audience sits in a circle and individuals who have been nominated as spokespeople, "when the spirit moves in [them,] to speak" (Penington, 1863), report back on what has been talked about in the smaller groups, allowing time for silent reflection after each contribution. Mirroring Quaker worshippers having the agency and responsibility to collectively construct a 'sermon', through these dynamics of speech and silence – through listening, responsiveness and turn-taking – audience-participants are asked to manage this 'conversation' without a script or controlling authority to do so for them.

To give a sense of the issues and concerns that can be raised by audience-participants in this part, and to give a window into the tenor of the group conversations that precede it, I will describe the discourse in this section from one performance at Bristol Old Vic (Uninvited Guests and Gibson, 2010). It begins with someone talking about a

story that they had found on the rise of far-right political parties in the EU. This is linked through reference to the theme of "restrictions in freedom" to a story about the release of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar and another about the release of a British couple taken hostage in Somalia. The spokesperson for another group then talks about a story about a mother who had tried to kill herself and her twelve-year old son by drinking bleach because social workers were threatening to take him away from her and how she left a suicide note saying that it was the only way she felt her son could be at peace. The spokesperson says that her group had discussed how "sad and disturbing" that story was and the empathy they felt for the mother now in prison. There is then a precis of a conversation that had happened in another group around a story on the involvement of fast food companies in influencing government policy on health and obesity in their self-interest, and another on a conversation about a story on proposed cuts by the coalition government to funding for students doing arts courses and how angry and upset the more consumerist turn in Higher Education made some of the students in the room. Another spokesperson talks about a story on how one contestant in the TV show *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* was buried underground in a coffin with rats and spiders running over her despite having phobias related to these things and how in the group conversation there had been a discussion about the lengths people go to for celebrity and what this indicated about our general culture. This section concludes, in this specific performance, with an audience-participant talking about her anger about a story in a local newspaper about the amount of money spent on a roundabout in her local area and her feeling that the development happening where she lives is not being handled with any "common sense" by local or national authorities.

The next section of *Make Better Please* continues to play with expectations of conversation. Hoffmann and I sit in the centre of the circle of audience-participants and, drawing on the content that has been generated up to that point (the stories discussed in the 'coffee-house' conversations at the beginning and in the elongated Quaker-style conversation), we 'stand in' for individuals from that day's news. These are predominantly well-known figures of authority. For example, I might say, "I am George Osborne, I really want you to believe that George Osborne is here with you

tonight. Does anyone have anything to say to me?" Or Hoffmann might say, "Tonight I am Vladimir Putin, Vladimir Putin is here with you tonight. Does anyone have anything to say to me?" (Uninvited Guests and Gibson, 2010b). There is usually a short period of silence as the audience-participants establish for themselves that this is another invitation for them to speak and then consider how to respond. When they do choose to speak, they often begin by asking questions. We do not answer. With this lack of response, other audience-participants often add to what has been said, developing a political polemic directed at the person who has been conjured, amplifying sentiments already expressed or sometimes presenting an alternative perspective on issues that have been raised. These powerful people (and their victims) are 'hosted' – through the 'magic' of theatre and religious ritual, the power of naming – in mine and Hoffmann's bodies. They are given an embodied presence that encourages audience-participants to address us as if we were the real thing, as if I was David Cameron or the Pope for example, as if we really could act differently and effect the change audience-participants want to see, as if we, the performers, are 'response-able'. My experience was that people addressed their feelings – anger, upset, concern, mockery – very directly towards us in these moments. There was a visceral sense of having become in the minds of audience-participants, if not fully the named figure, then some kind of approximation – as close to a representative of the real thing, to the real power, as they were ever likely to get. In this way a conversational dynamic – a dynamic of face-to-face, extemporaneous discourse, founded on assumptions of addressability and response-ability – appears to be in play with the figures from the day's news. But it is a conversation that frustrates as one interlocutor is only partly present. Like the actor in the naturalist drama or eucharistic host in consubstantiation, whilst we are Bashar al-Assad and Michael Gove etc., we are also still tangibly Dufty and Hoffmann. Cameron, Gove, Putin, Obama et al do not answer questions or justify their actions here – they do not demonstrate response-ability.

The limits of the Habermasian discursive model suggested by the set up at the beginning of *Make Better Please* are more explicitly highlighted here. The 'reasonable' democratic conversation can engender a sense of intimacy, a sense of agency and consensus. It can make the rich and powerful and the levers of power feel closer –

creating a sense of the troubles of the world being tangible and fix-able through a rational discursive process. In this section, naming ourselves as figures from the news, we attempt to manifest this effect. We make those characters feel present and set up the expectation that a rational conversation might happen with them. But then, with the lack of response from those that could effect change, that could explain and rationalise, that optimistic paradigm runs up against the remoteness of the external human world and the anti-discursive, unaccountable weirdness of the complex interests and forces governing it. The dramaturgical context in which figures from that day's news are sat centre stage surrounded by audience-participants, draws attention to the suspension of disbelief involved in rational conversational discourse; a process that brings the world closer, that makes it seem less alien, assumes underlying order and sense and expects others to reciprocate based on shared understandings and ground rules that support these assumptions. In the lack of response from the performers, the mythic quality of these assumptions begins to be exposed. The hosting of the external world in this space – engendered through discourse, through the naming of the performers as characters from the day's news – and the idea of reasonable dialogue as a route to meaningful change, is avowed as a form of theatrical conceit. The world, and in particular its rich and powerful denizens, put on a performance here of being present, of listening and caring, but this is revealed as disguising their unresponsive, unreasonable and non-rational undercurrents.

At the same time, more positively, in the absence of an interlocutor that will respond properly, there is a parallel conversation, a less direct one, established in this section of the show between audience-participants. As Clarke says, the performers that are standing in for figures from the day's news are like "effigies" (Clarke and Hoffmann, 2023) around which, through which, conversation between the audience-participants proceeds. It is like a dialogue between people sat watching the news together on TV, addressing the characters they see on the screen (the politicians etc.), but at the same time using that 'third party' – that unresponsive, only virtually present, addressee – as the conduit through which a conversation between people who *are* in each other's presence can take place. As such this is a more explicit rendering of the idea referenced earlier of conversation functioning as a kind of witnessing of each other's embodied,

located witnessing of the world; a recognition of others' witnessing of existence from something like a similar spot, a witnessing of a shared sense of separation and impotence in the face of an often incomprehensible and unresponsive world.

There is then an extension in this section of the exploration of conversation as both a medium for connection but also as a reminder of the limits of discourse and the separateness of self from other. On the one hand, the power of discourse to bring the outside world into the room, to give figures from that day's news an embodied quality, is made evident. In a Bakhtinian sense there is a relentless interpenetrative relationship here between this discourse of news and current affairs, its dramatis personae, and our minds and bodies; a sense of this social, historical dialogue running through us, inescapably part of us, shaping our consciousnesses. This is seen in the relative ease with which the simple naming of myself and Hoffmann as figures from the day's news gives them a tangible presence and sets off a chain of responses from audience-participants as if this conjuring establishes a node through which an ever-present internal and external discourse can be vocalised, can flow and comingle. In this there is a kind of intimacy, a shared experience engendered through a ubiquitous, shared discourse. But there is also a sense of the struggle of the individual to connect properly with the external world, to find expression for what they really feel in a discursive environment defined by the narratives, characters and vocabulary of the news media. This is a version of the "desperate effort to free oneself from the power of the other's consciousness and to break through to one's self for the self alone" (1984, p.232) that Bakhtin observed in Dostoevsky's heroic characters. It is a "desperate effort" to form an independent, effective relationship with the world through the discursive medium of the "already uttered" and the "already known". Imbricated with this, in this section of attempted conversation with mute figures from the day's news, is something analogous to Levinas' "radical separation" (1991b) between self and other. Or, more specifically in this case, there is an illustration of the separation between how we would like the world to be and how it is in reality; between 'our' talk and 'their' (in)action, against the background of the infinitude of what is out there, what it might mean, and how it might change.

**The up ending of 'coffee-house' conversation and an attempt at the dialogism of carnival**

What follows the sometimes frustrating, one-sided conversations with *ir*-response-able figures of authority represented by me and Hoffmann, is a more comprehensive break down of the Habermasian discursive paradigm suggested by the set up at the start of *Make Better Please*. The content selected from the day's news that audience-participants have provided, beginning in those 'coffee-house' conversations at the start of the show, is re-mixed in a more spectacular episode. A pseudo-ritual is enacted with me in my underpants and socks wearing a huge newspaper phallus. I am part shaman, fertility god, Mr. Punch, fool and medieval carnival grotesque. The channelling of the figures of authority and celebrities from the day's news that begins in a relatively low-key tone in the previous section through the simple process of naming ourselves, becomes something much more visceral. David Cameron, Carla Bruni, Nick Clegg, Wayne Rooney (and whoever is prominent in that day's news) are embodied by me in the form of grotesque, puerile parodies. I spout monosyllabic, repeated phrases, making guttural noises as I struggle to form the names of these individuals whilst at the same time trying to give exaggerated physical expression to them, as if in an extended effort to conjure these characters into being both verbally and physically, to achieve a kind of physical and linguistic birthing. Once various characters drawn from the day's news and from the background political/media culture of that period are introduced, I then start to integrate them into a narrative in some kind of child-like fantasy of manipulation and mockery. This was the standard start for what then, after this beginning, became a largely improvised section based on the specifics of that day's contributions:

> RRRRRRR. I'm a Camer. I'm a Cameroooon. I am a Cameroooon A Cameroooon A Cameroooon […] And now I'm Carla. I'm Carla. I'm Carla. I'm Carla. And I'm Cleggy. I'm Cleggy. I'm Cleggy and Carla. I'm Cleggy and Carla. Oooo. Yum yum yum. And Carla and Cleggy are having dinner at Davey's [*nursey rhyme voice*] Carla and Cleggy having dinner at Davey's. Yum yum yum. [*Mr Punch voice*] Get frying the sausages. Get frying the sausages. Get frying the sausages Samantha.

> Yum yum yum. We are Camerooons! We are Cameroons! (Uninvited Guests and Gibson, 2010b)

There is further recognition here of the limits of a more conventional discursive approach when it comes to making the external world, and those characters that populate its corridors of political and cultural power, present and available to desires for change. The attempt in the previous section to conjure figures from the day's news into being in the theatre space through the act of naming is superseded by this more extreme version – an exaggerated attempt to bring the words, the discourse, into alignment with the physical reality; to use the physicality of performance to somehow turn those words, those names of the rich and powerful, into a more tangible presence in the space. It is an attempt to make the *hosting* – the overlap between performer and character, between art and life – more complete.

Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque is relevant here. For him, this attempt to dissolve distinctions between the interior and the exterior (often through transgressive, sexual and scatological acts and references), to up-end social hierarchies, to say things and do things that are normally proscribed, to make present the otherwise remote figures of authority of the current socio-political moment[39] and to mix the serious with the comic, is at the root of carnival and key to the carnivalesque aesthetic that he sees influencing various literary forms going back to the Socratic dialogues. Bakhtin sees the carnivalesque as an underlying quality in his understanding of the dialogical, in that carnival is the extreme break down of the monologic, of the hierarchical, of the surety of ideology and of the secure, contained position of the subject. It is discourse pushed to the extreme. As he says in relation to Dostoevsky's world view which he saw as exemplifying this in novelistic form:

> all people and all things must know one another and know about one another, must enter into contact, come together face to face and *begin to talk* with one

[39] Bakhtin writes of literary genres that have "a carnival sense of the world", that "their starting point for understanding, evaluating, and shaping reality, is the living *present,* often even the very day" (1984, p.108).

> another. Everything must be reflected in everything else, all things must illuminate one another dialogically. (1984, p.177)

This attempt at a carnivalesque ritual in *Make Better Please* is then a continuation of the attempts to engage with the world through a form of dialogue – it is an attempt to literally "come together face to face and begin to talk with" important figures, systems and organisations that hold sway in that external world. It is an attempt to dissolve the gap that exists between self and other that the use of 'politer' conversational approaches up to that point have failed to.

This is a comparable dynamic to that in *Love Letters* in which there are attempts to physicalise declarations of love – through movement, dance, song and shouting – in part as recognition that, even with the embodied form of the person who has written each dedication of love there in the room, there still remains a gap between self and other, between what is felt and thought internally and what is represented in the language expressed. As such, more exaggerated attempts at giving embodied form to those things and to bridge that gap are tried. In *Make Better Please* the same is occurring, but in this case the gap identified is between the individual, the temporary community of audience-participants and the public world of news and current affairs. I am attempting to conjure the key protagonists from the day's news into being and, imbricated with that, to give expression to the feelings that have been directed towards those characters by the audience-participant group up to that point. I do this through words, through non-linguistic vocal noises and through my body, trying to test ways that the symbolic abstractions of language and physical spacetime restrictions might somehow be broken through to get closer to, to influence and to change, the world as it is represented in the news.

This is like an attempt at what Richard Schechner calls "phatic theatre" – a form of performance which has a carnivalesque quality in which "the evocation and expression of a group mood is the most important thing" (2003, p.251) and in which, as such, "'meaningless' vocables [can] temporarily replace words at moments of intense expressivity" (Ibid, p.252). This is an approach to theatre-making that Schechner connects with the behaviour of apes and universal human gestures of non-linguistic communication – "shouting, laughing, sobbing, plaintive whining, jumping up and

down, foot-stamping, raising the fist etc." (Ibid, p.251). It is notable that many of these actions feature in my attempt at some kind of phatic performance in this section of *Make Better Please.* As such this is a move away from the logocentric theatrical model that has preceded it, albeit one that was a version of logocentrism based around plurality, audience participation and co-authorship. It is an attempt at a form of performance beyond the limitations of linguistic discourse, a dramaturgical striving for a prelapsarian form of 'pure communication' in which there is an attempt to redeem the promise implicit in live performance to make present what is absent, to bring it into being, to dissolve the barriers between here and there, self and other, the word and the world.

Whilst I shout and whine and stamp my foot and attempt to embody the world's ills, Hoffmann, dressed in a costume made from strips of newspapers that resembles a Mummers' tatter-coat, screams phrases gleaned from what has been said by audience-participants up until that point into a microphone in the vein of a death metal singer. Referencing the performance lexicon of shamanic ritual, parodic folk theatre, Jarry and Artaud, the aesthetic territory shifts dramatically away from participatory conversational discourse, from coffee-houses and Quakerism, towards the 'carnivalized dialogical'. It moves beyond the discursive parameters of the rational-critical public sphere which Habermas associates historically with the emergence of relatively free, fact-based and widely disseminated newspapers. Here we scream and shout, we spit tea, we chew biscuits and smear the result over our bodies as if it is excrement. The newspapers have been repurposed to form my obscene phallus which is used to repeatedly hit a bass drum. One of the highpoints of this frenzied pseudo-ritual is when I raise my arms in a moment of epiphanic ecstasy and shout, "I am the Son. I am the Sun. I am the Son of Murdoch" (Uninvited Guests and Gibson, 2010b). The Enlightenment model for the public sphere, centred on reasoned conversation between participants in good faith based on commonly agreed factual information communicated through a relatively impartial media, and the ability of the rational consensus arrived at through this process to effect decision-making by those in positions of authority (explored at length in chapter 2), is up ended. The coffee-house paradigm is exploded. The tea and biscuits go everywhere, and I perform auto-fellatio

on the huge newspaper cock. I literally suck the news into myself in a ridiculously literal attempt at embodying the discourse, as if in search of a perfect form of conversation, a distillation of the carnivalesque, in which there is no gap between language, mind and body, between the internal and the external world, between self and other.

The limits of the 'good argument' and the 'civilised debate' are recognised here; the impotency of rational discourse in the face of a media and political landscape shaped in the interests of a handful of people, their families and class. Instead, in this moment there is a turn towards the non-rational, the abject and the non-linguistic – suggesting that an alternative way to meet the anti-democratic, illiberal, unreasonable tendencies of the rich and the powerful is in the same non-rational spirit. To treat those who exert authority not as reasonable, rational, faithful participants in the discourse but as demagogic entities that will say and do anything to maintain their dynastic power. The dialogue here is not between the audience-participants in the theatre space according to something like Habermasian values but rather more directly with the powerful figures and forces that shape our world. Channelling what Laclau and Mouffe would see as the group's "ineradicable antagonism" (2001), it becomes a conversation not *about* things that are wrong in the world but, through the performers, *with* that wrongness, like the fight with an evil spirit that will not listen to reason. Like shamans we absorb the concerns about the state of the world expressed by the audience-participants; we take this into us (as I also literally ingest the newspapers, unable to separate the ills of the world from the news media[40] that relays them to us) and wrestle with it in a form of shamanic direct action. We are cutting out the 'middleman' of polite conversational discourse and attempting to take our beef directly to the powerful, non-rational, myth-making heart of discursive control. We are taking on Murdoch, his imitators and acolytes – his 'sons/Suns' – re-appropriating their discursive tactics of trading in myth, soundbites, crass desire, ridicule, spite and untruths.

[40] From the perspective of 2025, the focus on newspapers seems anachronistic. What remains relevant is the sense here of the news/social media-political-industrial complex and its key protagonists existing beyond the sphere of most people's understanding and agency, governed in large part by self-interest and venality rather than any commitment to principles of fact-based democratic discourse.

In this there is further acknowledgment of Bakhtin's interpenetrative view of discourse – that it runs through us and cannot be stood aside from. The business of dialogue – whether internalised in the discourse of consciousness or vocalised externally – is thus a "desperate effort" for a sense of self and agency (and also to transcend the self or to find the self through transcending a limited, conventional understanding of that self[41]), where the discourse and opinions of others (some, like Murdoch's, perhaps more dominant than others) is the medium through which this desperate effort occurs, and where radical re-appropriation, in this instance a defiling or profaning of that discourse of conventional news media, might be an appropriate tactic in such a dialogical struggle.

Bakhtin describes carnival "as a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act" (1984, p.122). In carnival "all distance between people is suspended", barriers between social roles, including between performers and spectators, are dissolved in a heightened dialogical process. But this is where the attempt at the carnivalesque effect in this episode in *Make Better Please* ultimately fails. In its theatricality and grotesquery, the audience-participants are *separated* from what is happening in front of them. They are returned to something more like a conventional audience of spectators, sitting on the other side of the metaphorical "footlights", rather than "active participants" in some form of conversation which has been the mode of engagement prior to this. In this attempt to bring the world closer, to assert some agency over it, to transcend the limitations of the conversational coffee-house discourse presented at the start of the show, there is ultimately recognition that this distance cannot be "suspended". There is a reminder here that, in a Levinasian sense, as described in relation to attempts to transcend conventional linguistic expression in *Love Letters*, in any novel attempts to approach the desired otherness, and in this instance to assert some control over that otherness, there is still inevitably a

[41] Levinas is relevant again on this point. He says: "Transcendence is passing over to being's other, otherwise than being" (1991a, p.3). This desire for transcendence is at the heart of the relationship with the other – the yearning to "pass over" to something that is different to being, or at least different to the self's familiar state of being.

confrontation with the "absolute alterity" (Levinas, 1991b) of the other. Standing in my M&S underpants and newspaper phallus, partly eaten away and covered in chewed up biscuit, still wearing my socks, like an awkward participant in some kind of suburban sex game, my attempted embodiment of the discourse of the news of the day and then the attempt at casting me out of the space as the representative of the day's negativity that follows (Hoffmann chases me off the stage by letting off a fire extinguisher in my direction), are ultimately pathetic acts, ridiculous (if committed) attempts at trying to connect with and achieve some agency over the news discourse and the harmful aspects of the external world; a failed attempt at transcending the limitations of normal linguistic discourse and the restrictions of logocentric dramaturgical forms. This appropriation of historical and non-Western forms of shamanic ritual in an attempt to transcend the restrictions of a degraded public discourse in search of a form of phatic theatre that connects at a more fundamental level the people in the room with each other and with the external realm, that dissolves conventional distinctions between performers and spectators, plays out in practice as a low-rent theatrical spectacle that, ultimately, emphasises the representational linguistic/cultural field rather than suggesting any possibility of escape from or mastery of it.

Again, this echoes a Forced Entertainment perspective on creating a performance aesthetic that reflects the lacuna between the desire to escape the "world [we] are born into" and the reality of that inevitably failing, or, to coin Peggy Phelan's description of their work, "the gap between the scenario of the dream and the boards of the live stage" (Etchells, 2002, p.9). Etchells describes this in terms of the inadequacy, or failure, of language, but, despite this, the everyday struggle "to get blunt tools to do fine work, to carve out a life in, around, despite of and through what passes for culture in the late twentieth century" (Ibid, p. 102). For O'Connor, this desire – this struggle for connection, for meaning, for transcendence, for what is "otherwise" – in a discursive environment that is a barrier to that, can take the form of "a kind of rage" (Ibid, p. 44) in Forced Entertainment's practice. There is an analogous raging here in this section of *Make Better Please*. This is a raging at "the gap between the scenario of the dream" – the utopian possibility of escaping from/finding oneself, connecting with the other and re-making the world – and the embodied reality, "the boards of the

live stage", the basic fact of existing in a place and time within the confines of language. At the same time, it is also a raging at the other "boards" – the corporate boards of News Corp. etc. – that, through their promotion of a particular public discursive environment, further inhibit dreams of being otherwise.

The Habermasian reason-based conversational paradigm might have been up-ended, but what is left here in the messy aftermath of an attempt to reconfigure the news discourse and to supersede the division between self and world, is a re-statement of an unavoidable dichotomy between connection and separation that plays out in discourse. On one side there is hope – the possibility of togetherness, fostering consensus and engendering intimacy; the possibility of transcendence – and in *Make Better Please*, after this noisy theatrical purging ritual, the atmosphere returns to something more like that of the Quaker meeting with audience-participants given the opportunity to speak quietly about moving, personal stories of hopefulness. But there is also melancholia, or desperation, as the limitations on interpersonal discourse to make the world a better place are revealed. In a way the dramaturgy of the show is about presenting conversation at the start and then proceeding, through a series of attempts, to test its limits, to transcend it, "bashing on the edges of language" to find a better mechanism to express oneself and to make things better. In the end what is left is a beautiful but tragic pleading, repeated as if part of a liturgy by the performers after we read aloud and then burn a series of headlines for the bad news stories from that day having led the audience-participants out on to the street: "make better *please…*make better *please*". Again, there is an attempt at transcendence here through a 'magical', theatrical, non-rational process – a transformation of words written on flash paper (the kind used by magicians); discourse disappeared in a flash, fused with the air and the wind, as if the words were the thing and the burning could cure that ill. It is another attempt to bend the apparatus of theatre to assist in the struggle to erase the distance between words and reality, self and other, art and life. This is an appeal to supernatural forces as much as fellow human beings, an admission of failure in our attempts at conversation and other forms of human discourse to express ourselves, to make sense of the world and to orchestrate change, alongside the last glimmer of hope for something better. There is, again, a collective witnessing occurring in these final

moments, much as at a religious ceremony. This is a witnessing of an *address* to the world, to the 'powers-that-be', to common values – a witnessing that, in its limited form, still gives hope that we are not completely alone in our cries for help, in our appeals for a *response* to our prayers.

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Since *Make Better Please* there has been a recurring use of audience-participant conversation in Uninvited Guests' practice, across theatre shows and 'applied' community engagement projects. An example of the former, which provides a metaphorical distillation of some of the themes around the use of conversation explored above, is *To Those Born Later* (2017). In this show audience-participants are asked to discuss choices they have made about what to include in a digital time capsule to be opened in one hundred and fifty years. The conversations are about the objects, places and even the feelings that people value and want to be preserved. It is also, in some sense, a conversation through these choices with the people of the future, and audience-participants are encouraged to imagine "those born later" who will be opening the capsule and to whom these contributions are addressed: "your children's children's children's children. Your great great grandchildren. Or your friends' great great grandchildren" (Uninvited Guests, 2018). In an echo of *Love Letters*, it is an attempt to allow audience-participants the opportunity to speak "from the bottom of their hearts" about what "really matters" (Uninvited Guests, 2022). As in *Love Letters* it foregrounds the potential for connection, empathy and hope through conversation, but it does so against a backdrop of the *distance* that is also revealed in these acts of communication. This distance is there in the inadequacy inherent in the attempt to express one's interior life and history through the handful of special places and objects that one chooses to include in the time capsule and to speak about in these moments. It is also there in this ambitious attempt to communicate with the people of the future. There is a clear gap here – which also functions as a more general metaphor for any dialogical attempt – between the choices made by audience-participants of what to put in the time capsule, embedded with their values and intentions, uttered from their time-bound bodies, and the unknowability of how that communicative act will be

received (or whether it will be received) by people (or posthuman entities) in a changed world one hundred and fifty years from now.

**Conversation and the conversational: an aesthetic, philosophical and ethical paradigm**

The argument in this chapter is that the use of conversation between audience-participants in Uninvited Guests' practice, seen explicitly for the first time within the frame of the performance in *Make Better Please*, was the natural consequence of the development of a consistent aesthetic, philosophical and ethical project. It emerged from a commitment to the 'dialogical' – to plurality, co-authorship and collaboration, to the second-hand, to complexity, doubt and indeterminacy, and to embodied live experiences. Also, seen most clearly in the dramaturgical trajectory of *Make Better Please*, the use of conversation brings into focus an interest that features as part of this ongoing project which is around the desire for transcendence that is contained in human discourse – the desire to go beyond the standard tenor of human life and achieve greater self-knowledge, self-realisation, intimacy, love, connection, agency – but then the limitations of this discursive quest. Ultimately, conversation and other iterations of the dialogical in Uninvited Guests' practice affirm the distance between self and other, interior and exterior, and highlight the inadequacy of any form of discourse in fully overcoming that.

The paradigm for social relations and communication that is implicitly proposed through these Uninvited Guests projects, that the use of conversation as a dramaturgical device but also a wider notion of the conversational is central to, is predicated on those values of plurality, complexity, doubt etc. It questions both on ethical, philosophical and aesthetic grounds what Etchells' refers to as "clean single visions". Here there is value, and indeed existential honesty, in polyphony, indeterminacy and messiness; in resisting the monologic and the totalising. It takes interest in, *acts as witness to*, one of the central aspects of the human experience which is that there is a plurality of other people in the world, each with their own subjectivity. This is a paradigm that acknowledges that in admitting space for other voices – for collaboration, for co-authorship, for conversation – the internal complexities, ambivalences and contradictions in the relations between self and

other/s in the live discursive encounter will enter the frame; that disunity, imperfection and risk will be its key characteristics. As Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca writes about Chicago-based Goat Island – another company that was influential on the UK performance scene of the 1990s/2000s, including on the practice of Uninvited Guests, with an aesthetic and creative process predicated on notions of the dialogical – "collaboration involves taking the risk that others will understand 'your' ideas in their own way" (2016, p.102). Or, as Etchells says – writing about the collaborative process with the others in Forced Entertainment but providing an insight into the wider value of distributed, collaborative and indeterminate authorial processes – "Collaboration for [us] was never about perfect unity but about difference, collisions, incompatibilities" (2002, p.56).

This is a paradigm where positive values of ethical/ideological humility, philosophical integrity and aesthetic/dramaturgical interest are recognised as emerging from the meeting between the inevitable urge to achieve some sort of perfect dialogical state, to attain a utopian condition in which the self can express itself perfectly and in doing so can perfectly connect with the other, and the inevitable falling short in those attempts as "difference, collisions and incompatibilities" – qualities of the conversational – are encountered. This is a relational, discursive and dramaturgical paradigm founded on the conversational and as such, to borrow from Goat Island's Matthew Goulish, the idea that "quests end in failure"[42] (2000, p.125). Implicit in every word is the "sideways glance" at another word, the other remains "infinitely foreign", collaboration is "a way of confounding intentions"[43], and even the best conversation leads to another. For Uninvited Guests, as demonstrated through this chapter, both the *questing* (the hoping, the attempting, the "desperate effort") and the *failing* (the stumbling, the falling short, the inevitable distance) are important parts of the show and need to be witnessed.

[42] It is apt, in the spirit of dialogism, that Goulish is himself borrowing this phrase from Susan Howe.

[43] Quotations from Bakhtin, 1984; Levinas, 1991b; Etchells, 2002.

## Conclusion. Conversation in Performance: an openness to otherness

My argument across these chapters is that the use of audience-participant conversation as a device in the British performance covered in this thesis is one manifestation of the "social turn" in artistic practice and the trend towards the participatory over the last twenty-five years. It carries within it some of the general interests of those moves – namely a concern with democracy, inclusivity, community, equity and agency. In using audience-participant conversation, the social, and the concerns related to the social listed above, can be brought explicitly into the frame of the artwork and different paradigms for social relations and interpersonal discourse can be explored, advocated for and critiqued. It enables what Bourriaud says was the "basic claim" of the relational art of the 1990s for "the sphere of human relations" to be considered "as artwork venue" (2002, p.44) to be realised. The use of conversation then focuses attention on the *dialogical* character of these relations. The deployment in this thesis of diverse theories drawn from the 'philosophy of dialogue' have highlighted the broad areas that concepts of the dialogical applied to the fields of social relations and discourse enables exploration of: the dynamics of the public sphere (chapter 2), the desire for interpersonal intimacy (chapter 3), the engineering of socio-political change (chapter 4), and the potential and limitations of discourse as the self looks to transcend itself (chapter 5).

Further to this, as described throughout this thesis, there are specific attributes and qualities of conversation, as a form of the dialogical, that the use of audience-participant conversation in this context brings to the interrogation of the themes noted above and help establish a character and set of values for the relational and communicative paradigms suggested through these performances. These conversational qualities are various and have been noted previously, but include provisionality, reciprocity, plurality, humility, spontaneity and indeterminateness. These might be summarised as an *openness to otherness*. This is the otherness of other people: other lived experience, other ways of living, other points of view. But it is also an openness to other futures; to the multiple possibilities inherent in the live, unscripted moment; to unpredictable outcomes (including both 'success' and 'failure'). An openness to making mistakes, to not being right, to being fallible. It is an openness

to the possibility of being centred or de-centred, elevated or diminished in status; an openness to a claim from the other to some sharing (perhaps a reclaiming) of authorship, authority and agency. *It is an openness to be left in some way other than where you started and other than where you might have expected to be when the exchange began.* These performances use that openness to otherness implicit in the qualities of conversation to, depending on the example, generate feelings of intimacy or community, to widen experiential and interpretative horizons, to explore the possibilities for consensus and dissensus between people, to foreground complexity and uncertainty and destabilise fixed, monological positions and hegemonic ideological/discursive centres.

**"The contingent and contextual practices of conversation"**

The qualities of conversation listed above, that collectively amount to an openness to otherness, have an ethical, aesthetic and dramaturgical value, and I have previously made the point that often the performances that I examine here emphasise the imbrication of these spheres through the medium of conversation. Audience-participant conversation has been a means for exploring ethical, political and social ideas but also to generate aesthetic and dramaturgical effects, and indeed – following Arendt, Freire, Mouffe and others – to highlight the indivisibility of the socio-political from the business of (linguistic, dramaturgical, aesthetic) articulation. For all the performances examined here, in their foregrounding of audience-participant conversation, there is a focussing on the articulatory act as in some way constitutive of social identities, ethics and action. It is the conduit for extant social relations to be made visible and for those relations then to be affirmed or re-described, for a negotiation of a collective understanding of the world to be attempted and, potentially, for a sense of temporary community to be elicited. Conversation has the capacity to emphasise the heteronomous and historical characteristics of these articulatory acts. It avows the live moments on which its utterances and silences are contingent and, as part of this temporal affirmation, its dependency on the specific constellation of interlocutors assembled. It draws attention to who is speaking, who is listening, where and when that exchange is occurring, and all the socio-economic and cultural factors that might affect those things. Whilst there are assumptions and conventions in any

articulatory/ideological framework that might exert a powerful sense of a natural and permanent order (which is the inclination of any hegemonic construct), conversation, in its live, spontaneous, unpredictable and (in the case of these performances) embodied character, has a particular facility to highlight this underlying contingency and contextualisation. This echoes White's (2024) wider arguments on the capacity of the participatory to highlight the embodied, enacted, contextual nature of meaning-making: "Meaning always comes to us in the midst: of circumstance, of context, of action, and of reflection. Performance that invites us into its midst magnifies this" (p.7).

Within each of the dramaturgical contexts highlighted within this thesis, conversation has been employed by artists in ways that point to what Bhabha, writing on "conversational art", refers to as these "contingent and contextual practices of conversation" (1998, p.46). As described in Chapter 2, it is there in the messy business of rehearsing democratic debate and decision-making with the people who happen to be in the room for any given performance of *The Money*, negotiating a way through the contingencies and contextual influences behind the various points of view presented in that moment in the hope of reaching a temporary, local agreement. It is there in the intimate performances analysed in Chapter 3 in that sense of them being fundamentally contingent on and responsive to one's presence and what one says as an audience-participant. The avowal of the contingent and the contextual is also there in the use of audience-participant conversation in the change-making performances of Touretteshero in the way that it acts to defamiliarise and denaturalise the ableism of dominant socio-political and cultural discourses and the material conditions that spring from that. Finally, it is there in Uninvited Guests' use of conversation in *Make Better Please* as a way of generating content for each show that is reflective of the events of that day and the specific concerns of the temporary community established for each performance. In each of these cases a virtue is made of the fact that, as Bhabha says, referencing Rorty's philosophy of pragmatism, "'Conversational realities' are not immaculate conceptions or 'real' correspondences that satisfy the 'eye' of the mind" (Ibid, p. 42). In other words, the products of conversational discourse are intimately connected with the contingent and contextual nature of the circumstances in which that discourse occurs. They do not come out of nowhere, inspired by some kind of

ahistorical Platonic ideal. Nor do they offer a perfect Kantian "correspondence" with realities in the external world, satisfying the idea of there being objective, universal principles of rationality and aesthetics that any form of articulation is aiming for. Instead, "conversational realities" are "dependent for their authority on the messy, contingent communicability that meshes together a community."

In Chapter 5, I described the instinct of Uninvited Guests, following Forced Entertainment, to "[bash] against the edges" (Etchells, 2002, p.44) of this 'messiness,' to make attempts to transcend the contingency of articulation, to supersede the local limitations of language and aesthetics. There are also hints in the practice examined in Chapter 3, for example in the work of Adrian Howells and Rhiannon Armstrong, of a desire to discover a place of intimacy and connection that exists in a pseudo spiritual space beyond the usual contingencies and contextual determinants of everyday social relations. Or, as Rorty puts it, there is evidence in these performances of the "common urge to escape the vocabulary and practises of one's own time finding something ahistorical and necessary to cling to" (1980, p.725). At the same time, in all these practices, there is recognition of the emancipatory and ethically/politically advantageous aspects to an encounter, through conversation, with the fundamentally contingent and contextual character of articulation. Echoing Laclau and Mouffe (2001) on the requirement to make political decisions in an "undecidable terrain", operating on the basis of "a logic of articulation and contingency" (p.85), Bhabha says that, rather than the epistemological approaches referenced above which treat reality as in some sense "already programmed", the "conversational perspective is at once more provisional, and for that reason more deeply committed to, the ethical and political 'choice' that contingency forces us to be responsible for" (1998, p.42). It is the responsibility that comes with being "in the midst" (White, 2024) of other people – in the presence of their personalities, their ideas, their confessions, their ambiguities and contradictions, articulated through the medium of conversation – and, on this terrain of "messy, contingent communicability" (Bhabha, 1998, p.42), needing to make 'choices' about how to relate to each other. It is to make these choices without a prescriptive, external authorial hand and outside of any sense of a universal moral or epistemological framework. As Etchells says on audience witnessing, it is about feeling

"the weight of things and one's own place in them" (2002, p.17), to accept the burden of those choices, to take responsibility for those responses (to feel one's response-ability) rather than expecting a superhuman authority to provide guidance. Rorty says that to accept this fundamental contingency of things, including our moral values, is "to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance" (1980, p.726).

**Forming "communities of human survival" on stage**

For Bhabha, the "conversational perspective" carries with it Rorty's argument that feelings of community and solidarity between human beings are actually heightened with an awareness of this contingency and contextuality, with the knowledge that ideas, 'truths' and communities are impermanent and are not essential; they are "*ours* rather than *nature's"* and are "*shaped* rather than *found*" (Rorty, 1980, p.727). As Etchells also suggests, to live in that knowledge is not to succumb to apathy or nihilism on the basis of the impermanence of things and the futility of striving for absolute, irrefutable truth, but to deepen a pragmatic commitment to the temporary community, to the best working assumptions and values for the historical moment in which one is living, and to one's responsibility in that moment for the decisions one makes with the information available. From this perspective, a commitment to local community, to the bonds of social relations in the here and now and the ideas and identities generated from the conversational discourse between people sharing some of the same time and space, is in fact all that there is in the face of the absence of absolutes and universal truths revealed by a recognition of the inevitable contingency of things. In these circumstances, as Rorty says, "what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right". From this, Bhabha suggests an "image of 'conversation' as the community of human survival" (1998, p.42) and of conversational art as a way of shining a light on the urgent business of contingent, contextual community-building that is necessary to our survival as we circle around this darkness. Interestingly, David Harradine, co-artistic director of Fevered Sleep, speaking about their projects that use audience-participant conversation, and particularly *This Grief Thing* (2018-21), a series of artworks that

provide fora for members of the public to speak about bereavement and grief, conjures a similar image to Bhabha's:

> I was thinking about survival […] and going, 'why did conversation evolve in the first place for us as a species?' I don't know why, I'm not an anthropologist, but the image that came to my mind is that moment when one ancient human picked up a rock and was about to murder the other one. The other one went, 'Wait, I want to say something.' [They] started talking and then death didn't happen […] We don't talk because it's fun. We talk because it helps keep us alive. (Butler and Harradine, 2023)

In the framing of conversation as part of the artwork in all of the practice covered in this thesis – which is a framing of the business of meaning-making and community-building, of establishing subjective identity through an avowal of intersubjectivity, all against a background recognition of the contingent and the contextual – there is a framing of this attempted deferral of impending darkness; an implicit appeal for a pause of the hand holding the rock. This is conversation used as a survival mechanism against the emptiness of isolation, loss, misunderstanding, anomie and, ultimately, physical death. As a counter to all of these, it represents a grasping at Arendt's "earthly immortality" (1998). At the start of *Unburden: Saying the Unsaid*, presented shortly before he took his own life, Howells asks what you would do, where you would go, who you would see, if you only had three months left to live. Implicitly this is also a question about what you would say: What conversations would you have? Audience-participants are encouraged in the performance space and in the world beyond, to "say the unsaid". Through this microcosm, conversation is presented as an urgent and vital site for connection, authenticity and hope in the face of this unavoidable and imminent end. The suggestion is that, with time running out, all we have are these decisions, our own decisions ungrounded by absolute metaphysical or moral imperatives, about what to do, who to see and listen to, and what to say.

The avowal, through the use of audience-participant conversation, of interpersonal articulation as constitutive of subjectivity, the social, hope, desire and meaning-making in general, connects in a dramaturgical context, as previously suggested, with the postdramatic credo that emphasises the live-ness of the theatrical event and, as part of

that, the presence of both performers and audience together in the "collectively breathed air" of a space, acting as co-participants in creating a "joint text." This emphasis on live-ness and co-existence in the postdramatic is recognition of theatre as a medium whose material is "collectively spent and used up lifetime" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 17); that it frames "a shared time-space of mortality" (Ibid, p.167). All the artists examined in this thesis are practising within this postdramatic context – emphasising liveness, contingency, co-production of meaning and, even if not explicitly as Howells does in *Unburden*, they are framing the business of dying. As Jackson says, reflecting on Kaja Silverman's reading of the death drive, "it is in fact in its grip [the death drive] that our widest and wildest impulses for attachment and relationality occur" and performance that "places the possibility of death and the possibility of intimacy into the same space" gets at the "animating principle of any sociality" (Jackson, 2011, p. 247). My argument here is that the practice covered in this thesis uses audience-participant conversation as a dramaturgical device within the medium of postdramatic performance – in which the implicit character of all theatre/performance, that "sender and receiver age together" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 167), is avowed more explicitly – to stage this "animating principle of sociality". It showcases the often friction-filled but always urgent "impulses for attachment and relationality", the business of forming temporary, contingent "communities of human survival", against the background of this inexorable move towards death.

**Challenging the dramatic paradigm and the "Sole Absolute Thought"**

As discussed in chapter 1, the use of audience-participant conversation, as an iteration of the postdramatic, can be viewed as part of a disruption of the Aristotelian dramatic paradigm and the anti-dialogical tenor of the "model of sociability" (Bourriaud, 2009) implicit within it. Speculating on the emergence of this paradigm and its socio-political function, Boal imagines the circumstances around the story of a confrontation in pre-Aristotelian Greece between the lawmaker Solon and the actor and poet Thespis after a performance. In Boal's scenario, Thespis has broken from the prescribed script and from his position in the chorus in which he would normally speak with others in unison, and, instead, in an unexpected burst of self-expression has proclaimed "his own ideas, adorned with his own words chosen on the spur of the moment as he thought fit"

(2008, p.xii). Seeing this demonstration of freedom and spontaneity on stage as a threat to cultural control and public order, Solon says: “It doesn’t matter what words you used. What matters is that you demonstrated that things *could* be said. You showed them it was possible to speak out. You showed the people that each can think with his own head, choose his own words” (Ibid, p.xiv). Boal then presents the Aristotelian dramatic schema that arrives afterwards as one that seeks to contain and re-direct the forces of unbound desire, plurality and free, democratic discourse that might have been unleashed had the imagined precedent of Thespis been fully followed. In this model, mirroring Lehmann’s view of the traditional dialectical function of dialogue in drama (2006 & 2016), the idea of character-based dialogue on stage is a superficial conceit that distracts from the underlying imperative which aims to emphasise the monological and the unified. In what Boal calls “Aristotle’s coercive system of tragedy” (2008), plurality, divergent thinking and polyphony are negated and punished. There is no conversation here, and this ultimately serves to promote an authoritarian social, political and conceptual paradigm that lends itself to reaffirmation of the status quo. As Boal says on the creative, transformative potential of *genuine* dialogue and the desire of authoritarians to supress it: “when Two have ceased to exist and only the Sole Absolute Thought remains, creation becomes impossible” (Ibid, p.xvi).

To bring audience-participant conversation onto this site, like Thespis’ attempt to break from the official dramaturgical model with its scripted lines and ideas, is an affirmation of the contingent and the contextual, the plural, the open-ended and the democratic; to de-naturalise and to de-deify Platonic, Aristotelian and Kantian notions of universal truth, the monological and its associated hierarchies, and the inheritance of these things in the guise of the Modernist ideal. Whether in the Q&A sections of Touretteshero’s performances which foreground disabled people’s voices, the absenting of performers from the ‘stage’ in *The Money* leaving that public platform for audience-participants to reach an agreement between themselves, or the intimate exchanges in Jo Fong/Sonia Hughes’ work which give people the chance to have their lives and identities “seen and heard” (Fong and Hughes, 2023) within the frame of an artwork, the use of audience-participant conversation in this practice functions to

question who should speak and who should listen in these 'tightened'[44], paradigmatic spaces of art and performance. Implicitly it asks whose voice, whose performance, is prioritised and where authorship should and does reside. It questions who and what is centred, what is part of the frame and what not, who is included (on stage, in the auditorium and within the discursive parameters of the artwork) and who excluded. It confuses conventional divisions between stage and auditorium, us and them, same and other, and, in so doing, through its paradigmatic force, creates these same confusions and raises these same questions for the world of social relations and interpersonal discourse beyond the performance environment. It does this through its postdramatic avowing of the presence and subjectivity of all the individuals gathered in a space for a performance and their status as potential authors and interlocutors.

The suggestion implicit in this avowal is that, as Solon feared of Thespis' improvised speech, in place of the "Sole Absolute Thought" of the dramatic model and the production-reception dynamics and socio-political hierarchies that flow from that, instead, in these conversational dramaturgical environments, "all opinions are possible, all thoughts permitted". Or, as Howells would say, "it's all allowed". "It's all allowed" is an affirmation of Howells' performance environments as ones in which the coercive, conforming and repressive pressures of daily life might be diminished and where there is freedom to act and to speak without judgement. It is also a fundamental statement of the "conversational perspective", applied to both the performance sphere and the wider human world: that there is no omniscient authorial hand, no divinely ordained Aristotelian structure or hierarchy that reflects a *natural* order. Instead, there is just temporary community, fleeting attempts at intimacy, meaning-making and politics, and local moves towards collective understandings of what feels good, right and fair in this "shared time-space of mortality". Implicit in the spirit of "it's all allowed", and the wider conversational perspective that is evident across the practice covered in this thesis, is the recognition of the contextual and contingent status of any positions taken or judgements held, any social or communicative paradigms proposed; an awareness that, as Freire says, it is part of "a process of becoming" (1996) and could always be

[44] Bourriaud writes about art that "tightens the space of relations" (2002, p.15).

otherwise, or there could always be new “contacts and combinations” (Bakhtin, 1984). This possibility of being otherwise is perhaps ultimately not inspired by the divine, transcendental otherness suggested by Buber or Levinas, but by the otherness of oblivion. In this sense audience-participant conversation used in this practice consists in staging the negotiations with other human beings around how we might cling together on the cusp of the darkness of not being, avowing the articulatory act as all we have available to assist in that clinging, and recognising that that darkness *undoes* all attempts in that discourse to prescribe and proscribe, to singularise and to make permanent.

As noted previously, the use of theories drawn from the canon of the philosophy of dialogue as framing through this thesis points to the persistence and pervasiveness of the theme of the dialogical in Western thought. It also draws attention to the current ‘Trumpian’ moment referred to in the introduction and its destabilising of the foundational principles, values and practices that spring from the deep and widely spread historical roots of these dialogical concepts. In the world of Trump and the wider contemporary public landscape of social relations and interpersonal discourse of which he is part, there is limited space for the kinds of conversation played out in the performances covered here and for many of the values and attitudes that, as described in this thesis, can be associated with it. In this public sphere, ‘decomposed’ more quickly than Habermas could perhaps have envisaged, humility, collaboration, a commitment to the democratic, to shared notions of reality and to basic principles and practices of co-existence, do not appear to be highly prized.

An openness to fallibility, an openness to the unknown, to the other, an *openness to otherness*, which are conversational qualities, can be seen as signs of weakness. In this context, performance practices based around audience-participant conversation such as those covered here – that question the authoritarian and the autocratic, that emphasise complexity, uncertainty and the democratic, and commit to a “conversational perspective” – represent contemporary versions of Thespis standing up to Solon’s insistence on the Sole Absolute Thought. In these cases, we are given the opportunity to step out from the ‘chorus’ with others and affirm – on stage, in public,

in the flesh, in our own voices, in the process of dying and in the shadow of that undoing – the possibilities for being otherwise.

## Appendices: Transcriptions of interviews with artists

These are presented in the chronological order in which they were conducted. I have only edited out the repetitions, false starts and other idiosyncrasies of natural speech when, on the page, their inclusion seemed to unhelpfully obscure meaning. Otherwise, to conjure the conversational quality of these interviews, I have retained these features.

### Appendix 1. Matthew Pountney and Jess Thom: (Touretteshero): Interview by Richard Dufty in London, 16 August 2023

**RD:** In your performances, and the ones I know best are *Not I*, *Backstage in Biscuit Land* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, conversation between you and audience members but also, certainly in *Not I*, between audience members, is a significant feature. Do you think you can tell me a bit about the process of conceiving and developing those shows from the point of view of why you decided to include that element of conversation?

**JT:** So, I suppose I think lots of the art that we make is about initiating or changing or adding to conversations. So, I think that when we are making pieces of work, we are making them to generate conversations. And I think more recently, certainly with *Not I* and *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, being able to support those conversations directly in a space has felt like a really exciting extension of that and has felt like a generous way to particularly give time with an audience, to support an audience, to think about a piece of work, to think about the ideas…wanting audiences to think about the themes but also the process and to have time and connection with each other and with artists and with ideas. I think for me as a disabled person and a disabled artist, connecting with other people and connecting with other disabled people and connecting with ideas has been transformative. They are the things that have made the biggest difference in my life. And often that's through conversation. And so to really connect and extend and to create work that allows for those different types of connection, it's felt important to us to hold space, have space for conversations within the work.

**MP:** Yeah. I suppose that wasn't a kind of structurally built in part of *Backstage in Biscuit Land*, the first thing that we did, but I think we probably both noticed that on the occasions that we had Q and As for that show, which I remember in L.A.

particularly but I'm sure we did in various different places, it became apparent that there was lots to kind of talk about and think about from an audience perspective. But also loads of value for us, learning what people were thinking about the work and how they were responding into it and having that space for those questions. I think with *Not I*, there was a very practical consideration for *Not I* because it's such a short piece and it's normally performed with several other short pieces of Beckett's work, and so we were faced with how do you get an hour out of twelve minutes? So, it felt like actually, building that bit of conversation in felt really important for that show. And also because we wanted to take what was traditionally seen as a very kind of intense and obtuse and difficult to engage with piece of work and open it up to as many different people as possible. And I think we felt that by going, 'Hey, what does everyone think about this as part of the production itself?' it democratises it because you could have someone ask a hugely cerebral, Beckett, scholarly question, or you might have someone go, 'Why did you say biscuit and not blancmange?' And so, it felt like it created a more levelling space. And it also meant that if people had had a very intense experience, they weren't just kind of tipped out into the outside world afterwards. It was like, we're sharing this experience. And I think because we're always really keen on deliberately mixing up who our audiences are. And again, with *Not I*, we know that we're going to get some Beckett fans, some scholars. We want to get learning disabled, neurodivergent, disabled people, young people. You know, we want to get a whole load of different people into this space, people who have experienced marginalisation of any kind, all in the space, and then see what everybody has to say about it together.

**JT:** Yeah. And I think that there was something that happened for us when we were making *Not I* as well, which I think helped us understand who we were centring in our work and who it was for first. And it was for everybody, but if you had lived experience of barriers, you were going to connect to it and relate to it and get different things out of it, and that it felt like there is something. It's like something about having a plurality of voices and experiences and creating space for that that feels really…that feels interesting and that gives space and power to audience, not just as people who are consuming and watching something but are part of a community of people sharing that experience. And I think for us with *Not I*, everything about, like the set, it felt really

important to us that anyone could come and be Mouth, that there wasn't a barrier and it was a community of people making a space that worked for the people in the room and that conversation was part of that. And that extended to why we were interested in that play and what we were drawing out of it. *Backstage in Biscuit Land* was very much about experiences of disabled people as *audience*. I think *Not I* spoke about who gets to perform what roles and the claiming of existing characters as disabled characters, and about performance and about community. I think that *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* was about the right of disabled people to exist in the world, and all of those things were big themes and that having conversations about them were really important. And one of the things that we learned through *Not I* was that actually that some of those conversations could be…because we have the film we have, we have the opportunity to make a documentary about the process of making *Not I* as a stage production, we were able to tour the film to places in the world that we would never be able to take the stage show, but we were able to have some of the very similar conversations off the back of the film. And it was interesting to us to think about how we created work that could travel to different contexts, be seen in different ways, but still have that aim of supporting people to have conversations and to think and to connect with each other.

**MP:** And I think that with *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, that had a very funny sort of production history in as much as it had two years of R&D and very kind of careful, thoughtful planning over a long period of time, that was during, in and out of the lockdowns, and definitely full on kind of pandemic time, that we put that together and then we had no previews and then we were suddenly into touring. So it had a slightly lopsided feeling to it. But one of the things that emerged, that I don't think any of us would have predicted at the beginning, was my expectation was that there was going to be a huge amount of cultural output, theatre in particular, that would be addressing or dealing with the pandemic as a theme. And then in the fullness of time it emerged that just wasn't.... no-one wanted to talk about it because it was such a kind of significant collective trauma that it felt like, rather than other individual stories of trauma that people seemed more happy to talk about, the idea of collective trauma was like, 'let's just pretend that that didn't happen.' So again, creating that space to

talk within that production was a genuine invitation to our audiences to let out things that were important to them. And I think there were key moments. We did an event at Wellcome called *Invisible Touch* where there was Jess in conversation with two other disabled artists and it was about touch, physical touch, and social care. And it was a really interesting conversation. But one of the people in the audience at that event, basically, they weren't angry at the panellists, but they reflected that their experience of lockdown was having not had any physical contact with any other human being for two years. And that moment was like, 'Oh, you're letting this out, and you've come to a space where you're safe to do that, but you have been holding this. And that's a hugely significant moment'. And I think that the way that we look at all of our theatre productions is like, it's not about Jess doing the most honed, brilliant drama school perfect performance of anything. The production itself and the politics and ethics of that are really important. But it's like, from my point of view certainly, the thing that I'm always most interested in is how is everyone in this space feeling about this work? What has that done for them? All of that, positive and negative, whatever. What has that experience been? What's the collective experience been? And really, the only way that you can start to get it is by inviting people to talk about it.

**JT:** And we talk about that as 'the feeling in the room'. And that was something that we started talking about with *Backstage in Biscuit Land*. There was a feeling in that space about freedom to be yourself, bring your whole being to... There was something about how those spaces felt during and after those performances, somewhere that we got to that felt like a really powerful feeling in the room. One of the challenges of *Not I* is, 'Can we still create that feeling with a really intense piece of work?' And it was like, 'Oh yeah, we can.' That was echoed back to us enough times to feel like... That genuinely felt like a question that we were unsure about I think: can that feeling be held in a space that is dealing with things that feel darker or heavier or deeper than some of the stuff that we were talking about in *Backstage in Biscuit Land,* which was definitely a comedy and had joy at its centre? And then with *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, the other really interesting challenge about that was thinking about the very recent and ongoing experiences, and particularly ongoing experiences of disabled people and shielding people, and how easy it is to feel invisible or left behind by communities, a world, a

sector that doesn't seem to notice your requirements or has moved [on] and definitely doesn't want to talk about them. That invitation being really clear, but also feeling like it was really equal, and the quality of the conversation and the feeling of what the show feels like was definitely… was different in different places. And I think I was very nervous when we first when we took that piece of work out because it felt risky. It felt risky to make a piece of work that was talking about something that nobody seemingly wanted to talk about or think about, and where there would be very different and varied political responses to that. But actually, I think what I have come out of that tour feeling is an increased confidence in conversation and human beings' ability to have really meaningful conversations in short spaces of time.

**RD:** So are you saying with all of them, all of those shows and the place of conversation in all of those, that it's a device you can use to say 'it's not just about the art, it's also about the real world. And this is a way, conversation is a way, to connect the art to your real world. And it's also not just about me...you guys, us as a company, it's also about you.' Is that right?

**JT:** 100%. And about action and change. I think that we are making work where we want to understand something, change something, draw attention to something. We tend to make work around stuff that we're still learning about and we're learning about it through the conversations with audiences. But it's also about the change that that then makes in the world.

**MP:** I think on a really fundamental, basic level, it's also about saying, what people bring into a space in a performance is a determining factor in how good that performance feels to everyone. And it's just true. You know, from your experiences where you will have seen the same show many nights in a row, you can just tell some nights are just better than others. And that's generally based on an atmosphere or feeling in the room that exists there. And so, turning the invitation to say, 'look, we're all responsible for how this time that we spend together happens', it just articulates that in a slightly different way. So, you're literally part of... we're sharing this performance together. It's not just you are receiving something, it's very much we're all receiving and we're all giving in this space. And the other thing that I think over time, certainly after we finished with *Backstage in Biscuit Land*, and through the process of

doing *Not I*, we realised that the intended audience was not an assumed non-disabled audience. So who we assumed that we were speaking to in the first instance was not non-disabled people, for their benefit, about the experiences of being a disabled person. That was very much not what we were wanting to achieve. And I think in tandem with that, we'd been to some events – it was…was it a Heart and Soul event with Liz Carr... what was it called, *The Big Chat*? And it was a majority disabled space, and the quality and tone and variety of the conversation was completely different than had it been a majority non-disabled space...

**JT:** It was two disabled people speaking to each other.

**MP:** Yeah. And so with that idea of the conversation as a central part of our work, that is one layer, the next layer is who's involved in that conversation. And for us, very often times the most interesting bits of conversation are with other neurodiverse, disabled, learning disabled, people. And that is also safe in the knowledge that those kind of interactions are few and far between. The opportunities to have those interactions are few and far between. So, it's saying let's all come together now, let's have this conversation and that should be pretty unusual for everybody involved. And I think a lot of the most moving bits of conversation, where you could really feel what people were experiencing, was with other disabled people when we were doing *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*. And then we had the sort of beautiful moments...You know, one of my absolute favourite moments in *Not I* was when...so whenever a question was asked of Charmaine who is the BSL interpreter/performer she would answer in BSL first and then in English, spoken English, second. And we set that up as a kind of little, neat thing if that happened. And there was one performance that was at Battersea where this guy just got irate that he was having to wait for the spoken English version of her answer. I think everybody else, I felt, in the room was filled with the grace of suddenly being like, 'okay,' you know, any BSL users that would have just been the answer to that question, but for everyone else, because there was no other speaking, it's like, 'okay, we have to wait and this is beautiful and it's moving and it's powerful.' But it's unusual from a non-disabled perspective to have to have your access requirements come second. And this guy couldn't cope with that for like one question of one show of one evening of his life. And I found that as a director hilarious because I want everyone to have a nice time.

But I was quite happy for him to struggle. But so it isn't simply about conversation, it's about the types of conversation, who they are had between and what form they take.

**JT:** Yes. I often talk about this idea that as a disabled person, you receive messages constantly through your environment, everything about it. Often within theatres and cultural places those messages aren't great. They're like: 'you haven't been thought about, this isn't for you.' And we want to actively change those messages. More recently, I've also thought about the fact that actually non-disabled people are being sent messages by their environments all the time and often the messages non-disabled people get are: 'your time is more important and your way of doing things is the priority'. And it's also important to change those messages if we want to really democratise and share power and build community in more inclusive and accessible ways. I think the other thing about conversation is that it's quite fundamentally at the heart of Touretteshero. From the very outset it was one of the things that, by starting to do Touretteshero together, I went from not talking about something I found really challenging, to ignoring something that was within my life, that was having a big impact, to looking at it and talking about it and building the language to talk about it. And I felt that transformative power in my own life, and when we talk about increasing understanding and, particularly about talking about disability and disability culture, I think sometimes those things are seen as nice things to do, as a nice bonus, when actually I understand them to be absolutely crucial, life-saving, life-changing, vital tools. Conversation and connecting and understanding each other is absolutely key to lots of people's survival. And I have felt that difference in my life. And so I'm interested in making work that builds on that I suppose.

**RD:** So you're saying that the conversation is a way of making visible to the disabled audience members, for example, that they are being listened to and being understood? Is it that you mean? That their existence, their point of view, is all being acknowledged in that moment?

**JT:** Conversation for me every single day is part of me being able to access the world. Whether I was having those conversations on a bus with an Under 11s football team, or conversations with a woman in the supermarket, I was needing to explain my body and my experiences. And that didn't always feel like a choice. What making art that

includes conversation gives me is choice, control and agency and power within those conversations that I don't always have in other parts of my life. But also, through those experiences, I've understood the power of that connection and that understanding. And you don't always feel that... I used to think change was this long, drawn out, hard thing. And actually, what I learned through Touretteshero is that can happen very quickly and often conversation is a starting point for that, and shared laughter is a starting point for that. Change can also be really frustratingly slow and sometimes the exclusion of disabled people feels like it's presented as natural and inevitable. And I think that conversation helps us unpack the assumptions that are layered up in us all, it helps us pick those apart and actually connect with each other and think about the humanity and the community and the potential of what we can make together, people being in a space together.

**MP:** And I think that internalised ableism, as a phenomenon experienced by a lot of disabled people, is by definition quite isolating. And because that internalised ableist narrative is often around effectively blaming a person with impairments for having those impairments and disconnecting them from an awareness of the systems that are bringing about that isolation, the opportunity to be in a space with other disabled people, particularly who are politically disabled, means that you can start to find resonance. If somebody for the first time discloses something about their experience in one of those conversation sessions during one of our productions and Jess can just go, 'Yeah, that's something that I've experienced too.' And another disabled person might reflect that with maybe a completely different impairment. But it's a way of saying, 'Yes, we do live in this normative supremacy. We do have ableism as a thing to deal with and that ableism affects the thinking, aspirations, goals, desires of disabled people just as much as it affects anybody else, if not more so.' And so that opportunity to find those moments, and question that, is very powerful and can be something that can have an immediate impact on somebody's life. It was in Stoke, after the conversation, one of the audience basically said that they had, during COVID, decided that they were going to have a 'do not resuscitate order' and had accepted that and signed the paperwork. And they said that, as a result of seeing the show, they were entirely questioning that and might make a different decision. Whether they did or didn't, that

space and their contribution to a conversation and the conversation that surrounded it meant that the upshot was that they might do something that was potentially literally life-saving to them is hugely significant. And that for me is exactly the purpose. We can always go, was it a good show or was it a bad show in terms of performance, or did it go according to plan from a technical point of view? Or what's the show report like? If you can go, 'did something incredible happen to some members of the audience that they will keep with them for the rest of their lives?' That to me is the only really interesting part of the entire process. Everything else is like, we know what we can achieve, we know what can go right and what can go wrong. The variable that is most beautiful and most subject to change is what happens when a group of potential strangers all get together in a space and have the opportunity to be seen and heard by one another.

**RD:** Just picking up on that example in Stoke, if you hadn't had the conversational section at the end of the show… I mean, that person might still have felt those things, I guess, but wouldn't be able to share it, so what would have been different?

**JT:** I don't think they would. It's hard to imagine *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* without that conversation. The structure of that is that there was sort of introduction, the film was the art, then there was some scripted stuff afterwards that contextualised it, and then there was the conversation. We would not show the film without the context because it was way too easy for the reading to be one that was not reflective of our... you know 'disabled people just need to be brave and go outside' which was not the point of that piece of work. So it's hard to separate that out. But what was also interesting is that the conversation followed the things that the audience noticed. And of course there were some things that came up, but actually they were very different things in different places. You know, I come on stage wearing a 'no DNR' stab vest, but it didn't come up in every conversation. It only came up in some conversations. But in that particular show, I feel like the audience really heard the invitation to support each other. And there was a lot of sort of spontaneous support for each other. And there were disabled people sharing really powerful and significant things around communication and fear and ableism within medical care. And lots of stuff that didn't come up with every show and wouldn't have come up without the mix of people in the space. And so I think

there is definitely something about that invitation coming from me as a disabled person and being held in that space. But it also definitely is about feeling seen and heard and held by the audience too. And I don't think that experience would have been anywhere near the same had that person not had the chance to describe their experience of impairment through the pandemic and becoming a disabled person just before the pandemic and the sort of journey that they've been on. And I think it's really important for disabled and non-disabled people to hear that, because it's not a linear process and the relationships with our bodies change. You know, we make work that centres disabled people. I'm very aware that often the people that most need to hear that are currently non-disabled people, that it can be protective for non-disabled people to hear disability talked about in pragmatic, factual, joyful ways because it counters the narratives and the conversations that we're presented with over and over again that are often very limited, that are often very cliched, often very tragic. And it means that if you only have those tragic narratives to draw on when you experience disability or illness, then it makes that process hard. If you've had opportunities to see different support requirements met within your community, if you've had an opportunity to be part of conversations that are disabled-led and exploring the complexity of that experience, then I think it puts you in a stronger position for managing your own changing relationship with your body, your brain, your health.

**MP:** I'm only just thinking about this right now as we're having this conversation, but I suppose that probably, historically, a lot of people, however frequently they go to the theatre, whether they go a few times in their life or go very regularly, a lot of people will have…the main experience of speaking in a theatre space where they're not the performer, will be somehow deliberately awkward, embarrassing, threatening, whatever. I'm thinking, particularly around stuff to do with stand up or anything like that, or, you know, the kind of Edinburgh shows where a whole bit relies on getting someone up from the audience and making them be outside of their comfort zone completely. And that that is what the artist is getting out of that situation. So I think that creating a space, a theatre performance space, where we're inviting deeply personal things to come out for people and to sort of say, if Jess has done her job properly and the production has done its job properly, by the time we reach the

conversation, people should know that they are safe to speak and be heard. So it is almost like, if you can stand up and speak in front of a roomful of strangers about something that might be deeply personal to you and be supported, as Jess said, not just by the performer, but by everyone else in the space, then I think that you can step back from that and go, 'Well, I could say that in other less charged situations in my life that haven't necessarily had that kind of direct connection to sort of shame or embarrassment or awkwardness or unpreparedness or whatever'. It's like, 'Oh, if I can do that in a room full of strangers, then I must be able to do that with my family or with a friend or with my boss or whoever. It's actually not that bad.' Being given permission to speak in any kind of public context, once you kind of get over that hurdle, that first bit, it's not actually that bad. And I think that definitely plays into it, because it's tools like Jess said.

**JT:** And there's also something democratising about that. There was a show of *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* where the first person to speak in the conversation was a child of around ten, who spoke about her experience shielding and masking to protect her clinically extremely vulnerable siblings. And there was something so incredibly powerful about a child just speaking, speaking confidently and truthfully about their experience, and being equally heard by a room full of largely adults… That being an audience and being invited to speak in some ways felt democratising because, in different spaces where you have more awareness of who else is there, there are invisible hierarchies and permissions and all sorts of things, but it felt like, when that invitation is right, it feels really powerful because it's an opportunity to hear from each other in new ways and to hear perspectives that maybe haven't been prioritised.

**MP:** And it's a way of reframing discourse as... The thing that makes that feel like a privilege to be in, is the lived experience of other people and the variety of that lived experience. That's what makes that feel like a privilege. And if you can be in a space where you come away thinking, 'I was lucky, I was lucky to hear these amazing stories about these people's lives, that aren't necessarily easy things for people to talk about, think about or share.' And that that is the kind of hierarchy that you're creating, which is around an equality of being able to share experience... We are of a generation that is still... it was said to us as a joke, but that children should be seen and not heard was

still something that was kind of kicking around. It would have been certainly part of the upbringing of my parents for sure. And again, if we're able to, in subtle ways, create spaces that just absolutely eradicate any of those traditional hierarchies and say, 'Yeah, a ten year old's experience to this room of adults in a really adult is just as valid as anybody else's if you connect in with it.' Or that the experience of a learning disabled person reflecting their experience of anything and feeling that that space is there for them to be able to do that, is just in itself extraordinarily powerful for those individuals. It's also a very powerful way of reflecting that to people who do have those kind of inbuilt hierarchies.

**JT:** We also talk about this idea sometimes of hierarchies of brains. Certain types of brains get prioritised over others. And a lot of that is to do with fluency, fluency in speech. How confidently as an artist you can talk about your work often makes a huge difference to how people respond to it. What feels important about conversations and supporting conversations within our work is it that they don't have to be perfect, it's not about finding the most beautiful way of saying something. It's about finding ways to connect ideas and people and thinking up with each other and to hear each other and bear witness for each other and to then allow that to change our thoughts, grow within us, for us to respond against. All of those things feel powerful, but it also feels like a powerful way of trying to dismantle some hierarchies about fluency and perfection of speaking and speaking within theatre spaces, that that has to be honed. What's interesting about live performance is about that shared experience and the liveness of that experience. And I think that allowing that to be rough around the edges, and for conversations to happen in complicated ways feels exciting and interesting and challenging to that idea, to ideas around the hierarchy of how we talk about art.

**RD:** Makes me think about the idea of sort of 'thinking through conversation.' What you were saying earlier that you hadn't thought that thought until it came up in *this* conversation, and how I suppose that's what's happening in those conversations in your shows, is that one thought, one bit of somebody saying a thing is triggering another thought that might not have occurred without that previous person saying that. The previous image in my head when you were talking about how necessary that

conversational element was, was onion rings and, in the example of *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, you've got the film as the core bit, but then the conversation sort of amplifies things that certain people might not have noticed. But also diversifies things in terms of possible readings of moments in that...

**MP:** Yeah, I think I would slightly less poetically think about it as like throwing shit against the wall and seeing what sticks. With *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, we had to address the fact that there were strategic reasons why we felt it was safer to make a film as the core part of the work. It makes it easier to tour. It makes it easier for Jess in terms of pain and energy. It certainly environmentally is a much easier process because we don't have a huge set that we're lugging around all over the place, which meant that we were able to justify smaller runs in that tour. But we were absolutely certain that we also wanted to make something that felt live and... I think we would both really hesitate to call this time post-pandemic, but it's like post society's sense of the pandemic. It's like, if we accept that a group of people coming together in a space represents an actual risk to each other's health, what are we doing? What justifies that? And that idea of just sort of turning up for any cultural output, just to consume it has never felt that interesting to me. You know, if you want to do that, you can just watch something on your own at home on TV and just suck it all in and it's a one-way process, that's it. And you keep your thoughts in your head. So, we had to create this space where the conversation could go in a multitude of different directions, that was written and conceptualised *into* the film. So we would never have made that film, as Jess said, if that was a standalone piece, we wouldn't have made it with that narrative in that way. There were lots of tiny details in it that at any one moment somebody could have seen, picked up on, and that would have triggered a completely different conversation. And there was like, again, it was a child... There's a load of business with who eats what tin of food. And personally, I think we spent too much time working that out in theatrical business terms. But you know, that's actors. But we did. And it was in Bradford. There was a child who was about ten who noticed exactly that. And asked that question and it was like, 'great, you've seen that little moment in this, and that's triggered this bit of conversation'.

**JT:** There's loads of stuff within the film that is built on reality, that is essentially designed to seed the conversation, but totally relies on different people seeing stuff and picking stuff up. There's a moment about wedding rings that is about the lengths disabled people go to to show that they are valued, to show that they are valued within healthcare settings. There's stuff around hospital passports, the pledge is built on disabled people's resources that we created for each other during the pandemic. There's stuff around the email that is based on real experiences. There's a load of meaning around that. Like when to follow instructions and emergency planning. Whether we're talking about pandemic planning, whether we're talking about disaster planning, whether we're talking about fire evacuation, from what's happening around people's evacuations in emergencies. There's so much within that. And the conversation can go in a million... but it relies on the people watching it to pick things out. And whether we're chatting about why Keith Chegwin is present, or the email. All of those things. We were interested in seeding a conversation, starting points for conversation, things that you could bounce off. But one of the interesting things was about how very genuinely different that was in different places.

**MP:** And that was a genuine process. And I think that, in other areas of the work that we do, work with genuine creative risk rather than pretend creative risk. So, when we do events for children and young people, we've done certain events where it's working with a group of young people to put something on in a finite amount of time. We will literally have nothing. We start on a Monday, we're going to finish this on a Friday. If you give us nothing, that's what we're going to have at the end. There isn't a kind of safety net of 'here's the template, you can do this, you can do that. We've preset some lights. This will all happen. It's going to look good even if the content isn't great. And people will be impressed and we'll get a pat on the back. If you don't bring what you're bringing, it's going to be shit.' And I think that that's the same level of risk that we bring into those conversations. Some of them were a bit flat. And again, having toured internationally, it's interesting where people's focus lies within conversations. And, you know, I think with *Not I* particularly, we deliberately, strategically in conversation with each other, sort of said, 'If someone asks you a really boring impairment-based question, obviously it can be answered, but you can just answer it in a very flat way.'

So, almost like you said in that kind of process of amplification, it's like, 'You've asked me a boring question, here's a boring answer.' Someone else asks you the question that's to do with the art or to do with something of a kind of a bigger nature or whatever, then you're going to get a more dynamic, effusive, engaged answer. So, it's almost like feeding the opportunity to 'let's up the level of the discourse in this space.' Because that's the invitation. And, you know, that's Jess's extreme generosity as a disabled performer, coming out doing incredible work and then maybe having somebody ask a really ignorant question that we have to receive with generosity, because that's what we've invited people to do. And so there is real jeopardy within all of that work. There were two or three performances where I was messaging Rosie just being like, 'This is so incredible. I'm stunned by what's happening in this space.' Sometimes somebody would say something that was almost like a word for word articulation of why it was that we made this piece in the first instance. And I was just sitting there with my head and heart blown open. And then there were other ones where I was like 'These guys are trying and that's all there is to it.' But other than the framing of questions, the only thing that we did differently with *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* was that we had that prompt which was like, 'we're going to ask you a question first', which felt like a way into starting conversations, that is the reverse of a usual Q and A. And so usually with a Q and A, some...

**RD:** Remind me of the question you asked them.

**JT:** 'Would you have gone through the door?'

**MP:** So, 'If you if you were trapped in a bunker, or if you were stuck in a bunker, would you have gone through the door?' And then there was a further question, which is 'What item of joy would you have taken with you?' So, in that sense there were some safety net ideas in there, but they were still like, 'If we get a bad answer, that's it, we're going to get a bad answer.' And I think that flipping of that…Firstly, I mean, we never tried it in a different way so that we don't have anything to compare it with, but my sense is, that by flipping who's asking the question and who's answering the question, you remove... I think lots of times when you go to a Q and A and somebody oftentimes has got a very, very specific agenda thing that they want to ask about, something quite often to demonstrate to everyone else around them how incredibly expert they are in

whatever they're talking about. And that it's a kind of willy waving contest at that point, where it's like that's the reason why you've asked that question. So, I think we wanted to come at it from the perspective of like, 'here's a question for you' that again, in terms of democratising it, it's like those questions are so open ended, you can be any age and you can answer that. You can have any level of cognitive ability and answer those questions, with support. They're open questions in that way.

**RD:** Both in *Not I* and *Burnt Out*…those discussions feel a little bit like a Q&A session, like a post-show discussion. But it's quite a big thing that it is still part of the *artistic* experience...

**JT:** With *Not I*, the art was live in the room. The film gave the context, the political context, and then there was conversation between audience to break that... And lots of it is also quite practical, some of it is around energy and what's possible for me physically and then it drew back to a more... I was definitely responding to questions often and that tended to be questions about *Not I*, or about the process... With *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* actually, there was very little of it that was about the creative process. There was an invitation to ask about how and why we made it that way, but actually what people tended to talk about were the experiences they connected with.

**RD:** Is that partly because of that decision to begin with that question which is clearly not about practicalities. It's about the ideas, the themes and your own life experience.

**JT:** 100%. And I think one of the interesting things that I suppose I learnt through that tour, the conversations that worked best and were most powerful were the conversations where I'd said the least, and that I joined things together and I held space and I reassured people that they had time…and heard and led on the holding of space. But conversations that did feel flatter, sometimes I felt like a pressure to fill that space. And that was one of the notes that was really useful for me was 'You don't have to fill the space...And that conversation is what it is...'

**MP:** Yeah. We don't have to fill every single second of space and if there is a lull, there is a lull and that is what has happened, you know and I think again, this is… I'm only really sort of thinking about this...well no, this is an articulation of stuff that I've thought about before I suppose…With all of our productions, I'm really interested in

creating a space for audience that feels safe and held and equal and flexible. At the same time, there is a sense of uncertainty about when the art begins and ends. So, because Jess's tics are so unusual, and because non-intentional language in theatre is unusual…it's just unusual to have non-intentional language in any production, right? That's almost the antithesis. Unless you're going to see improv, you're expecting something, whether it's been devised or not, its ended up as a script and it's being said and that's what's being said…I love the fact that we change gear in and out of scripted and unscripted text even within the sort of conversational parts, even when people are walking in the door, they don't know. Jess is always, 'We haven't started yet. Talk amongst yourselves. Don't worry, this isn't the show, this isn't the show.' But then is it the show? All of that creates... there's a magic around that. But it's a very real-world magic, which is like everything in here is kind of okay as it is and is up for grabs. And oftentimes, with all of the productions that we've done, things that have started out as tics have worked their way into the script. So, all of the productions and the stand up that you've done, some stuff that sounds like tics and you deliver as tics are actually scripted. And then there is some stuff that is so perfect that you'd have to go, 'hang on, surely that was scripted.' And so you create a kind of a real sense of like 'leave your expectations at the door.' And that also permeates the kind of conversational element because some of that is going to be more familiar to Jess, to answer certain questions or themes that come up, and some of it is going to be completely left field to all of us. And then some of it is scripted and some of it isn't.

**JT:** It's interesting thinking about how it relates to our practice coming from the world of play at children's events. Because one of the things when we started doing children's events and our first ever children's event that we collaborated on together was at South London Gallery. *Something Out of Nothing* was about having an event without outcomes and was about trusting in the imagination and creativity of the children we worked with and giving them resources and saying, and it was exactly that thing, it's like, 'We have no idea where this will go, but we're going to give you a load of stuff and we know you will do something with it.' And there's this line for me, it's about trusting in audiences. But also what feels risky, what might feel risky to other performers around like, you know, whether a show feels good or not, how powerful it feels, not

being really in my control straightforwardly, or not being in what we've scripted but also in what people bring to it and what the audience bring to it…In trusting in audiences and taking that risk there is something really interesting about risk in relation to disability and in relation to the privilege of risk-taking and the types of risk-taking that are prioritised, glorified, within the creative sector. Every time I go into a theatre space, I'm taking a risk and I'm often taking risks with my fundamental identity or my health or my well-being. And we are really, really keen to create spaces where we are not asking people to take risks with their identity, but we are trusting the audience to engage in a way and to take creative risks or challenge themselves or think in different ways and be open to that process of conversation. And I think it is interesting that it feels like trust and risk are these two things that are sort of balled up together. And I can see how that has come from our work as playworkers and in adventure playgrounds, which are all about safe risk-taking and the benefit of taking risks in that way. And you know, when we were talking about *Not I* when we were making *Not I*, I was really worried about that conversation/discussion element initially. I wanted a structure. I remember talking to you and Ria, Matthew, about wanting us to talk about that bit and have a plan and to know what I was doing, and that space. And you essentially said, 'You don't need that, because it's like circle time for adults.' And once you've led a circle time for seventy kids who don't have to be there, supporting a group of adults who have chosen to be in a space to have a conversation about something that they've just experienced is not going to be... And actually, for me, it was, 'Oh yeah, okay, fine.' It was about locating those skills. I think that there was something interesting about that and about the sort of power and control of particularly theatre spaces and who has power in them that feels like, if we can disrupt that…And also in saying that conversation is part of the art, it's always been part of the intent. If we want to start conversations, why not have those conversations within the art? Why would we risk having to wait till afterwards to happen? Why would we not give that space and time and care?

**RD:** I'm interested in asking you about how your use of conversation in your shows relates, if it does at all, to the...How you see the general state of conversation, public discourse, whether that's everyday meetings and interactions with people or whether

that is discourse/conversation on social media...how you see your approach to conversation in your shows relating to the general state of conversation, dialogue, in our contemporary world. Are you somehow reacting, providing an antidote, to that?

**MP:** I think that it again goes back to what Jess mentioned about the trust versus risk dynamic, where you have those two things floating about like an atom in as much as...My personal frustrations with public discourse as it's encountered mainly on social media, where that is kind of effectively the platform that it takes place in now much more than newspapers or anything like that or any other sort of…traditional media is really just commenting on what has been commented on in social media. And because of all the very well-rehearsed stuff around engagement and clickbait material and all of that sort of stuff – it's the extremities of opinions that carry the most weight because it's what draws people into conversations and that deliberate polarising for financial gain, system that we're living in, that is deliberately divisive but is exploitative, divisive as well… I find all of that extremely troubling and also that kind of, on certain levels, that kind of movement to... that idea of no platforming people... I can see that with certain stuff, and again, you suddenly get very plugged into your own personal ideologies and morals and ethics. But that general idea of what thoughts and opinions are acceptable at one given moment... And because of the level of intensity of how social media works it is suddenly like, 'Oh shit, we've all got to formulate a detailed opinion around this topic now because something's happened that meant we have to use this hashtag and we have to do a bunch of soul searching and we have to take this opinion. Otherwise we're in the wrong.' And to me, there are always much subtler, deeper conversations that aren't necessarily being had that are the more important conversations. And if you put people in a room together where they can see each other or they're aware of each other, the possibility of spewing a load of anonymous shit into that space is immediately removed. So, it's like you can't easily... I mean you could say whatever you wanted, but it would be very immediately apparent that it was you not like 'Demon Lord 68'. You know, whatever your handle is. So there's that. And I think I have a sense of general trust in the idea that, whether I agree with someone's perspective or not, that I trust that if they can explain how they've arrived at that

place, that there is value in that... You did a talk that was at a church, it was St Martin's in the Fields.

**JT:** Yeah, yeah. About relaxed performance.

**MP:** And there was a guy in that audience who was fairly elderly I think, from what I can remember, who asked a question about...he made the point that if you go and see ballet or opera, you may be spending one hundred plus pounds on a ticket. And he wasn't saying it in an accusatory way. He was genuinely saying, 'Why is it okay for somebody like you to be making noise next to me to disrupt my experience of that?' And, you know, that's a hard question to answer on some levels. And there are so many intersections of convention and economics and social justice and disability justice and...

**JT:** Who has the right, whose space it is, and why one way is the correct way and one way isn't the correct way.

**MP:** But it was a genuinely asked question. And I think, from what I remember, you gave a pretty good answer. But if we're not prepared to be in situations where we can have difficult conversations or ask difficult questions, then we can't answer the deeper issues that we're all trying to face at the moment. If we are only prepared to skim across the surface, that isn't...

**JT:** And I think some of that is, I suppose, where for me, conversation is something that involves connection, accountability. I don't think that lots of what happens on social media I would straightforwardly characterise as a conversation in the same way as I would understand what conversation broadly speaking is. Because I think it's often about people putting views out and people responding to them. And sometimes there are moments of...going back to dialogue. Things tend to be categorised...boiling down to like offense... Often it's interesting when you try and have those more nuanced conversation, people often will boil it down to ideas that I don't think always useful like 'this offended you'. And if I'm talking about access to something or who's speaking about certain types of experience. That's not about offense... it doesn't offend me. That's about truth and authenticity and I think accountability is important within that. And I think there's something about the accountability of being..., being very aware of someone else's humanity when you're having that conversation and being able to

respond to them... And conversations can look and be very, very different things. We have conversations with people with lots of different types of impairments, of different ages. But what I would categorise as conversation is about more than just the exchange of views. There's something more to it than that and social media it's a much more flattened version of that, it's an exchange of viewpoints.

**MP:** And also it doesn't evolve organically necessarily and I think what's happening with discourse, and just human communication in general over the last twenty years probably but like much more so in the last sort of ten, fifteen, is that because of the various different technologies that we're using, we are enabling ourselves to have one way conversations much more easily than we're allowing ourselves to have two or three or multi way conversation. So by that I mean I've noticed that younger people are much happier to send a voice note than they are to have a conversation, or that a text is a better option than having a conversation. And you know, we grew up using emails which is not a conversation. You know, there are all of these forms where it's a binary form of communication, where there is a point and then another point and a point and another point, and isn't shared in the same way. Like this conversation, you said you've got a list of questions, we've gone off topic, but maybe we've answered questions that you didn't know that you had or whatever. And it's evolving and we've had new ideas in the process and you can't have that. We're training ourselves to think that conversation is just making a statement and then seeing what statement comes back at us and then responding to that, rather than going, what happens if we share ideas and we all start from the perspective of, we don't have the answer, the final finite answer to any of this, but we all have a shared responsibility to try and find those answers. And there's a big, big difference, I think.

**JT:** And I suppose I think for me that conversation is part of how we make art, is part of how we share art, and it is part of the art that we make. But conversation is a process through which we are learning about our own experiences and ideas. Rather than just sharing. Some of that is sharing. You know, through conversation we make the work, we share it, and we share fixed ideas or fixed points as part of that, but each time other people are engaging and interacting with that it is changing and evolving. *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* I don't think is the same show that we started with in Bridlington. It has

changed and evolved in terms of my relationship and understanding to it and my connection and feelings about it have changed through the process of doing it, mainly through the process of experiencing talking to other people about some of those ideas and things. That started as a group of artists having conversations, and it's about expanding who's part of that conversation. It's part of an ongoing process, not an end in itself.

**RD:** So do you sometimes worry, just going back to this guy you were talking about in the audience for the talk, who asked a question that was not antagonistic, but he was interrogating your position, and he was maybe presenting something was a bit oppositional to what you were saying…Do you sometimes worry that in the conversations within your shows that people are too much on the same wavelength, there's too much consensus? It's creating a safe space and giving people confidence in their points of view and affirming their lived experience, but do you worry that there's not enough conflict or...?

**JT:** I don't worry about that because we tend to disable people and I don't think disabled people have enough safe space, so I think that's one space. I also think safety is a conflicting idea within, particularly within theatre. Lots of theatres aren't safe for me and they're non-accessible to me because they follow a normative set of ideas about who art is for and how it should be engaged with. And so for me, I'm not interested in making work that isn't challenging to people, or that doesn't expect people to challenge or think about their own…and reflect on their own viewpoints or expect the same of me, but what I don't want people to do is to have to put parts of their own identity or well-being on the line. And I think that they're very different things. And I think that lots and lots of people, non-disabled people, haven't necessarily really experienced what it means to be unsafe in a sort of physical, in a real way. And so, I think some of those conversations are quite hard to have because I feel there's not always the sort of the depth of understanding about what that truly means. We're trying to address these huge inequalities that are built into our creative sector. And especially, I think, for me. You know, this time last year I didn't know if being an artist was a possibility for me. We, as a disabled-led company, when we think about safety and risk and what it means to take work out, particularly at the moment as a

clinically extremely vulnerable person...we're weighing up huge stakes around risk and around the benefit of allowing those risks to happen and taking those risks.

**MP:** I also think that it's a perfectly valid question and it's a valid question that the entire non-West End theatre world has to ask itself. I think commercial theatre is slightly different in as much as it's intentionally trying to just suck everyone in who's up for going to see *The Lion King* or whatever. I think that devised theatre or off-Broadway or not West End theatre, I don't know what term you would kind of put it in, but like all of that runs that risk of kind of speaking to itself and speaking to a kind of sort of liberal fascist agenda that's just like, 'these are the things that you are and aren't allowed to think.' So I think it's fair to ask that of all like non-commercial theatre in that way. I feel that, touring with the collaborative touring network and the whole ethos of like taking work to areas that don't get access to live performance and pitching up in places that are like totally different than the sort of life we're used to living in London, is stepping in the direction of...You had a lot of concerns that you were a bit worried about. There might be people who are like massive anti-vaxxers or who would be annoyed about wearing a mask or, you know, would feel affronted by that. I've always felt in the broader sense that, as I've been monitoring how we've been operating as a company, I kind of feel like when you hit people who are coming at you with totally opposing ideas, that's when you know that you're reaching more people. And I think that the fact that we do build conversation into the work as part of that, that says to me that we're pretty confident in the ideas that we have. We don't necessarily say they're exactly right for everyone for all time, but we're not afraid to have those ideas questioned and challenged because you wouldn't create space for that to happen and for one person to suddenly, you know... My concern for *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* Biscuit was much more around audience care in terms of people relinquishing, letting go, expressing experiences that they had that were effectively trauma and Jess isn't a trained trauma counsellor. She's really good at holding space for groups and for individuals, so we trust in that process and we trust that we put all of this in place. But I was much more concerned about that aspect of allowing the space to...I think basically if you have ideas that you are so against anyone else questioning on any level, it speaks to a deep insecurity about your own convictions in those beliefs. Because if you cannot

distinguish between someone questioning your ideas and personally attacking you then... And I feel like that's the sort of era that we're in at the moment where people are so confused about how those two ideas intersect. Any criticism of anyone's idea is then just basically taken as a sort of personal attack that is felt as deeply as if you've gone and punched someone in the face and those two things aren't the same. And I remember years ago seeing Muhammad Ali's memorial service that was just astonishing. Astonishing. He had sports pundits, he had members of Malcolm X's family, he had two or three former presidents of the United States, he had Republicans, he had Democrats. He had Christians, he had Muslims, he had Jews. People from all walks of life. Talking with deep passion and love about their experience of this man. And here he is, his whole career is based on physically punching people in the face until they fall on the ground. And yet he's able to forge connections and see the good in people, irrespective of what roles they appeared to be performing within society and what end of a spectrum they appeared to be on. So it was like, 'Do I get on with you as a person? Yes or no? So then we may or may not agree on every single topic, but do we interact well as people? Yes.' And that seemed to be the basis of that. The reason why I think Jess is so persuasive as a performer and as a public speaker and as an activist is because she presents that with all the armour down and it's just like, this is what it is. 'I'm only speaking to what I can speak to and here it is. And some of that might be shocking to you.' Some of it might be horribly familiar, some might be a bit both. But it's from this place of vulnerability. And I think that allowing conversation in, is an extension of that vulnerability. It's not like putting something to a vote where you anonymise people's interaction. It's not sending people out into the world. It's not creating opportunities to converse that are so heavily controlled or policed that you can't really get to anything. There is risk and vulnerability and trust and care constantly circling each other.

**RD:** Yeah. And it's that you're a good listener, isn't it? I mean, that's one of the key parts of having a conversation, that as well as presenting your own experience and point of view, you are really good at...I mean, it's an intangible thing, isn't it? But that sort of, asking the question then and then really listening to those answers. You can

imagine a scenario where somebody else wouldn't listen so carefully to what is being said.

**MP:** You're an empathetic listener. That is the key to it. You're not a perfect listener because you struggle with memory, which is hard. So, you have to pay more attention to what's just been said. But there is there is an empathy around how you engage with people. You as a performer are reminding the audience that there is no hierarchy at the point of performance, even if everybody in that space has an implied learned experience of the hierarchy of 'this is the performer, this is the usher, we are the audience, this is what happens blah, blah, blah'. It's like everything that goes on through the process of the productions is about subtly trying to dismantle some of those things, and that's where you can have empathetic listening.

**JT:** There is also something about constantly heckling yourself, the unexpected disruptions of my tics or the way the brain connects to things. There is vulnerability in that... and because of oppositionality... I take risks that lots of people I don't think they could even begin to understand how exposing and difficult that can be because I don't know what I am going to say. And I think that's really hard to imagine if it's not part of your lived experience. But there have definitely been moments where I have also really been like... I remember doing a performance of *Not I* at BAC and knowing that the London adult Tourette's group were going to be in, fifteen other people with Tourette's, and it's like I have to put my money where my mouth is now, but if we can, if I can do *Not I* with fifteen other people with tics, given all of the neurological things that I know about Tourette's and the suggestibility of that, it is going to be very hard for someone to say to me that any show can't be a relaxed performance. Some of that is like pushing stuff to limits and challenging myself to be in situations that are exposing or risky because I am supported by a company and by a creative team, by friendships and relationships that allow me to take those risks, with a safety or with a confidence or with an impact that I hope will reduce the risks other people need… there are payoffs for that... or exposing those risks to create change. I think there is something about the challenge, feeling like you are getting some pushback sometimes, being like now we are actually at a point where we can start to feel change happening. And then there are other points where it's really hard to be in a room and for someone to say I don't want

to do this as a relaxed performance, because they're saying they don't want me in that space. But it's much harder to say that to my face than it would be to say it to a producer. And so that's why it matters to be like, you have to say it to me. If you're going to say it, and that sort of exclusion is brutal. And I think there is something about this feeling of invisibility, particularly as a clinically extremely vulnerable person, and seeing particularly the creative sector and theatre open up in particular ways and then shut back down when it was, when it wasn't in... you know, how easily that expanded and how easily that retracted...and that conversation feels like a really vital format for airing those truths, those realities and for not sugarcoating how brutal that can be.

**RD:** To go back to your qualities hosting conversations, isn't another quality that you have that you have this profound interest in, understanding of, empathy for, the idea of plurality and difference. And I suppose it goes back to what you were saying about the polarisation of debate, conversation, discourse on social media – it's got to be one thing or the other. But the idea that you have that I suppose partly comes through lived experience of disability, that the world is made for people who are living within this sort of normative spectrum. But there's this whole other world, all these other people out there, what about them? I feel like that's part of the conversation thing, isn't it? When you're hosting a conversation – it is that recognition that there's always another point of view, there's always multiple points of view and there's like some empathy there in terms of lived experience. But your experience will be different to mine.

**JT:** So, I suppose I think I have also benefited from working with children for a long time. One of the things I will often say about the beauty of talking to children about Tourette's and about disability and the conversation that I have every day with adults and children... But there's something very different about the quality of the conversations that I have with children and young people. And often that's about not the fact that children will ask the questions that they're interested in, they'll ask the curious questions that I think... adults skirt around the issue. Most importantly, children ask questions to learn and evolve their point of view, and their perspective on the world, and to learn about themselves and others. Sometimes when adults ask questions, they're asking those questions to have their own views confirmed. And sometimes I simplify this it and say children listen to the answers, which is true. But I

think it's more about the reason that they're having conversations, the motivations, and I'm really interested in the process of conversation and the process of learning and evolving my relationship with my own body and brain and experiences and circumstances and how that relates to others, and finding connection. I'm solid in how I've come to think about things…I don't really care *what* gets said, but it's a process of learning and exploring a set of thoughts or ideas. And I do think that I have learnt a lot from having lots of conversations with children because it feels like conversation sits in a fundamentally different and more interesting place. And that's the place that I'm interested in conversation coming from, I think. I've not really thought about that loads. I've thought about the conversation with children, I hadn't really thought about how that has definitely shaped, I think, my approach. And conversation it is a fundamental for me, every day. I explain certain things from the outset because it's always much better for me to say it in my own words and from my own perspective rather have to have to risk someone having made their own sets of assumptions about that. So I think conversation, and feeling confident to have those conversations, and to have those tricky conversations, has opened up my world in ways that I can't even...like physically opens up my world in terms of giving me access to social care and the support I need to live my life. Those conversations about asking for help are fundamentally really fucking hard. But if you have them, the potential payoff is huge. I don't know whether everybody has had conversations where they can pinpoint the powerful potential of exchanging ideas and perspectives.

**RD:** In your shows when you're having these conversations…you talked earlier on about creating an atmosphere of trust and creating a space where people feel confident enough to ask questions, to voice their lived experience… Like you're saying, having a conversation, initiating a conversation, choosing to speak in any conversation, particularly in a public setting when there are a number of people in the room, is a risky thing and often the people that to volunteer to do that, maybe *not* in your shows but in other settings, are… there's lots of power dynamics at play there, cultural capital comes into it. Are you doing everything you can to remove that, so, it's not just the people who've come into the room feeling bold and confident that are speaking, it's everybody?

**JT:** Yeah. I mean, generally I feel like we do a pretty good... And I think there are layers of that and lots of that is about audience care and about access and about making sure that barriers to participating in that conversation are... we think about that so much. It's so much part of that work. And then, you know, there are really noticeable things. You know, we had a BSL interpreted performance in every place we went with *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*. But it was noticeable to me that where there were a group of seven or eight, or possibly more, Deaf people in the audience, that was the point when it was like a safety for... that's when people were speaking…Deaf BSL users were contributing to the conversation and speaking and sharing perspectives in BSL and with the whole audience. So, I think…there are definitely things, places where we spot... we are constantly looking at ways that we can support people to feel confident doing that. I think it's also really important to me that there is consent in that and that we never force participation. We're really thoughtful about how we set that up, and getting more thoughtful. We're really careful about how we communicate around a show and have visual stories and all of those layers of information, and have different ways of engaging. It was absolutely key that every single show had a live stream and that the way that the live stream audience were part of the show evolved over the course of learning about how that felt in the room and online, and how we talked about that. And lots of those things aren't one thing, it's layers. And it's about the messages that you send about who is... I think if you are used to getting the messages that you are the priority and that you've been thought about, it's hard to imagine spotting. I spot every time, every act of inclusivity, of thought of my body and my brain and my speech patterns. I spot that and it says something to me. That's layered within our work in ways that I anticipate other people will spot and will help undo what you're talking about in terms of who feels safe to speak in those spaces. Who we prioritise is so clear within our work now. It's got clearer and clearer. If anything it tips into prioritising… People who have direct lived experience of barriers are going to recognise stuff or recognise that they have a particular permission to speak, freedom to speak, encouragement to speak, in those spaces.

**RD:** I think that's true. I was thinking back about my experience as an online audience member for *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*, and I was thinking about the conversation at the

end and I thought it would be weird, really weird, to, certainly early on in that conversation, for *me* to be the person as a non-disabled person who doesn't experience the barriers that many in the audience would have, to be the person [to foreground my view]... It would feel really arrogant and entitled...because of the lead up to it, the content of the film, but also the way you frame the whole conversation. So, it's clear that the power dynamics have been shifted.

**MP:** I think that the thing that made *Not I* different was the fact that it was very consciously taken from this world of canonical texts and academia and performance and privilege to some degree and colliding that with our kind of assumed audience of disabled and otherwise marginalised and systemically oppressed people. And I think that, when I think about the work that we might want to make in future, I'm still interested in the idea of taking existing texts and reimagining them. I don't identify as being disabled. I understand that I have white, male, heteronormative, middle class economic everything, privilege. I still want to feel accepted and welcomed in the spaces that we create. So, I want to have spaces that are genuinely inclusive but are also genuinely places to learn. And so it doesn't require specific characteristics. It does require a specific openness or mindset of willingness to shift or change or have experiences that are outside of your own, outside of your own little bubble. And I think that's when our work is at its most successful is when we're pulling all of these disparate experiences together and saying we're all just people, and that's okay.

**JT:** I remember that with *Not I* there was a different sort of vulnerability with *Not I* to *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land*. I had not studied English or theatre. It wasn't a text that I felt any sort of ownership of. Initially I felt like I could feel the history of it and the sense of entitlement and ownership and reverence of it. What allowed me a way in, was really feeling connected to certain lines within that, from a really deep perspective, in a really deep way, that enabled me to feel confident speaking to it in those contexts. And I have definitely grown. I can now have conversations with academics that would terrify me at the beginning. And it was also because we were supported – because academics, Beckett scholars, gave us their time, and because of how we approached it, and we talked to them first and that we were supported and nurtured by them and encouraged. And then there was a lot of generosity around that and patience. But I

definitely felt like, 'I don't get this or I'm not clever enough to be able to understand this,' but then feeling so deeply connected through that process of connection, like really understanding that text and then thinking about what it says about the world we live in now, and feeling like, because I've experienced that process, I can see what having conversations or allowing different perspectives on texts like that, what that opens up about how we understand them, how we understand each other, how work is allowed to grow and evolve and be presented...and changes over time, how it's performed or who its performed for, why that changes it... That felt terrifying at one point. And now I feel so confident talking about that. But I only got that through doing it and through being exposed to that.

**RD:** It was interesting, incidentally, that it was clear the Beckett influence on the film.

**JT:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know that. Yeah.

**MP:** That was a joke. We had the same cast from *Backstage in Biscuit Land* and *Not I* with the same kind of amalgamation of references, visual references and so-on, in that space that was just like, yeah, of course this is, this is like...

**RD:** The ticking clock. Waiting for Whatever…

**JT:** There was one conversation where we talked about time as a construct and time within Beckett's work and crip time and all of these ideas. The *Not I* conversations tended to be quite similar, partly because they had a very specific root text. But with *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* we went in a lot of different directions and that might become more predictable over time if we did other runs of it. But I did feel like it could go anywhere and there were some lines in *Burnt Out in Biscuit Land* that were... It's mixing up Beckett's references and actual lines from *Not I* technically with *I Am Not Dead* as a song to a tune from a film or whatever...That's a ticced song that fulfils a very particular function within my life at key points – it's a song I sing so I can shower independently so that people know that I'm still alive. The mash up of references in some ways is definitely reminiscent of the mash up of cultural references that Tourette's creates, our work has echoes of that, I think. But some of that is very deliberate. Some of it's not.

**RD:** There's something about that Beckettian quality that sets up the conversation quite nicely because there's an element of mystery there. It's not neatly...It's open-ended. And everybody can say 'What does this mean? What does this mean?' and relate it to their own experience...

**JT:** That's because there isn't a correct response. And that question about whether you would or wouldn't have gone out the door, that's such a deeply personal...and everybody really has a direct recent connection to that in a specific way. We don't name it. We deliberately don't name COVID at any point, because it is also as relevant to climate change and loads of things...

**MP:** The thing with Beckett is almost like we were early. We were a couple of years too early with *Not I* because if that had landed like mid-pandemic, because I was always really keen for us to tour to prisons and places where people were incarcerated or there against their will or where the kind of sense of time was disrupted. And I think there's two reasons why we ended up in that kind of like Beckett-influenced thing. There's the social DNA of the work that we've created. As in, we can probably take elements from previous shows and bring them into new shows coming up or whatever. And then the other side of it is that is very resonant, I would say, to most people who experienced some form of isolation or confusion over time or whatever during the pandemic, it's like that is Beckett's time and world and space. So that run finished, kind of perfect timing in a way, but it would have had a very different post-COVID interpretation.

**JT:** But I also think as theatre makers we're not trying to make any particular type of work. The work we make definitely changes and influences us and we learn things from it and we are also keen to hold on to learning. If things are working we don't straightforwardly just get rid of it. That evolution I think... I think some of that is also about as disabled company and being a performer who experiences pain and energy barriers, we have to be really thoughtful about how we use our time. We can't do everything. We have to prioritise what we choose to use energy to do. And I think that that's really interesting at a time where global resources are things that we need to think about. I think disability culture does have something to say about understanding possibility and energy and priorities and how you live in a world where you're having to

make those judgments and decisions. That helps you make better decisions. It helps you focus where you choose to put your time.

**Appendix 2. Tassos Stevens (Coney): Interview by Richard Dufty on Zoom, 18 August 2023**

**RD:** This is all about the role of conversation in performance and in your work and the work of Coney. So, in the performances, certainly the ones I've seen – *Small Town Anywhere*, [and] thinking more recently of a *Magic Trick* and *Telephone*. And also, I'm thinking of *Common* that I saw a work-in-progress of back at BAC, conversation was a significant feature in all those projects, and my guess is that across all of Coney's work, or much of Coney's work, it's a significant feature. So, I was wondering if you could reflect on that a little bit and tell me about the process of conceiving and developing those projects and projects like them and the importance you see in the role of conversation within them?

**TS:** *Telephone* was very considered, and I will talk about the process of that. But there is a more general point. I guess it's kind of recognising in some ways it's a natural byproduct of making things for people to play, and you're making things for people to play in groups. And there's the practicalities of making things in groups. But also you quickly see that a lot of the *pleasure* for people is in the kind of conversations that they will have as part of that experience. And particularly if you can *hold space* through how what you set up into the design of the experience or facilitation in such a way – also to have conversations in a way that people wouldn't normally have them – I think there's just a huge pleasure inside that and a richness and everybody is hopefully bringing themselves into it and also meeting each other well. So, part of it is that. Just simply, this is what happens when people play together – they will have kind of conversations.

Also, I think that *reflection*, more broadly, is the mode, is the space, within which we make sense and meaning of experiences that we've had. And reflection can happen by yourself, but it can also happen in conversation with other people. It's where we make meaning. So, within *Small Town*, obviously there's conversation knit into [it]. This is how you're playing. Part of your role inside the world as a citizen in the town is that you'll be talking to other citizens. Also *gossip* – this is the thing that citizens do, whether that's in conversation or writing letters to each other. Essentially this is the role that you're inhabiting as a citizen of the town where citizens tend to gossip. That's the thing that you're playing. And then everything obviously happens inside that,

through the conversations that you're having with other people, conversations that as the makers we're not generally privy to. But it's also really important what happened immediately afterwards where we took people back into the threshold/gatekeeper space, the historian's salon, where you were first cast. I think we instinctively stumbled into what was a really important bit of caretaking and safety for the audience, as well as meaning making, which is we needed to hold a space for people to have a conversation with each other. And we had to do a simple bit of social facilitation by just ensuring that there was a free glass of wine for everybody, we had wine boxes. So nobody had a need to go to the bar. And then not having to give much of a prompt, but basically just making it clear that your role has now dropped, you are back to being you, and it's just a chance to chat to people and find out what the hell was going on. 'What were you doing?' You also saw a before and an after. Beforehand, people in the same space, just mostly quiet, mostly talking to the person that they might have come with. But then after, it's like the best party, you can't tear people apart.  Also, that transition in some ways is what the piece means – you played being a community and now you are this temporary community because of this. I've learned a bit about LARP, Live Action Role Play, which *Small Town* is adjacent to, although not the same as. And particularly what's called Nordic LARP, which is the more experimental, less like dressing up in chainmail and talking Elvish, which is not my idea of fun. But actually, the more experimental art scene is actually, it's a really fantastic artistic practice. And also it's called Nordic because particularly in Scandinavian countries the scene has taken off. There is so much wisdom that has been gathered there about the best ways to design and take people into experiences like this. And there is always a kind of decompression space afterwards and a reflection space as well. And that's part of having taken people into deeper experiences where things can become quite profound or vulnerable, then you need to hold a space where people can kind of decompress from that. And having been through experiences with other people, the way that most people will choose to do that, although they don't have to, they can do that by themselves, is in conversation with other people and reconnecting in that way. So, I think that's fundamental.

And I was remembering *Adventure One*, which I don't think you played. So this was an adventure, first made nine years ago, and it happens in a secret location somewhere in the city of London, in the financial district, which we kept secret. I won't even tell you now, where it is. Part of the showmanship is that it is secret because we don't have permission to be there, which is true. And we wouldn't get it if we asked, which is also true. And you are tailing somebody who works in the heart of the financial system and you're guided by your phone and initially you're sort of exploring the space and being guided to listen to particular bits of audio in particular locations and gradually building up a picture, a portrait, of this man. Before then, the voice on the other end of the line challenges you to do something for which there is a genuine risk of arrest as the person that you've been tailing – at a distance as it were, through listening to audio about them – they're now turning up for real. And you're now challenged to do something. There is a genuine risk of arrest. I mean, that's actually, that's actually true. We came close twice. I also won't tell you what that thing was. So that's my promise. But then afterwards, after that has happened, the next significant thing that happens is there's a conversation around a table and you will recognise some of the people in that conversation as being people that you met along the way and that you might have been also conspiring with in this arrestable action. You will also recognise the facilitator as both the person you were tailing and the also the voice at the other end of the line. They were one and the same. And there's a tilt – this has always been about you. The very first question you were asked by email in advance of that is, 'where would you place yourself in relation to the financial system? Are you on the inside because you work inside it or you've got knowledge? Or some on the outside? Is there a story that says where you are?' These answers are part of the dossier that is unpacked in front of you, and your own file is handed to you, and then you're invited to arrange yourselves around this circular table. So, the person on the left is the one who's most inside the system, the person on the right is the most outside the system. But very much with a 'you are all welcome. Wherever you're sitting, you have an equal right to be here.' But then the conversation that then follows… The conversation then follows... you've just been on this adventure, which, certainly by the point you're getting towards the arrestable part, everybody's hearts are beating, you're running…In any flow state, but particularly the intense flow state, in play in that way, we *cannot* reflect. We don't do

that. So then this is sort of basically, 'what did you just do and why?' And then sort of trying to move this towards a wider question about… which is sort of what the piece is about, 'what kind of agency do we have in the face of this big financial system?' This was relatively soon, post-crash, certainly when it was first conceived. And the thing you were asked to do [was] a McGuffin – 'this will crash the system, and would you do this if this were for real?' But it's in the conversation, particularly with an awareness of where they're all sitting, that that grew from. Before [we made a decision to sit] people in this way, it was one of the first play tests, I remember somebody saying, 'the end, it was like the end of *Fight Club*, and seeing the skyline it just made me even more want to blow up all those buildings.' Then this woman sitting next to him, they were strangers to each other, rather nervously, is like, 'I work in one of those buildings.' And then what happened between them... Or, the most extreme case was, on the left there was somebody who worked as a financier in Barclays, quite high up, as inside the system as is possible to imagine, and on the right there was somebody who had spent six months in the Occupy camp outside St Paul's. I mean they had an argument in front of everybody else, but even the fact that they were talking alone, that would not normally happen. But the gesture of that conversation actually carries the gesture of the piece in a way.

**RD:** So you're saying in that case, maybe most clearly in that case, but also in *Small Town Anywhere*, the visceral experience of what's just been played out is being processed and reflected on and heartbeats are maybe calming down and all that sort of process is going on, but also the kind of wider meanings of the piece maybe and how it relates to the world beyond the game, if you like, are being amplified, the themes are being landed or they are being expanded. Is that what you are [saying]?

**TS:** Yeah, yeah, very much so. And I think that sense of, 'What have we played like? And what does it mean, and what does it mean that it was *us* that played this as well?' So actually, I'm thinking a new thought. I used the term 'gesture', I don't know if you know that term, and I've encountered it indirectly originally from Ned Glasier of Company 3, and Toby Peach he's worked with Company 3 a lot as well, so this was brought into Coney. I think I use it slightly differently. And I think of it in terms of the gesture being the action that the piece kind of represents. But then it's the meaning of... 'what does

it mean for us, the makers, to do this action for you, the audience? What's the meaning carried within that? What does it mean for to me to give this to you?' I was struck by when people play something like *Adventure One*, where for most of their experience everybody else around them are either players or part of the world – they're not *in it*, there's only one actor – the gesture's also 'what does it mean for us to be playing this?' And I think that's important and one of the best ways to make any sense of that is through conversation. And some of those conversations, like that peak one of Barclays v Occupy, itself becoming like a mini experience inside. Everybody else watched that conversation for a bit between those two people and then that itself was kind of part of the whole experience.

**RD:** I was just going to ask you, what it is specifically about conversation in those instances that you think enables people to process things and understand the experience that they've gone through better. Because there are other things you could have done, and maybe you have done in other pieces, where people might have sat down on their own and just reflected quietly in silence. You might have had pieces, and I've been to them, where you've written at the end, you've been invited as an audience to write about the experience you've been through.

**TS:** Yeah, but I think I think it's about 'what does it mean that we've done this together?' Rather than, 'what does this mean that I've just done this experience? This just prompted me to remember a very lovely experience or piece that Dan Canham and I scratched for Coney. It was based on something that he'd originally developed, it was called *Night Walk*. And it was literally a walk through dusk into the night, through Epping Forest, as we did it on the edge of London. And at the end of that, we gave people notebooks to write as we were traveling back. There was actually a rule of actually no conversation through this whole experience other than what's necessary to stay safe, until we were back, at the end of the Tube journey, back into the centre of London and finished writing the notebooks. So, I think in some ways it's useful to think about the cases when there has been a deliberate decision to preclude conversation – why is that? Because of what conversation itself does. Fundamentally, conversation…where there is a *relational* meaning then I think that it's part of that.

I'll segue from talking about this into talking about *Telephone*, where it was very fundamental. So I've got a working theory of change through play and taking part in stuff which would say that the dimensions of the experience that impact us positively are about *agency*, where we're able to get a sense of our agency and express that, our *talents*, and those being stretched, and a *connection*, either new connections to people or richer connections to people, and all of this powered by *reflection* which can happen over time. And that's true of any experience that we have that impacts us and feels good. And I think it's in conversation where connections can be cemented. I think the kind of play that Coney… particularly from the pandemic…Every immersive company out there talks about agency, giving away agency to our audience. But actually, I think connection is a more powerful dimension. And *Telephone* was literally… the manifesto of that was to give people a sense of connection at a time where we were really missing it. And that was kind of written in a day and a half, the first draft of it, which didn't change that much after that. After a first wave of experiments that me and David Finnigan had done, three game-shows, one a week, just trying different ways of making something to do over platforms like this for audiences who were not the same room as each other, and then there was a second wave where we thought a little more deeply about what can you most meaningfully, usefully make here. And one of my responses was *Telephone*. Storytelling as a form suited Zoom. There's a forced, direct contact that you have with everybody in the room. But mostly just that this is what we are missing, really kind of craving at the moment. What comes from being able to connect people, strangers, in Zooms, who might be on other sides of an ocean from each other. And a day and a half is no time, so I stole the structure from myself. I don't know if you remember *Solo 2*, which was a storytelling piece that I did at BAC, one with lots of light bulbs and audience sitting in chairs across the space. And that was about friendship and was designed to try to make friends and it had the structure of lots of small pieces in the first act and then a second act, which is the interval, which is the audience talking to each other but being primed to do that, and then the third act being something short that kind of rounded it all off. I just copied that, thinking this is actually stronger in this context now. And particularly with the second act, at the interval, and knowing this is going to be the high point and so designing for that with the confidence that came from knowing that it had worked surprisingly well in *Solo 2*.

You've set people up through the first act, both with the contract – this is what we're here [for], this is what this is about – and you've primed them as well with their own experiences, that are resonant, that have all been brought to the surface. So, to then give people, 'now the rule is, you're going to be in small groups just with each other,' after 15 minutes, there's a time limit, but also making it easy for people not to take part, if they don't want to then that's okay. And then you can have conversations with each other. You're not forced to talk about the things... but here are these icebreaker questions should you need them. And they're the easiest thing for people to tack into. And then the questions, and they were literally some of the questions that I wrote and then answered myself to come up with some of the first act material, like 'a phone call that would change your life' or 'a memorable wrong number incident' and 'the first phone number you can remember,' and a story connected to that. Those were the three questions. And you've made it okay for people to swap stories with each other, and, because they've been primed to do this, if they choose to do so, they are sharing experiences, which are really human and vulnerable, and you're finding commonality as well through...The beauty of talking about telephones is that you're really think about relationships, and everybody's grown up with them in some shape or form. Everybody's got stories. For most people, it's a real natural pleasure. Deliberately, from the design of it, we're not going to hear all the stories that have been shared and you don't want people to feel that they have to be shared. Then people come back together. If there are any stories that are shared, we've got time for a couple maybe. The ones that were shared were amazing. Over the course of 70-80 shows, the different stories you hear from people...

**RD:** You first started doing that show...

**TS:** April 2020. It was a lockdown piece.

**RD:** We did a version of *Love Letters* which was sort of a similar response to what was going on at that time.

**TS:** Oh yeah, yeah.

**RD:** There's something in my head, going back a little bit to what you were saying, but I just want to ask you about it before I forget. This relationship between play and

conversation, which I guess sort of gets to the nub of what you're thinking about when you're using conversation in your work, since so many of your pieces are about play, about games and all of that. I'm going to try and summarise what you were saying. You were saying, I think, that you can't really have play, as long as there's more than one person involved, without conversation, that it's an inevitable part of...

**TS:** Yeah, unless you design the play in a way where one of the rules is that you can't.

**RD:** Yeah. And even if you do that, then maybe after the experience, people will be desperate to talk about it with those that have also gone through the same thing. But then would you also say that in conversation itself there's always a sense of play, some of the same things that we're drawn to and find pleasure in with play are there in conversation, in terms of, I don't know, connection, agency, things not being predetermined, some of those qualities. Is that right?

**TS:** Yeah, completely. I think that framework is true for any activity that we take part in. And that's where the good things come from. So, Astrid Brill, she's a researcher and associate of Coney, she co-devised a metric and did a PhD on impact and audience agency through using a couple of Coney pieces as case studies. And she came up with a framework of levels of agency and in that framework the top one is creative agency, describing the moments where an audience know, 'This has never happened before. What we've just done, only we could do this. Only we will ever have done this. And we know that because we are part of the process of making it happen.' But the affirmation is also like, 'Yeah, we did this'. Always the most memorable moments for audience are the moments where they made them happen, also for us as makers. The moments we remember are the ones we're just like, 'whoa', things that are unrepeatable, that'll never happen again. And I think there's that quality in a good conversation where you will be saying things, thinking things, that you've hopefully not quite articulated the same way before. Part of the impact framework more broadly, if you're trying to do playful changemaking, reflection is a necessary part of experience, and you need to design for it. Part of designing for reflection is either asking, or inviting to be discussed, questions which also I think take the formulation of what I would kind of call 'a good question' – almost being a self-definition, the questions that make you go, 'Oh, that's a good question,' usually because they're coming at a slight angle so they're going to

spark in a way that means that you will maybe say something you won't have thought before, or you're less likely to fall back onto your scripts, being the things that you routinely say, and also they'll be open as to how you can answer them. They're not looking for a particular answer. And they'll also be things which will probably touch on... We've got a framework as well about the 'gift'. Making a good gift, there are lines you can't cross, if you cross the line then the gift is no longer a good gift, but the challenge is getting it as close to the line as possible without crossing the line. I think it's the same here. How can the questions get close to the lines that matter without crossing them. It's going to be the point where the best answers and conversations will flow from. It's part of the things to think about – 'what are the good questions to ask after any piece or any part of an experience? What are the questions that people ask each other, which will mean that good conversations happen?'

Another little piece that's important, and certainly relevant here, was a tiny piece called *A Good Question* which was a conversation-game, and framed as such, that I initially made in 2015 around in the run up to that election, where I'd been struck by how difficult it was to have a good conversation about politics with anybody, but particularly anybody that you might have a different politics from. I'd had a good conversation with a friend about the Scottish independence vote. It was the first time in almost living memory where we're actually having like an hours long conversation where we disagreed around politics. And then thinking about all the reasons why that's difficult, but it really kind of fundamentally coming down to... There's a nugget that an ethnographer once shared with me which is one of my most valuable insights... the single biggest barrier that people have to taking part in anything is a fear of being judged, not the actual judgment, but the fear of it. And if we're talking about politics as literally one of the most judgy activities we can do together, probably to the point that you won't sit down with somebody whose politics are different, because it's difficult, it's complicated and complex and assuming you're going to look stupid. And the fact that people's identities and sense of belonging is very much tied into that, the tribal discourse that kind of happens. It's really hard. So, this was me then trying to think, 'okay, how do you get around that?' How would you design in a way that will enable that and reinventing many wheels in this, came up with something in three steps. First

step, which is the hardest one, is find somebody who has different politics to you who's happy to sit down and have a conversation. Although I first did this at BAC, at the famous *Tory-Core*, where there was a protest by Young Conservatives. I was there for that one. It was very half-hearted. I was in the audience and then afterwards I went up to one of the Young Conservatives to say, 'Would you do this with me?' and explained the three steps. And he and friend said 'Yeah, okay' and took it on. So yes, step one is find somebody. Step two is interview each other about your politics. And while we are doing this, the most important thing is you're collaborating to try and find the differences between you. You're only looking to identify and acknowledge those differences. You're not going to argue about them or try to sell them. You might even celebrate them. They are the reason why this conversation is a richer conversation to be having, because these exist. So, you're trying to find these. And found that the best icebreaker question in this was like, 'Tell me what's happened in your life, the life experiences that you've had, that have led you to have the kind of politics that you have now'. It was a way richer question to come into it, because it bypasses the scripts. And then you lay out your differences. And then having done that for a bit, step three is you ask each other questions that might connect to the differences. But the rule is you pass every question that is asked you that doesn't make you go, 'Oh, that's a good question'. And you've got that understanding between you. So again, it's collaborative. You're trying to find 'what are the best questions we can ask each other?' Although actually I figured out unless you bump into Young Conservatives after they've done a half-hearted protest, the best way is to think about people you've already got a relationship with, you want family or old school friends or neighbours, because a lot of our friend groups, obviously, will be people who think the same as us. So, you've got to go back to break out of that, and I had incredibly rich conversations with people, and the questions were actually in the last five minutes of a three-hour conversation, because step two was the one where the pleasure was. But you need that understanding of 'the differences are there to identify and celebrate rather than argue or settle', in order for step two to be able to happen.

**RD:** And would that mean that the questions that you ended up with were the less confrontational questions or the less antagonistic questions? What was the quality of the questions that were considered?

**TS:** Yeah, they will be less confrontational and antagonistic because they would be less judgy. The thing with the confrontational, antagonistic question inherently has a sort of 'You are wrong to think this thing, how can you possibly think this thing?' And there's a place for that. But if the aim is to have a conversation, then that's not going to happen through a question like that. You want a question that is close to the line, doesn't cross it. That's one thing. Particularly if you've had such a rich conversation, questions which are really light won't feel good either, they won't feel as relevant... The old school friend, it completely reignited our relationship. And he calls me every so often and says,' we need to have another conversation about politics.' In 2015 I thought he might be somebody who was at least considering voting UKIP. Which is true, and I think he did. He's classic red wall, Labour through and through. The questions are going to be meaningful and have the appropriate weight for the conversation you've just had, but they won't cross a line and they won't be head on. They're trying to come at an angle. The best questions you can only answer with words that you never said before, something you never articulated before. And often confrontational questions, particularly the ones that people are usually challenged with, they've got their scripts, their scripted answers, even though they're not aware they are scripted, it's how I always talk, but you have to find a way past that.

**RD:** We've moved onto this territory now around politics, I guess, and how your use of conversation in your work relates to the wider public discourse, political discourse. Can you tell me, not just in terms of that that piece you just talked about, but more generally, with your use of conversation – this might be at a conscious or a subconscious level – whether your approach to conversation, relational performance, relational game playing, how that relates to your understanding, feelings about, the state of public discourse, public conversation at the moment? I've got a question here about social media. Obviously, it might be hard to avoid referencing that in maybe answering that question.

**TS:** Yeah. I think it's probably good to talk about social media in this. We had a kind of commission from the Goethe Institute earlier this year to do some R&D about trust. It's a game about trust, which we turned into R&D about trust in experts and evidence. And particularly around the context of health care and vaccination, and it became a broader deep dive into what's in play around that. One of the causes within the new mission of Coney, is thinking about difference and division and how to counter that. Social media would be better called emotional media. The engine of it is is liking and sharing, and things that get shared are most likely to be things which provoke emotion. And negative emotion provoking is more likely than positive emotion. And then each time we open it and we hit something that makes us feel something, particularly if that's a negative emotion, then, because of how we most often deal with discomfort or dissonance [which is to] double down and become more rigid about what we think, then that increases rigidity and [encourages] radicalization. And then obviously the whole accidental on purpose design where echo chambers naturally emerge, then also increases that division. And this being done to us by the least suitable humans to be in charge of this, the ones who are running it. You'll still find me on Twitter, but I now have a rule actually that I won't engage on Twitter other than to basically share positive things and solidarity or support for other people, but I won't use it to have an argument with anybody. I've learned that the hard way. Kathryn Beaumont Evans, who is an associate of Coney's. She's a performance maker, an actor, although that's becoming less and less, her side hustle has become her main line now, she's trained as a psychoanalyst. In 2019 we did a residency at BAC for a week – *The Glass Kettle*. That was her. And she talks about Twitter as a racket. Transactional psychoanalyst, which is her particular school/stripe of therapy. Rackets are mini routines of interactions that you do because you're trying to fulfil a need. They end up not fulfilling that need really, superficially doing it, and then leaving you unsatisfied so you repeat it and you loop and you just kind of repeat and repeat and repeat. In some ways it is that, 'Somebody has said something wrong on the Internet. I have to...' That's the kind of archetypal Twitter racket. There's nothing positive to be gotten from that engagement, for you, for the other person.

**RD:** Going back to your use of conversation in your performances or your practice, do you consciously see that as some sort of counterbalance to that, some sort of antidote to this approach on social media?

**TS:** Yes. This is a very live question for me at the moment because I'm thinking about getting ready to do this work in community, a geographical community. I've been reading a lot. Just been reading something, quite a shit book actually, but I'm still glad I read it, by one of the core organizers of the protests that were part of the Serbian revolution that toppled Milosevic. Yeah, useful in as much as he talks about how you need to really actively design a movement which can bring along the most people possible and how, to do that, you need to find connections that people can make from their own everyday lived experience in the cause that you're talking about. And in some ways start small and fight on, campaign on, the small things people can feel tangibly in their lives and then build towards that. You also have to be able to build the unity. The campaign had a singular message of 'he's finished,' meaning Milosevic, and then switching it as he began to topple, focusing on a message about democracy. But you have to find the things you have in common with other people. You have to find those connections, that's how we operate as a species. And I think that you find those best through unforced conversation and being able to swap lived personal experience as well. That will build connections across differences. There's a study, that is a little bit controversial, there's a little bit of doubt, but I'm going to take it like it's true, with a heavy footnote that this is still being debated and how accurate and valid [it is]. But there was a study done in the States where they were looking at political campaigning, and you had like a campaign around gay marriage, equal rights in that respect. The most likely way for somebody to change their mind was by meeting a campaigner who had that lived experience of being gay and who could then talk to that person, find connections, make connections not even necessarily about that issue, but obviously with that identity in mind, such that then it becomes a human, personal question rather than an abstract, philosophical question. And I think that they found that having those kinds of conversations was the strongest factor that meant people might actually change their mind. Only 'might'. And I think finding that sort of commonality and therefore solidarity and I think, something I've been thinking about, also how can you

get people experienced in holding differences and recognising, 'okay, we are united on this and we differ on that. And it's not that I think that's unimportant, but it's less important than the thing we've got to do together'? I think that you can only really do this through practice. And the practice is conversations.

Doing *We The People*, which is the community landing project and [is] landing in Matson in Gloucester, which we've run quite a few times over the last five, six years. And you're landing in a place with two offers, one of which is *Rabbit* and making a gift to somebody in the community. The other, which is the more public, straightforward one, is we're here to make a pub quiz or whatever is the accessible format that can involve questions for a particular community, for the place where people would feel most comfortable. A pub quiz about this place, the catch being 'I'm not from this place. I think you might know more about it than me. What question…' I will literally – easy for a white, cis male of a certain bearish build to feel confident – I will walk up to strangers and like, 'Excuse me. Got a slightly weird question for you. If you were to set a question for a pub quiz about this place, what question would you set?' And yeah, people will invariably stop and go, 'Oh, that's a good question' and then might give you something, but it's more then the conversation that follows from that, and then by the end of it you might then kind of write a question to go into the quiz. Because the point is all the questions will be sourced from conversations with local people and will be written with them, if not by them.  All the questions are also multiple choice, that bit I do the writing of, to write the wrong answers. Which means then that anybody can guess the answer and then when it comes to the quiz itself, you do it as social curation, so you mix up the teams basically. So ideally everybody's got one friend and one stranger on the team, at least, because when there's a multiple choice, then people will argue about the answers even if they don't know them. And the questions are more often, 'Here's this person. What do they think about this particular aspect of the community?' as much as they are trivia. Then the best way to get people talking and therefore connecting is through trying to answer a question in a pub quiz. This format is a banger, it never fails.

And one of the most memorable conversations I had was, I did it in Folkestone in 2017, with a local councillor. Ideally you work with somebody local as a broker, who will help

you meet different people, who will themselves be gatekeepers to different parts of the community. So I was meeting this councillor, had this ninety-minute chat and it's only the last ten minutes she was like 'You do know I'm Ukip?' And I was like, 'Yeah, of course I do'. And I'm a very aware there are some questions that we would disagree with, probably quite vehemently. I'm choosing to acknowledge those and put those over there, and actually I want to also just sort of acknowledge that up to this point, we've had this really incredibly, for me, valuable and insightful conversation. You're talking about the impact of gentrification and like a neoliberal economic agenda on local working-class people like yourself. That bit of it, I'm with you comrade! It's the bit where you then start scapegoating other people where we have to at least agree to disagree. But I think there has to be a better way through from that point than the demonization or scapegoating of poor, white working-class people – 'If only they could see a bit more clearly or weren't being lied to all the time'. That's also a recipe for disaster, which is kind of unfolding. We have to find a way to reconnect.

**RD:** Just thinking about the relationship between conversation in your work and the wider political discourse. We talked a bit about social media and how maybe toxic, that is, and how antagonistic that can be. And presumably you feel that, whether that originated in social media or social media is just a symptom of something that's going on, that our wider democratic political discourse has gone in that direction as well, has become more antagonistic, more polarised. And there is a sort of post-truth thing going on there that's most clearly seen – obviously in America with Donald Trump, but we've definitely seen in this country as well haven't we? I'm really interested in relating your use of conversation and the way you get people to relate to each other in your practice...I'm really interested in the relationship between that and your understanding of what's happening in our wider political environment. It sounds like you do see it as some sort of answer to, antidote to, those general trends. Is that right?

**TS:** Yes, but also with massive caveats. Not least is scale. Part of the research on trust, we interviewed an expert who is also a friend of mine called Charles Kriel, who is an analyst and filmmaker, and sort of advised parliament on Cambridge Analytica and Facebook in the wake of the potential impact on our electoral system, also made films about the anti-vax movement in the States. And a nugget that he shared that sits with

me: you can radicalize people at scale – and by radicalize we're thinking about the opposite, moving people into quite rigid and antagonistic camps. You can only counter-radicalize one at a time. And yeah, in a way it has to be kind of conversational and relational, I think. And those two things being knit because it's about building a relationship with somebody. The information you are sharing with them is less important than the relationship in that respect. Helping somebody back. And I think that might be true more broadly.

**RD:** To pick up on that, I'm thinking about the qualities that you're looking to engender in the conversations that are happening in your practice and how they are maybe different to the general qualities we find in the conversations, if you can call them that, on social media or within the political world. Some of the qualities that occur to me when I'm listening to you talking... well, one thing that was in my head when you were talking about some of your practice earlier on was the embodied quality of it. Whether you're having a conversation online or in person, you're seeing the person in their totality as a living, breathing, complex human being rather than atomising them and just seeing them in terms of their party affiliation or their class, or whatever subset of characteristics you want to sort of categorise people by. So that's one sort of quality that seems to be coming through, and then there are qualities around honesty, authenticity and sort of, I don't know whether 'forgiveness' is the right word or 'acceptance'... Is that right? Could you talk about the qualities you are looking to encourage?

**TS:** Yeah. Being able to hold a space that can at least reserve judgment. It's the really hard one. But people can't really share and connect with that fear of judgment. Really, you're always designing to hold a space where that's okay. But at the same that doesn't mean the opposite, trying to hold a space which is unsafe in any way. Then again, the flip of that, being able to make it easier for people to hold – and very aware of my privilege in saying this, but still – being able to hold discomfort and difference. It's easier to do that when you are present to the fuller person. Obviously being in person gives you the strongest smell of that. This is not bad. I think it's important that you hear voice. And you're present with voice, I think, because voice communicates a lot. It's maybe also a common observation of the difficulty in reading tone that we have in text

alone. Maybe when you've got multiple channels and multiple things are impacting you about this encounter with somebody else, if one factor is something that is causing you discomfort in any way, then it's easier to hold that… these sense that there's a relationship… It is very difficult and gnarly but we have to find practice to help people with this. I think it's important.

**RD:** As you've said, you're doing everything you can in the different pieces you've made to create an environment, spaces which are as unjudgmental as possible, so that people can feel free to speak their minds, I guess, and reveal interesting things about themselves, that will be interesting to those listening, but also might be liberating for those who are speaking those things. But even so, presumably you acknowledge that the decision to speak and engage in any kind of conversation, particularly when it's not just two people having a conversation but there's a wider audience, takes a certain amount of confidence and the people that choose to do that or feel most confident doing that, will sometimes presumably be those who've got certain privileges, who've had certain privileges in their life experience. Are you conscious of that and are you to try to mitigate that?

**TS:** Yeah, yeah, very. And you try to design in a way to mitigate that. I think it's easier in small groups for that, for a small group to self-facilitate than it is in a larger group. It's weirdly easier for a louder voice to dominate large groups. I think it's often just about giving people permission to... I think a lot of it is actually about thinking about the space that you're holding as a play space, and where the rules of engagement... 'rules' is a hard word... but you want to share and make explicit the culture that you want to happen. You have to explicitly facilitate that and you want to find the lightest touch way of doing it, the way that means things happen the way they want to. So how you, the LARP term is 'on board', how you on board people into an experience is really crucial. With *Telephone*, I carefully scripted it in the end, the last bit I scripted was how... And I don't think I said anything specifically about watching out for dominating voices. And also, I couldn't curate the rooms, there's a randomness who you get pinned with. But the main thing was giving people agency to not take part, so that you could at any point in the first act of the show, if you don't want to interact, then it's completely fine, all you need to do is turn off your camera, then I won't ask you to take part in

anything in the first act. People understood that, such that when it comes to act two and the interval, you find yourself in these groups and if you don't want to take part in the conversation, you're somebody just wants to chill, that's completely cool. Just turn off your camera and mute yourself. And then everybody else will know that's what you're doing. And also that that's okay. In some ways you have to say that it's okay for the other people to recognise that it's okay for you to step out of this, because it's the sort of feelings of like, 'oh, are they okay? Should I say something?' and the anticipation of those which makes it harder for somebody to step out. And then effectively you're giving people, not quite a law of two feet, but essentially if a conversation becomes less interesting, then you will just step out of it. At least you've been given the agency and permission to do that. That was the easiest, lightest way to get to something that was generally going to hold. And I think even *knowing* that you can do that is enough to make you feel more at ease with being in that situation. So, I think just generally recognising that we need to find the lightest, loosest structure of how we're going to be together and to on board people into that. That will enable conversations to fly.

**RD:** Do you find this a particular issue, do you think, because obviously the kind of work you make does build up a real fan base, doesn't it? It's amazing that you've got this community that you've built of people that are really committed to the work that you make and want to play more and more games with you. Obviously you've got some projects that are particularly focused on a particular community and so with those projects maybe you don't have this so much, but where there is an open access thing, a general invitation, are you always thinking about how do manage those people who have done things a million times before and come to all of [y]our stuff and those that are relatively new to it in terms of, you know, confidence when it comes to having those conversations and playing the game?

**TS:** It's a challenge. I think there's got to be an awareness of that. Yeah, with the smaller group work online there's a fan base for that and there will be people who are newer. Yeah, it's harder in Zoom. I'm always mindful of that, an awareness of how the group is. People will be different at different points, but you want to try to manage it so that everybody's moving together. And it's difficult when there are asymmetries. If

somebody is less into it then people who are more into it will actually act to disengage them more. In *Small Town* actually people who didn't want to engage, and we called them 'blocks of ice', they would have a little bit of an inhibiting effect on other people who would be worried about them. But then people who were really hot, obviously by 'hot' I mean really, really, super engaged, that those two acted as a pull to widen the temperature difference. At least the 'hot people' make the 'cool people' feel even cooler. It's just a challenge. It's just sort of inherent. But you do your best to negotiate that.

**RD:** Change of tack slightly. We talked a bit about the relationship between conversation in your practice and discourse on social media, political discourse. Do you think about what you're doing, particularly in terms of the way people are relating to each other through conversation in your work in relation to the economic environment we live in, the Western capitalist model that we're all part of, relating to. There's obviously an overlap there with what we've said about political discourse and discourse on social media. Do you see what you're doing in terms of the kind of social relations that you're trying to encourage as somehow critical of, opposed to, the social relations that contemporary capitalism encourages? Do you ever think of it in those terms?

**TS:** Yeah, doesn't everybody? Yeah, I think so. It's funny, as you were asking that, I didn't know whether that was going to land on the 'Are you getting people to do all the work for nothing?' angle.

**RD:** We can come to that.

**TS:** I remember a producer back in the early days of *Small Town* going like, 'it's a genius, genius idea. You get people to pay to be the actors.'

**RD:** Yeah, not specifically of your work but that is a critique of all of this area of practice, isn't it? I have heard, read about, the idea that it's somehow naturalizing the experience of labour in the neoliberal economy. If the thing with the neoliberal economy is all about casual labour, and everything being short term and flexible and there being no real sort of centre that you can kind of call to account, and I suppose

you can make the argument that participatory art in lots of different forms, is somehow, on some level replicating that.

**TS:** It's a nice provocation. I don't agree with it. You're building a space and you're hosting a space. It's like, people go to the pub to have conversations with other people, primarily, and to buy drinks as part of that. The landlord isn't profiting in that way from... we wouldn't have thought to say that. The conversations that are happening in there are not free labour, they're part of what... It becomes a little bit different in social media platforms and online platforms where that exchange and discourse will be preserved and then become part of what draws people back. But I still think, you're running a platform where that can happen, and without that happening, your platform would have no value. But also that would not happen in that way without that platform... I think you can be critical of the way that particular platforms and spaces are held, designed, facilitated and how that runs. But, the thought that is coming to mind, that I haven't quite connected to this... I did a big bit of research for some projects ten odd years ago for Coney that was the product of Channel 4 Education, one of which won the BAFTA. The initial seed of that was a big bit of research that we did around teenagers, mental health and happiness and also how they use media that was then commissioned in order to support the future commissioning process. Anyway, I remember having a conversation in 2010 with a group of teenagers and asking them about when and why they use Facebook, which was *the* platform at that point, would be no longer for this age group, and was struck by the peak time was between around like 4 o'clock and 7 o'clock – i.e. getting home from school and decompressing after that and also getting ready for whatever the evening holds; that is chatting to friends, friends you knew in real life as well. That's peak Facebook time. Me, teenager in the 80s when all we had were landlines, I used to do that, but I used to kind of call friends one after the other in order to do that same thing. It's like the platform changes but the need remains the same. The platform changes and it facilitates in a slightly different way. So you, 2010 teenagers, can chat simultaneously to lots of friends, in one kind of conversation in a way that we couldn't do back then, and other things as a result of that. But the fundamental need is the same. And I think that ultimately the

labour is in the design and the building of the space of the platform or the work in which that conversation inhabits.

More broadly, I have less problem with volunteers and the key point for me is if somebody is either doing something without which, without that individual action, the work wouldn't happen, or doing something where they are required to make something or to turn up or to be present a particular time. As soon as you obligate people to do things or you completely critically rely on things that they're making, then you have to pay them. But where it's optional, then I think it's fine for people to do things for nothing if they choose to. Coney doesn't take placements unless it's part of a formal course requirement because you're privileging those who can afford it over those who can't. But even when we do take them, we also take real care to talk about what people want to get from the experience and then make sure that we try to actually give them that rather than 'yeah it'll happen by osmosis.'

**RD:** All that makes sense. Isn't it also true that, beyond that question about free labour and what that might represent, there's something in your practice and in the way you're getting people to relate to each other, which is really antithetical to the transactional model of social relations that I suppose a lot of market economics encourages. It goes back to what we were saying about sort of seeing the whole human being, giving those conversations time, being as interested in listening as speaking. All that does feel to me that it's in some ways an antidote to the way that a lot of kind of marketplace relationships happen. Do you think?

**TS:** Yeah. Yeah.

**RD:** Social media is definitely related to that. You said that before, towards the beginning of our conversation, that the polarisation, the antagonism, that's encouraged by those platforms is partly about selling something. It's about the marketplace of opinions and how those strongly negative opinions get eyeballs and through that make those platforms something that can be monetised, I guess. And what you're suggesting is a different sort of approach, less kind of capitalist, if you like, less about selling stuff.

**TS:** Yeah. Maybe it's kind of reflected in how the principles and values you bring into the design of (I use that verb a lot – you're always 'designing'). Those will be reflected

in the experience people have. I was just struck with how even some of the charges of 'isn't this just free necessary labour?' also come from the fact that the world is being pushed into a very transactional lens, because if you only see that aspect of it, then of course it will feel like that. But actually, it's about something wider and not least the agency that anybody has for taking part or not and that then becomes more meaningful because of that, because people are choosing…

**RD:** Final things I want to ask you about. I'm jumping around a bit, but I'm thinking of theatre and performance. That's your background going way back, isn't it? I'm wondering how much these days you think about what you do in terms of its relationship with theatre/performance. And, if you do in any way, thinking about how conversation, because generally in traditional practice certainly in this country over the last however many decades, conversation between audience members is not encouraged, apart from rare instances. But there seems to have been, within in the world we move in, a move over the last twenty years, in line with the move towards more participatory practice generally, towards sometimes that being a feature. So, I'm just wondering in terms of Coney's work, whether you think about what you're doing in terms of conversation as somehow in dialogue in any way with traditional theatre, or how you situate what you're doing in relation, if at all?

**TS:** I would site what Coney makes in a wider field of play, which includes at one end of it the experience of going to the theatre and sitting down and watching plays. There are connections and it's a wide and complex field. I've become less interested in that, that end of it, partly in some ways because as theatre makers (most of us involved in Coney are theatre makers originally in some shape or form) because we're able to land in different places in different contexts and connect with people in different ways, and you partly pursue what's most distinctive and also just being excited by what more participatory experiences offer. But they're not alien to each other. Also, you cannot say you have interviewed me unless I say this this thing, this quote, the kind of quote that I always get quoted for, 'the experience starts when you first hear about it, it only stops when you stop thinking and talking about it.' I often use the analogy of going to a theatre building to explain what I mean by that. When you first hear about something – the conversation with a friend, or you pick up a flyer – and then all the things that

happen, including going to the theatre building and being in the bar beforehand, before you then step into the actual play space and sit down and the curtain goes up. I very literally modelled *Telephone* around that because it's the most useful metaphor in that respect. Then you watch the show and then afterwards you come out and what happens after that, which will often include conversation afterwards, even if it's the slightly stilted, 'What do you think?'

You know, we met through the scratch culture that BAC propagated, although I still think that BAC never fully understood it. The stuff with ROAR, and particularly the kind of scratch nights, particularly the really simple contract that I stumbled into finding, which was to tell everybody, 'You didn't pay money for a ticket. Your price is basically to buy a drink for either the artist or the audience person that you didn't know before coming and you like the most, and just have a conversation about what you liked.' That was it. That was the key for then unlocking... The post scratch bar conversations were always so so rich and such an important part of the overall experience for people. And I'm still fascinated by that arc of the experience. And a lot of what I'm thinking about in terms of impact is about how you prime people before the experience that you have – to become aware of, bring to the surface – so you will make connections between whatever you're carrying and what the experience of the show is. And then afterwards, what are the prompts for reflection or conversation that will help you make meaning out of that experience? *The Magic Trick*, in a nutshell, in a quite simplistic way, does that. Asking you the magic number question at the beginning, so you're literally bringing to the surface and writing down for yourself 'this is what is going on for me'. And you will then later be facilitated to relate the answers you write to the questions after each bit of that experience… to connect those back to that in order to make the impact. I think that's what we do when we go to the theatre more broadly, or we take part in anything – this meaning making sense that will follow. And also what happens relationally, because any social art form there will be conversations that happen whether they're designed or not.

We're partnering with an AHRC fellowship that Astrid Brill, who l mentioned before who is University of Bath Spa and a researcher and associate of Coney's. She is leading for Bath Spa University with Coney and Pudding, Georgia Attlesey. Pudding – it's a start-

up that Georgia started that is about running good post-show conversations for audiences – venues and events. It's been pretty successful. We're partnering in this AHRC fellowship that's looking at what we are calling 'emergent impact,' like what happens through an experience will be 'emergent', it will be non-deterministic. It's arising out of what people are bringing and serendipity as much as what might be intended or designed. I'm interested in also how you could develop practice which would help people have a better cultural experience. The Pudding solution is to run an event, facilitate that, after... I think if Coney were to do something in that space, it'd be more about how do you give people a practice whereby they can do this for themselves. And more broadly making sense and meaning out of the experiences that we have being a valuable thing to do. And a conversation is always going to be one part of that, not necessarily all of it, and that brings it back to theatres and other buildings as spaces where that happens. But looking at the experience of going to the theatre is as much in the 'before' and 'after' as it is in what happens inside.

**RD:** Yeah. It's interesting isn't it, because sometimes when I go to the theatre these days, having been immersed in participatory practice, thinking about your practice and other people's practice that has those conversations or those interactions with audience within the frame of the event, it feels anachronistic sometimes, doesn't it? I'm thinking particularly of the singularity of it, the monological nature of it. It's never one person's voice because it's a collaborative artform, but it's a small group of people's voices, maybe all from a similar demographic background very often. There's not really a question there, but I was thinking about your work again in relation to that kind of more traditional theatre practice.

**TS:** In some ways there is still a dialogue that happens with you, the audience, in terms of what connections and exchange that might happen with what you bring to it. It's just that it won't necessarily be thought about by the makers in that way. But we did some research already around this. This was around participatory, immersive work – other people's shows rather than just Coney's. [We] chatted to the makers beforehand in order to come up with a set of questions which you could ask, [that the] audience could be given, not to do anything with other than think about, not even with suggestions at all, just 'think about this, reflect about this for yourself,' that were

designed to try to just heighten…'what are the sort of experiences you might have which might connect with the show?' I remember I did that for myself. I remember I went to see the Old Vic production of *A Number*, the Caryl Churchill play, with Lennie James and Paapa Essiedu, which I didn't love unfortunately. I have seen and loved that play before. But I tried to figure out some good questions to ask myself before I went in. And then I actually found they did really lift my engagement with the piece, because then moments happened in the show which then prompted me, the thoughts were happening. There's a father-son relationship and I think I went with another friend who's lost her dad, so there's inevitably...There's a richer conversation that's possible because of that and if you flip it around and you see the function of this piece of theatre is towards what you're left with afterwards and then do a bit of the work for the theatre makers in helping prime yourself. Yeah, it was interesting.

**RD:** You just made me think about the Headlong, *Afterlife* piece because I saw that show, but found actually the experience of doing your thing, much more interesting. I mean, I thought the show was fine but didn't didn't love it. But I found the Coney piece really made me think and really helped enrich, retrospectively, my experience of the piece of live theatre.

**Appendix 3. Seth Honnor (Kaleider): Interview by Richard Dufty on Zoom, 19 September 2023**

**RD:** In your performances, your shows, your projects – I'm thinking particularly of *The Money* because it's the one I know best, I think I've seen it about four times, but also I'm thinking about *Pig,* which is clearly related to *The Money* and I've read a bit about, but there might be other projects that you want to reference – conversation between audience members is a really significant feature. I'm just wondering if you can tell me a little bit about the process of conceiving those projects and developing those projects and your thinking about the role of conversation when you were making those projects.

**SH:** The conceiving of *The Money* is quite a well-rehearsed story, which was that…I suppose I could go back a little bit for this…Obviously I'd made theatrebristol.net. I had made a platform that gave people voice in a way that… it was pre-Facebook, pre-Twitter, pre any…User-generated content had been used, but I'd never heard of it, until many years later. I'd created a platform to give people voice, or maybe even a stake, I suppose.

Then I discovered Open Space through Phelim McDermott's work, and went, 'Oh, he's doing offline what I was doing online', essentially. Obviously, those two things then became a practice for me of holding those two – digital space and the offline space. I got really interested in that as a model of… I suppose I got interested in, could you distribute money in a way that wasn't like *Dragons' Den* where one person is asking essentially someone with a pile of cash for money, but actually, I'm having to go again, 'Oh, yes. No, your idea is better than mine,' because there's a single resource.

What I didn't realise probably at the time was that actually that has got really a lot of profundity – that idea of we share a planet. Essentially, I don't see it as a resource, but of course, capitalism and our society does. Culturally, we do use it as a resource in some ways. We benefit hugely from the oil age. That is, of course, using it as a resource. I just didn't realise any of those things at the time. I just was going, 'Could you put £100,000 in the middle of 100 people and get them to decide how to distribute it between themselves and they all have to agree, essentially?'

I didn't have £100,000, but I thought it was a good idea. My aunt said to me, 'You should make a TV show because they've got money.' Phelim and Lee [Simpson, from Improbable Theatre] got me a conversation with a production studio in the middle of London, which, very weirdly, was at County Hall, which, of course, is where we ended up doing the West End run. So, it's a very strange relationship to that building. Also, the same production studio, the chief exec whom we later made the ITV primetime with. It's got a weird cyclical thing. Irrelevant really.

I thought, 'I better play this game.' The week before I went, I was like, 'Well, I better try it out.' I happened to be in Cornwall with some family and some friends. I wrote to them and said, 'I've got this meeting with a TV exec next week. Would you spare a tenner and come to this caravan at 7pm or whatever? You have to be able to give up your tenner. That's it.' Like, 'Don't come if you don't want to.' Eighteen of them came, out of duty, as much as anything, just because I'd asked and they thought they'd better. I said, 'Put your money on the table. Now you just have to agree how to spend it.' There were no rules. I went, 'Ready, go.'

It was absolutely extraordinary. Some of them really haven't forgiven me because the lack of rules was brutal. They just discussed for 45 minutes how they would decide together. They talked about voting systems, and they got quite cross with each other about the merits of different voting systems. They got really entangled in it. Then after 45 minutes, they were like, 'Okay.' They hadn't talked about the money at all or any ideas at all. It was clearly quite painful for them. They exposed a lot of their politics, a lot of their individual relationships. I was like, 'Oh, what have I done?'

An hour and a half in, I was like, 'Oh, no, I've wrecked lifetime relationships here. What have I done?' I couldn't stop it, because in a way, stopping it…I could see it had to resolve. I couldn't resolve it by stopping it. That would not have resolved the situation. Then the younger generation would be like, 'Well, we should just go to the pub.' Then the older generation was like, 'We cannot go to the pub.' They're like, 'But we do go to the pub.' 'We have to give it to a charity that's saving people's lives in the Middle East or whatever.' It was so heated.

I had told them that anyone could leave at any time, and one person did. It was very kettled. What I didn't really realise at the time was I learned how to make a show in three hours by what not to do. Probably the most effective bit of R&D I've ever accidentally done. [I] went to the TV exec and he said, 'Yes, sounds amazing, but people will make it a monster. I can give you any TV exec's name, but they will make it a monster because it sounds potentially monstrous and that's what TV people want. They'll want the tears. If you don't want that, don't do it.'

Of course, I didn't want that. I don't want to create a monster. I didn't do it. I didn't follow that up. Then Emily Williams said...we needed a piece of work that was a bit edgier for a season of work we were doing six months later. Then Emily said, 'Why don't we make *The Money* as a live show?' It was obvious, really, because I knew how to make live work to some extent. I'd been making it for 10 years or so. So, I knew how to do that, whereas I didn't know how to make TV. It made it possible to control the edges of it.

We were looking for some way to do it where we could...we didn't have any money, basically. We were really looking to how we could do it cheaply. We happened to be looking for somewhere to do it where you could film it. So we looked at County Hall in Devon, which has a streaming thing because they stream their meetings, but we walked into the Guildhall in Exeter, which is one of the oldest continually civic working buildings in the country. Actually, it's super old and has always been civic.

It had all of the 'Benefactors' on the wall. We just used that system. Let's just do this. This is a civic decision-making system. So we did it in there. That's what it became. It became a fiction inside a civic decision-making system, where we borrowed the physical structure of that, so it was set out like almost all parliaments. Basically, what we called the Benefactors at that stage, which then became the Players, faced each other. Then the Silent Witnesses, which were called Silent Witnesses because they didn't have a voice, so they were dead, like it's a joke, they faced the other way.

The playing time was two hours. I had arrogantly thought that I could get Lyn Gardner to come and review a show because no one on the national paper had ever come and reviewed a show in Exeter ever. I was like, 'Well, I could do that.' I rang up, and she

said, 'Yes, I'll come.' Then she decided to come for the first show. Then the timer went, and it started to two hours. I fell through the floor. I was like, 'What was I thinking? Two hours with no intervention!' I really was like, 'What was I thinking?' Then an hour in, of course, I was thinking the same thing. Everything had come out. It had gone silent. It was weird.

Of course, it's a totally weird show in some ways. There was nothing else like it. I was half kicking myself, half going, 'Oh, this is quite interesting.' Then it picks up and then towards the end of the second hour, it was just so tense. The two-hour playing time was always the most intense experience, much more intense than what it is now, which is now an hour of playing time, because it drops, the conversation just goes to almost nothing.

I think when we did it at BAC, we did an hour and a half. That still had a bit of that shape but not quite as extreme. Now we do it as an hour just for logistics, to be able to tour it and repeat it in a day or whatever. Just can't do it… you can't get people to a show that's two and a half hours, no one will come. They don't believe it. So it doesn't have nearly the shape that it had in terms of the shape of the conversation that happens. And it's really almost not changed since then. That was 2013.

**RD:** Was that the first show/project that you'd made where relatively unstructured conversation was at the heart of it? That was the first foray into that?

**SH:** Yes, of course, because with Imitating the Dog I made shows [where] I didn't really have loads of agency over the content because they were group shows and it was very much in [a] Wooster Group derivative sort of style that wasn't natural for me. But I think, since I did that work at Theatre Bristol and the Open Space, I'd been facilitating spaces for structured/unstructured conversation.

My practice as a facilitator had really developed. I'd really understood how to open up spaces for people to move into and how to give them help, enough structure, but also to remove what they might see as normal conversational structure, like a chair or sitting around a table in a certain manner to create hierarchies or whatever. I'd learned quite a lot about how to remove them. Of course, in *The Money*, it isn't very generous always because actually of course it is a construction and it is therefore a manipulation

of the audience. It is hard. I have made it hard for them to come to an agreement like that. Otherwise, it's not interesting.

**RD:** Because I'm just impressed that, without having made a project that was similar prior to *The Money*, I'm impressed that you got to the point of having the…maybe this is because of what you've just said about your background with Theatre Bristol and facilitating discussions of all sorts…that you got to the point of feeling brave enough to put people together in a room for two hours without an active host and you felt that it could work and you'd let that conversation just run.

**SH:** We talk about this a lot at Kaleider because a lot of our work…we talk about giving agency to audiences. Actually, for me, it comes down to trust. What I recognise in other people is that they can't get to that level of trust. Really, they find it quite daunting. How do I explain this? When I pitched *Pig,* I pitched *Pig* to a group of about… I think there was probably about 40 people in the room. It was in Belgium. I was at the end of the time, every other artist had presented. They'd had 15 minutes to present and then 15 minutes for questions.

I just said, 'I want to make a plastic pig and it has a sign inside it that says this is a community fund. You can contribute to it if you like, and when you've agreed on how to spend it, you can open me and spend it' and put it in public space. The panel was like, 'Want to say anymore?' I was like, 'Not really. No, thanks. That is it.' Of course, to some extent, I was being purposefully different to everybody else. It was tactical to some extent, but also I didn't want to say anything else about it because that is what it is. If you don't get it from that, then you're never going to get it. I didn't know what else to say.

I said, 'Can they ask questions?' They said, 'We've got time for questions as well.' I was like, 'Well…' Anyway, suddenly loads of people's hands went up. They asked one of the lead directors of the network and he said, 'How will you look after your audiences?' Which is I suppose an example of that thing of people just, they are terrified of giving over agency to people. They just think that they will…I think they think that bad stuff will happen. I think it feels very risky.

Whereas, for me, I think everyone thinks that and therefore they manage that risk and so you are giving them the responsibility to look after some of that risk themselves, which comes with a whole lot of responsibilities as an artist to make sure you are not making them hate each other or exacerbating that. I don't want to do that, but what I do want to do is trust them to have a really interesting conversation.

I was told a lot later that half of that room thought I was literally taking the piss. They just thought I wasn't being truthful or real. Half the room were like, 'Oh yes, we get it and we love it.' Since then [I've] had many conversations with people who were in that room who just couldn't believe I was saying what I was saying.

The genesis of that project was really Alice, the lead host in *The Money*, and I talking about how you could take the money out of a walled space, because I was less interested in people who had decided to come to a show. I was much more interested in people who hadn't made that decision already because they weren't primed essentially to think, 'Oh, I'm going to an artwork, it's going to be really interesting.' I was more interested in people who… We call it 'interruptive gifts'. Acknowledging that you are really interrupting them.

If you are putting a big plastic pig in the street, you are really going to interrupt someone whether they like it or not, and then you really have to give them something worth interrupting for. Otherwise, it's just horrible. You're just tripping them up. You have to trip them up. Then what I find myself saying, which is a bit ridiculous really, 'it's like you trip them up, but before they hit the ground, you give them wings', so they're like, 'Whoa, what? Where am I?' Getting people into that state is the ultimate for me because they just are going, 'What is this I can suddenly do? I'm in a space I didn't really realise I was in and it's enjoyable and interesting.'

Alice was saying, 'Could we put a table with money in it?' a pool table, I guess, where you can just play *The Money* in the street. I just could not see anyone ever wanting to do that and flippantly said, 'You may as well just put a massive plastic pig in the street,' and then was like, 'Oh yes, maybe we should just put a plastic pig in the street.' It took William Galinsky actually to just back it and say, 'Yes, let's do it.'

It took someone super courageous actually to go, 'Yes, let's do it.' *The Money,* I don't think anyone would've said yes to it as a commissioner. I think it's very, very unlikely anyone…We only could do it because we made it ourselves and no one was asking. There was no funding. There was a certain audacity to it that I just don't think…I think everyone else would've gone, 'Mm.' People asked me with *The Money*, are you going to have ambulances outside?

**RD:** God.

**SH:** People genuinely thought that it was a dangerous thing to do.

**RD:** Yes, but you felt confident that it wasn't. Obviously, it's interesting comparing those two projects, isn't it? The nature of the conversation perhaps in those projects and what's different about that, given that there's an overlap in terms of the premise of each of those projects. There's a pot of money and you're asking people to have some sort of conversation/discourse around what to do with the money. *The Money*, in my experience, felt edgy and risky and exciting and all of those things, but you always felt we were relatively safe. We'd all chosen to come to this thing.

I suppose there's an element of exclusion in that process as there is with going to any arts event when you are paying money and you need to be on the mailing list and the rest of it. I haven't seen *Pig*, but I've read about it from the stuff that you've sent me. That feels quite different because you haven't got those controls, those filters, if you like. On the face of it, it sounds potentially more scary, more risky, bad stuff could happen, in a way that maybe *Money* doesn't. Did you find in the way the conversations and people's interactions around *Pig* played out that that was the case, that it felt more edgy?

**SH:** I find it slightly terrifying to have *Pig* out. I have to be on it. When I'm not with it, I'm super nervous. It's like watching your kid play in the motorway. You can't do anything other than take it away again. Once it's out, it does whatever it does. What *Pig* does that *The Money* maybe doesn't do, *The Money* maybe gives you a deeper reading of...it is anthropological in the sense that you're watching humans try to be the best of themselves actually most of the time, or playful, or provocative, but essentially

there you are seeing...Like you are saying, it's art in a fairly safe space. Mostly it's in arts festivals, whereas *Pig* is really, really inside out…

In *The Money*, we corral people. We sell them tickets, we bring them into the space. We have hosts that then corral them into the middle. The money is in the middle. We're doing a whole lot of work to get them looking into the middle of the space. Outdoors, you can't really do that. The effort to do that outdoors is immense because you haven't got walls, you haven't got doorways to move people through. You haven't got lights. You've got to build all of them and then you're just building a theatre outdoors. It's really difficult. What we did with *Pig* is we did the opposite where we created a magnet in the middle that pulls people in.

You've got a different force happening. It looks cute. It lights up and people like it. It looks nice, but of course it's totally unassuming because it's asking you a very difficult question. What it does differently to *The Money* is it reveals the city or the place it's in very, very rapidly, with brutal rapidity. Sometimes that's slightly disappointing and sometimes it's exhilarating and sometimes it's super scary.

Just to give you a sense of it, obviously, we've toured it really only in Western Europe. Actually, we just did it last year in Eastern Europe, but mostly in Western Europe. It started in Norwich. In Norwich, nobody knew about it. It's a bit like *The Money*, you cannot rehearse it. You just have to trust that you've done all the thinking, which is a weird thing for an artist, obviously, because a lot of the time we diminish risk by trying things out. You just couldn't do that with either of these projects.

We put it in the street and I'm sitting watching it and someone says, 'Well, I'm going to go and be the first to put money in it,' sitting in front of me. She goes over and she puts some money in it and someone says, 'Oh, it works.' I remember thinking, of course, people put money in it. That's always going to happen. That's not it working. Then a few days later, someone comes in, opens it, and spends it on the football kit for a kids' football team where the manager has run off with the money. The paper loves it. It gets into the press super-fast, *Pig,* really rapidly gets into the press wherever it is.

They take a picture of the kids' football team around the pig and the promoters are super happy and they're really pleased. Again, everyone's like, 'Oh, it works.' Then

someone rings up the festival and says, ‘Oh, I’ve got this group of elderly people and we wondered if we might be able to have the money for our group.’ The festival did what I told them to do, which was refer them back to the artwork and go, ‘You can do what you like,’ as in just go and read the sign. She said, ‘But we don’t have any kids.’ They weren’t so good with the press. She took a couple of kids with her and opened it and took the money out, and then people were like, ‘Oh, this is interesting.’

Then the Big Issue seller had been standing near *Pig* for several days and a security guard from the venue that it was next to, who had been super sceptical about it and very angry at these Italian kids trying to open it and steal the money in a xenophobic way and anti-teenage way, helped him open it. He took out £12 for a bus ticket and two coffees to go and see his partner in hospital. It makes me teary now to think about the juxtaposition of what he must have had to go through to make that decision. It really hit me in the stomach at that point. That’s when I went, ‘Oh yeah, it works.’ Because it was to do with this juxtaposition, this super complex thing we have about people.

Then it goes to Norway for two weeks and no one opens it. Gets money in it, I arrive, it’s already had three major articles in the newspaper. I come down at breakfast, I’m on the front page of the newspaper. No one’s opened it, it’s had money. It’s a small provincial town it’s in. It’s not even in Oslo. The mayor comes to talk to me and she leaves her office and says, ‘I’m going to have a pig conversation,’ which in Norwegian means dirty chat thing. She’s like, ‘Everyone knows.’ They were talking about it. I overheard people on the bus talking about what…there’s no word for community in Norwegian direct translation. They’d used this word, I can’t remember what it was, *fellesskap* or something. There was this conversation about what that actually meant on the bus. People had overheard that it was being talked about at Bingo. I went into a venue somewhere else in the town and they said, ‘Where are you from?’ I said, ‘I’ve got this project, *Pig.’* They went, ‘Oh my god, the *pig*.’ It was so pervasive, and no one was opening it.

They were hugely frustrated because they were like, ‘Oh, no one opens it in Norway because no one would be a tall poppy because we are taught to comply from really early.’ I was like, ‘Isn’t this is a good thing? Isn’t this all fine?’ They were like, ‘Yes, but

it's really annoying.' I'm like, 'You could open it.' They're like, 'I can't open it.' It was really extraordinary. On the last day – no one knew it was the last day because it wasn't announced when it was from and till – but someone did open it in the very last hour actually, weirdly. There's a video of. It's a really extraordinary opening.

Then we went to Hull a few days later and £2,500 was put in in two days. The police were involved very heavily. We had to move a bit. It was the most extraordinary experience of my artistic career. At times, it was brilliant in many ways, but I was lucky to have some peers around me. I would constantly go, 'Is this okay?' They were going, 'Yes. You are all right. Carry on. This is what it is.' It showed up the drugs problem in the city very quickly. It brought everything to the surface. All of the press piled in. It went up through the police incredibly quickly. They'd had a conversation about it, but as soon as it was out in the open, they were there.

They asked us to move it. They asked me, 'If there's an increase in deaths tonight in the city because of access to cash in your artwork, how will that make you feel?' After I'd got over the initial 'I don't want anyone to die' moment, I was like, 'Hang on a minute, that's not totally my responsibility.' Anyway, the police after that were really, really brilliant. Really brilliant. Held off it, kept it on CCTV, did step in a couple of times. It was two days. It was so intense, Richard, I can't tell you.

**RD:** I read the report. I can't remember the organisation that was supporting you do that tour, but that report you sent me. It's probably the most interesting reports of those kinds I think I've ever read. It sounds so different in each place you go and there's so much drama and so many moral quandaries for you to deal with.

**SH:** A promoter will go up to it and say, 'I went to see *Pig* and nothing was really happening.' You go, 'Yes, that's because it doesn't happen around the pig. It happens with the story that someone hears of someone taking it out to go to the hospital to see their loved one or whatever because they haven't sold enough Big Issues, but you don't see that if you go up to the pig. You can't tell that.' We put Pigzine in place to capture some of that for people because it was too…

Interestingly, that's a visual art thing, isn't it? If you go to a gallery and you look at a picture, no one captures what everyone thinks. They either do or don't have a

conversation about it over the washing up. No funders really...I don't think they really worry about that. In theatre, they really worry about what people say. We're in this weird in-between place where I'm going, 'People will just talk about *Pig*. It doesn't matter.' People are like, 'Yes, but how will you know?' 'I don't know. They just will.'

**RD:** Just quickly whilst it's in my head, it doesn't really relate to conversation, but I'm just interested. When the police were intervening – maybe it wasn't always the official police, but it sounds like there was a certain amount of policing of who was allowed to open *Pig* and take money out. That happened. That's part of the project, I guess, is it, in different places? That the community or the actual police will sometimes step in and say, 'No, no, not you, mate. You're not opening it. It's not for you'?

**SH:** Absolutely. Two things that happen. One is it would attract people in uniform. I mean it like that. Anyone who wears a uniform for some reason it seems to attract them. I think that is to do with, it challenges the control that someone in uniform actually represents in some ways. No one ever seemed to be bothered by it. They were really interested in it. Police are often very interested in it. There's that amazing picture that one of the audience members took of it in Marseille with these two officers with big guns next to it. Massive guns, looking at it sideways. This kid looking at them with a communist newspaper in the background…failed communist newspaper sign in the background. It's an extraordinary picture in some ways of power and control and money and societal structure. On the other hand, people would walk around behind people who were undoing it, doing it back up again. People would be undoing it, someone else would walk around behind doing it up. There was a situation in Hull where someone in the street community had opened it and taken out the money. People were up in arms, as you might imagine.

Some people were up in arms. Then the next day he brought back a receipt for the telephone that he said he bought for his mother or whatever who didn't have a phone. Suddenly everyone was massively reassured. Then seconds later they're like, 'Oh, why am I reassured by a receipt? How do I know that you spent that money on that phone? Where did you get?' It really challenged people's prejudice, basically. Just as soon as you thought you knew where you were, you weren't there anymore. I loved it for that, it never let people settle.

**RD:** When an official authority like the police was deciding to intervene and stop somebody taking the money, did you just think to yourself, 'Well, that's just part of what this project is about? It just reveals these structures,' or did you sometimes say, 'Guys, the whole point is you're not meant to intervene and let people do that'? You just let the things play out.

**SH:** Yes. Because they are the community too. There's no one that was above it. In a way, the power of *Pig* is that it levels everyone. Not really, of course. *The Money* does that too. The system actually gives everybody the same power essentially. Police have to come to terms with the fact that they are the community. That was hard for them because they're so used to the public space, to policing the community and therefore being other, that actually this project had to make them realise that the drugs problem was not my problem. It was the city's problem.

It was a very particular moment I think then that showed it. It was a late hot summer day as well and all of the things that come with that. People really questioned…A vicar opened it or someone from the church opened it and took some money. It doesn't matter how much people take, but it becomes a bit like, 'Oh, why do they need it?' No one intervened. If you're elderly and open it, no one intervenes. If you look like you've been living on the street, people call the police.

**RD:** It makes me think of Bernard Shaw, talked about the deserving and the undeserving poor. In *Pygmalion*, I think, satirising that attitude. It is a bit like that, isn't it? It's whether you are deserving or not. Whether you're morally deserving of being able to open it.

**SH:** I think *Pig* achieved asking that question in a very challenging way. We did it in Budapest last year and I wasn't there for it. I think they should have taken *The Money*, basically. I'm not sure they were quite ready for *Pig.* It felt like a bit of an intrusion actually from an artist's point of view.

**RD:** Going back to conversation in both *The Money* and *Pig*, what's the difference between the conversations? Maybe it's hard to generalise between the conversations that happen in *The Money* and *Pig*. All the times I've seen *The Money*, there's a lot of consensus and a lot of agreement and a lot of good feeling and goodwill. But always,

there's the opposite as well –there's some level of antagonism and disagreement. Is that the same mix that you get in *Pig*? What's the difference in terms of the qualities of the conversation you get in both projects? Have you got an ideal mix of…a little bit of consensus, a little bit of conflict? I'm assuming you don't.

**SH:** No. Whatever happens, happens. That's why it works, to some extent, is because I have to let go of that. When I used to watch *The Money* in the early days, and I've watched it, I don't know, a hundred and fifty times or something, and I still worry slightly that it will break, it won't work or whatever, I really had to learn to just trust that whatever happened, it worked. Whatever the outcome, it worked.

The conversation in *The Money* is…they are corralled. They've got this time that they've already committed to, and they therefore have a conversation together. It can be really, really interesting or it can be incredibly dull as in the actual content of the conversation can be pretty dull. That doesn't mean that the show is dull, which is weird because obviously, it makes up most of the show. Sometimes they are less good than others.

Sometimes there are shows that are just better than other shows. That is true. I used to say it always worked. It always does something, but sometimes they are extraordinary. That's because you just would never write them. You could never write them. Extraordinary events happen and turns happen and emotions rise and fall, you couldn't write a script for it. And it's impossible to believe that it's entirely just real people having a conversation because it's so extraordinary.

Then there are other times when, I don't know, they just do agree quite easily and they come to an agreement and it's quite nice. That is also fine. It's just a different show. There was a show in The Netherlands where they all agreed and I couldn't read it because it was in Dutch, so I couldn't understand. There was no one next to me to translate. I was like, 'Why are they all buying in, no one's vetoing?' People were buying in a lot towards the end. I was like, 'This is very unusual to see it happen like that.' Buying and signing, buying and signing, and I was like, 'Oh, weird.'

It turns out that it was just a really good idea and that they wanted to buy a boat together and to clean up the canal as they went in this timeshare of a boat. By the

weekend they'd bought a boat. To my knowledge, it still exists as a timeshare in Groningen where people go and can use it for leisure, but they have to clean up the canals as they go. Just a cool idea. That's cool.

**RD:** That's a rarity like you say, isn't it? Going back to something you said earlier, you talked about handing over agency to the audience, which you obviously do in a quite profound way. You also said, but we are still manipulating them, we are still setting the rules. We're still making it, I think you said, making it difficult for them to reach agreement.

**SH:** Yes. It's unanimous, so that's difficult.

**RD:** I suppose in terms of the quality, going back to that thing about the quality of the conversation that you are trying to engender, clearly it is what it is within the parameters that you've set up. In setting up those parameters, those rules, you are interested, are you, in the idea…I'm just interested in that consensus versus conflict thing. Obviously, if everybody reached an agreement, if every show was like that one in the Netherlands, it might become a bit less interesting as a project, I guess. You're interested in that dialogue between the ability to reach agreement and the trickiness of reaching agreement, aren't you, I suppose? Is that right?

**SH:** Yes. I suppose. I think they're the same thing really. It is hard and sometimes people achieve it and sometimes they don't, but the show is the same. The show is still going. The show is still just something else. Often people ask me about *The Money*, they're like, 'Oh, what do people spend it on? What do they come up with?' It's often the first question in an interview, and I'm always like, 'Well, it's not really the point.'

I can talk about that, of course, because some of it isn't uninteresting, but actually, it's more what…Again, like I say, I had to come to terms with the fact that if people agree to spend the money or if they didn't agree to spend the money, it's the same show. You are still watching a conversation. The resolution, a lot of the audience feel like they've either achieved it or they haven't, but of course that's not what the show is. They come to realise that, I think, mostly. That's why there's a drinks section at the end where they get to talk to each other, to try and get them to process that.

That's a very important part of the manipulation for me. The structure of it is to allow them to begin to process that, a bit more as themselves, a bit less on show, and not complete that processing, so they get chucked out before they've really resolved it. There's no point of applause. I'm not asking them to end the contract with me as the artist at all. I'm wilfully removing that. There are lots of structures in there that are manipulative in terms of, I know that that's not allowing them to put the show down, if you see what I mean, and I want them to stay with it. They don't know I'm doing that consciously, I just know that's what will happen.

I think there's lots of structures I'm putting in there that are to do with giving them an experience that they're not consciously totally across but subconsciously are entwined with. Then it's not really a question of whether there's conflict or not conflict, really. There are some shows where people feel very pleased with themselves afterwards, but then the Silent Witnesses watching are like, 'The players all look very pleased with themselves.'

But the Silent Witnesses, so many of them are sitting there going, 'Yes, but you shouldn't feel so pleased with yourself because you could have done anything and that's what you chose to do. I'm not sure if you could do anything… that's not necessarily what you would choose to do. You've just come to a compromise.' The discourse about what the hell do we all value together is still there. Of course, [what] doesn't happen in *The Money* is people don't say, 'Let's talk about our values.' They almost never ever say it. But of course, that's what the show is about, is about what are our shared values, to some extent, not entirely. But it is extraordinary that in all of the shows that doesn't happen really.

**RD:** Is that one of the reasons why you landed on the idea of unanimity, needing unanimity to be able to sign the contract and decide where *The Money* goes, because if you didn't have that then some of that deep conversation about values, it'd be too easy, they wouldn't have to go there because it would be, 'Well, the bloke over there is not going to agree, but whatever, it doesn't matter. We've got a majority here and we're not going to interrogate why he doesn't agree really because we don't need to'?

**SH:** Yes, I think I was just most interested in a structure where everyone had to agree. I'm interested politically in how we find common ground. I think that it's the problem. One of the big problems we have right now is that we are being super polarised. I don't hear politicians saying, 'But do we want people to die in the Channel?' I don't hear them asking that question of the electorate. I hear them playing a game of 'Let's check out what people think will win votes, and just make sure this,' and they're just scared to go, 'Do we want that?'

Because my feeling is if that actually people are asked if they want that, they will invariably say no. Then you go, 'Okay, next question.' It's not what I see happening at all and so we get this very, very polarised system where people are moving away from each other rather than creating common ground. I suppose, just like theatrebristol.net just like Open Space, I was interested in a structure that could hold diversity of thought but also convergent. It's a space that can hold divergent thinking, but also prioritise convergent thinking as well, actually allows people to find what they do agree on rather than assuming people won't and creating a system whereby that's dealt with somehow in the system.

**RD:** I was going to ask you about that, particularly in terms of conversation in *The Money*, how it relates to your feelings about social relations and public discourse out there in the world. You've already started to talk about that. I think it's really interesting because you are doing those two things. You're encouraging people, creating the parameters to encourage people to think about how they can find that commonality, reach a consensus, find agreement, because otherwise, they don't complete the game or whatever. They're not able to spend the money. But the fact that you are looking for unanimity, and that there's *money* involved, somehow inspires... There's endless possibilities but limited resource. That inevitably leads to, or can lead to, divergence can't it and some conflict and antagonism. I think that's what's really interesting about... Because I can see one reading of *The Money* and *Pig* where you think, 'Okay, you're setting something up to inspire conflict,' and then everybody else looks on and thinks, 'Wow, this is great drama. This is great theatre.' I feel it is more complicated than that. There are some good values and good ideals at the heart of it.

**SH:** Yeah, for me... I wouldn't make a piece of work that did that. Actually, recently, post-pandemic, I've been making work that generally is actually less antagonistic, because I feel like the public, audiences, they just may not be up for that challenge right now.

**RD:** I was going to ask you about that actually, because you're talking about *Fish Mobile*, aren't you?

**SH:** Yes.

**RD:** I've heard you in interviews and read stuff that you've written about that, and you've talked to me I think previously about that feeling, post-pandemic people need something calmer and less confrontational maybe.

**SH:** Yes. It's doing a similar thing for me of creating a space. It's just creating a slightly different, honed space. *Fish Mobile* still invites you to come and be with it or whatever, but it's a very dreamy expansive space to be in, and a space of wonder and less cerebral maybe actually than I guess *The Money* is, for example. *The Money* makes you *think* essentially, it's less embodied, but *Fish Mobile* is audacious in its simplicity to some extent, I guess. Putting a tiny mobile on a massive crane and making it massive. Put it on a crane and that just being it. Sometimes audiences are like, 'When will it start?' You're like, 'No, this is it.'

It's quite different in some ways, but I suppose it is still this thing of bringing people together somehow, I suppose. Of course, we do print-making workshops underneath it and they allow people to make their own little fish mobile and they go away and complete that at home and hang it up or not as they will or won't if you see what I mean. It's got very similar invitations in it to *The Money* of taking something of it away into their lives and having it embedded and getting them to keep thinking about what it meant. It's not dissimilar.

**RD:** Going back to *The Money* and *Pig* and the conversations that happen in and around those pieces – it'd be interesting to hear a bit more about how you relate those to your understanding of that polarised discourse that you were referring to. Do you feel like when you were making those projects, thinking about those projects, that you were thinking partly about responding to polarised political discourse?

**SH:** No, because it wasn't really. If you think back to when it was conceived, 2010/11 time, actually Facebook was only 2006, so you're super new into social media then, and it still had that really nice feeling of giving lots of people a voice. Now we're into a different stage of big data and the manipulation and algorithms driving it, that actually is teaching us something else about…something I think is slightly terrifying probably about...We humans have this tool to communicate with each other across the planet, across species, across islands, across seas, the question is what will we do with it?

Right now, it doesn't look terribly pretty, partly because it's perceived as giving people a voice, but actually, it privileges big characters. It privileges lying essentially. Big data is very tippable. It could be innocuous on an individual level, but on a massive, massive level…If you have a centimetre of water on the deck of a ship, it's innocuous until the ship leans over and then it pulls it all the way over. I think that's essentially the potential for big data. Of course, then AI built on that foundation...

Just to go back to your question, I don't believe that people faced with another human being say the same things as they do when they're in a digital space. I just think they have an empathy by looking in their eyes or breathing the same air across the table that they're breathing on. It's very, very hard for them to be as antagonistic. I think that those digital platforms, although of course I built one in the early days – I built it for theatre, but it could have been Facebook, I'm aware of that. But now I'm not so keen.

**RD:** Do you think if *The Money*, for example, was happening in a different way, in a digital way, without being able to eyeball, you'd be replicating the worst side of what we're seeing on social media more generally?

**SH:** Yes. I think there's an anonymity that's dangerous, I suppose. I say dangerous. What do I mean by that? I think there's an anonymity that would make the digital version of *The Money*, could make it really quite horrid.

**RD:** Do you worry, though, or have you worried through the course of *The Money* that there are some aspects of it which certainly on a superficial level might be compared with people's behaviour on social media, like certain personality types dominate or can dominate, can't they?

**SH:** They do, but they don't, because they all have the same power in the system. You observe the biases, but essentially they all have to agree. If someone decides to veto, that's fine. It's dramatic. It's okay. But it's the same, it doesn't matter – they didn't get to spend whatever, £250 or £500 or whatever it is, in the big scheme of things it's not really a big problem. Often people do that because actually, they're helping people by moving the money off the table. They're actually going, 'I'm going to veto because you're pulling each other apart, and actually, by moving the money off the table, I'm doing you a favour.'

The group doesn't necessarily see that that's what's happening. Sometimes people take on that role to move the money off the table by saying they're just going to veto everything. It's quite interesting. For people watching, that's super interesting because they're like, 'Oh, yes. This is interesting power.' Because you have this drink afterwards where people chat to each other, it's super rare that there's a real conflict that isn't resolved in a fairly good manner.

Of course, there are some instances where prejudice or biases show themselves, and that's not so good. What my experience generally is, is that someone in the room will come around behind that and support it. It outs it and doesn't get dealt with because a lot of those things aren't dealt with in our society, but it does get supported in some way, and that the structure allows for that to happen. It's on an edge in a way that I can't control. Either I don't do it, or you allow it to go to those slightly more difficult places.

**RD:** I was just thinking about *The Money*, and you've mentioned this already, I hadn't really thought about it like this, but there's the two forums that conversations are happening within, aren't there? There's the conversation that happens over the course of the hour, deciding what's going to happen with the money. Then there is also the conversation that happens in the decompression space, if you like, over a glass of wine or whatever afterwards.

That's interesting, isn't it, to think about it, because from a personal experience, they feel very different…I hung around for, I think, in most cases, very different types of conversation. It makes you think about, and it'd be interesting to ask you about this,

having seen *The Money* so many times, what happens to conversation within that hour, if you like, and how that compares with the conversation that happens afterwards? What happens, I guess, when the money is on the table, the money is at stake? There's a different energy, isn't there, to those conversations? Is that right?

**SH:** Yes, absolutely. People think the show is an hour long. Someone who'd seen it three times told me there was no music in the show. I was like, 'No, there is.' They were like, 'There is no music in your show.' They just don't know. By the time the music comes on, they don't hear it. It's extraordinary really, but the audience are in no state to…They just get dropped off into this other space. Interestingly, what didn't work in the West End run because we were in COVID and we weren't allowed to have drinks in the same way, it really damaged the show for me.

It's very easy to think that it's not necessary or not part of the show, but it's a very, very important part of the show for me. It's in the show. It's not an after-show drink. Of course, it is, but it's inside the show for me. It has to be there. If you drop people off into the street straight after they've just had that hour, they'll be in a very different state than 20 minutes later when they've had a cooling down period and a chance to chat to each other and a chance to reflect on and objectify what has just happened.

Lots of things are happening in the hour. They're being watched. They're in a performance mode whether they like it or not, that's what they are. If they leave, they're still…have performed leaving that table. They're super self-conscious, I guess. For some people that's fine, for other people it's not so fine. They have to really work at it. Then in the next space, they're not observed in the same way. Also, the Silent Witnesses get to just pour out whatever it is they feel the need to pour out. Players will go up and very nervously say, 'We obviously were really boring. Did you think we did any good?' Then the Silent Witnesses will just go, 'Oh, my God, you were so interesting.' Suddenly this thing will change. I'd really learned that in meetings, if I was chairing a meeting, what I would do at the end of the meeting would be to hand around a talking stick essentially and just get people to say how they felt.

Again, it was taken from Open Space. What I found was that if people left at the end of a meeting without doing that, there was some weird thing where they felt

uncomfortable about something and they couldn't process it. It was a rubbish meeting or a difficult meeting or something wasn't quite right, or it was really great. Of course, if you hand a talking stick, inevitably people either get that out and you go, 'Oh look, this is a common thing this needs solving. We need to do that in another meeting,' or people go, 'Oh, no. I really liked this.' They're really positive.

Then everyone leaves having heard that. Somehow that processing changes everything about that meeting for them. I really wanted to do that essentially, to create a space that's a coda in the show, I guess, that allows people to just hear each other. In a way, maybe, I thought about it like this, but maybe in a way they observe the commonality of the show in that moment in a way that they can't do in the actual show. Despite them looking for commonality in the game playing time, in that after space they become more themselves.

**RD:** Yes. The times I've experienced it, what's struck me is how you're still talking to the same people, essentially. You're having a conversation like you have done for an hour if, assuming you were a player, but how the energy feels completely different, which makes me think about how important that space is, and that decompression, but also makes me reflect on how the parameters you set up during the game playing time and just the fact of having this objective around having to decide what happens with this money, really, the flavour it gives to the conversation. And obviously [that] then makes you think about the wider implications of that. Thinking about how money affects social relations and discourse. You know what I mean?

**SH:** Yes, absolutely. When I first did it, I remember sitting, watching it, screaming in my head, 'It's not about the money.' Like 'What?! You are tying yourself in knots because of the money. It's obvious that it's not about the money.' Then I had to come to terms with the fact that I'd called it *The Money* and put the money in the middle of the table. And then it was a bit unfair of me to have imagined that all of the audiences would realise that by calling it *The Money* I was going look at how we are around money, *immediately.* They couldn't get there that fast, so I had to be much more generous than I was initially, because I had gone on a much longer journey of it. It wasn't that I was somehow cleverer. It was just that...

**RD:** You'd been living with it for longer.

**SH:** I'd been living with it. Of course, some people see it very quickly, they go, 'Oh Yes, look what's happening.'

**RD:** Reflect on that a bit because being in it, it is remarkable that the *amount* of money, maybe it matters a little bit. We're not talking about… Every time I've done it, it's never been thousands of pounds. I think probably the most it's been is a few hundred, which in itself is something, but it's not going to change the world, but you do feel it viscerally, I suppose. You really feel it changes the tenor of the conversation, that you could think of a different…if it was Monopoly money…

**SH:** We did it with Monopoly money actually. When we were at BAC we had that one gig in Parliament. Do you remember?

**RD:** Yes.

**SH:** Just leading up to that, the Parliament committee, the administration committee said, 'We've discussed it, you can do it, but you can't do it with real money because…' I don't know if you remember, it was elections, so there were no politicians who were allowed in at that time and they were super nervous I think about the Houses being used for individual profit, because it was an election moment and that they need to not use either house for individual profits. They basically had really understood the show. They'd really gone 'really interesting, but if anyone agrees how to spend the money, whether it's an individual or a group, that is then profiting from the use of the Houses.'

So you can't do it, but you can use Monopoly money, which of course at the time was hilarious. There was parliament telling us that we could play in parliament, but only with Monopoly money, not with real money. It was a kind of deep irony somehow that the public was allowed in, but only to use Monopoly money. It was also the fact that they even suggested Monopoly money, not any other kind of counter or…it was hilarious. We thought that it won't work, we can't do it, and a friend of mine said, 'Just try it' or like 'Just do it anyway. It doesn't matter if it breaks, you're never going to get to do it again in parliament. What an opportunity, just do it.'

We tried it at Kaleider around the kitchen table with three of us with one of us picked up a pen and put it in the middle and one of us picked up something else and put it in the middle and said, 'Let's imagine this is money.' We had this conversation and actually, ironically, we agreed to buy a boat together. Which I bet you all three of us will still remember that that's what we decided 10 years ago around that kitchen table, despite it not being real money. We did it in parliament and we sent everyone a bit of monopoly money as a ticket. We didn't charge them tickets because we weren't allowed to. We did a lottery for people being allowed to play. We sent them Monopoly money and I was super scared it wouldn't work, and it was extraordinary.

It was, of course, enhanced by the fact that we were in Westminster. It was an extraordinary venue, of course, but at the end of the show and at the end of the hours of playing time, Alice is like 'Have you agreed?' They clearly had not come to an agreement. They were like 'Yes, we have definitely agreed.' She asked them six times and six times they said, 'We have definitely agreed.' Everyone in the room knew that was not true, but it was just hilarious, brilliant, impassioned. It didn't really matter what they had agreed on or not. It was extraordinary to see it working with just the idea of money. It didn't need to be money, it just had to be the idea of money.

**RD:** Are you seriously suggesting that you could roll the show out with Monopoly money and it would play pretty much exactly the same as it does with real money?

**SH:** It would be very difficult for me to say that without testing it because of the impact of the Houses of Parliament on the event. It's not a normal situation walking through Westminster Hall to a show like that. That might have had quite a significant effect. But I guess the money seems to be neither here nor there. It can be much more money and everyone always says it's not enough. It's never enough money.

**RD:** You're suggesting that it's the thing that engenders the emotional responses that you get, the passionate defence of one idea or another and all of that, the forming of coalitions and all of that stuff that is so brilliant about *The Money*…that the catalyst for that is not necessarily real money, but the *idea*. We're all so familiar with money as a concept, we can key into that idea really. Even if…

**SH:** I think it's the idea of money. I don't think it's not money, I just think we're so enthral to that system, and none of us are outside it, we're just absolutely in it. It's very, very pervasive. I suspect it's very strong. Even if it's not very much money, people can become very passionate about it I suppose, is what I'm saying. Whether it could be Monopoly money or not, I don't know.

**RD:** From observing it loads of times, what are the range of emotional responses that the money, or the idea of money, provokes? The times I've seen it, it's really interesting to reflect on it afterwards and think about your own responses. I've found that when I'm in there, it feels blindingly obvious what should be done or…You know what I mean? You think I am being so reasonable and so…You know what I mean? I still can't persuade X, Y. You know what I mean? Then afterwards, you think, 'Why was I so…?' There was something about this idea of money that makes you so, in some ways, narrow-minded. You know what I mean? For me. Maybe that's just me talking personally, but I felt…

**SH:** No, no, of course for everyone. That's what I mean when I sit there and go, 'It's not about *The Money*.' It's so obvious to me that you just…I mean to break the show, or, it doesn't break the show of course, but… That's what I say about people vetoing, if they move the money off the table then people have to have a different conversation.

In a way, that's a gameplay to actually play a different role which is to remove it and go, 'Now you've got an hour, but the task that you've been given is no longer on the table.' Of course, those people very, very rarely sit it out. Normally, they then hit the gong or something, or change their position or whatever, in order to play some other power play, because they're often people who are aware of the power that they get by doing that and they can't help themselves or whatever.

In terms of range of emotion, I don't know. People will come up to me a year later and say, 'What a fucking show.' They're cross still. One person came up to me and said that. She said, 'Oh, you made that fucking show. It's the best thing I've ever seen.' There's an…equally angry and admiring of it as a thing. It's beastly, but also clearly she valued it very, very highly. That's not that uncommon to find. I used to talk about it getting

under your skin. Again, when I first made it, I remember it would be the first thing I thought about when I woke up in the morning – the show from the night before.

I was like 'What have I done?' I would say to people, 'It will be the first thing you think about tomorrow morning.' They would never believe me and they'd always think it was because I was talking about my show and somehow bigging it up. So many people have come back to me and said, 'I just couldn't get it out of my head.' It's very unresolved in that way. For me, in a good way – to resolve is to stop asking the questions. I want to ask questions of people.

If they answer them, then it probably wasn't a good enough question. They can go through the process of trying to answer it, but it feels like a good question if you're still chewing it over a year later and trying to work out what's going on. To me, I feel like that's really successful art, that you didn't just ask a question and they went, 'Oh, this is the answer. Next.' Which is why I just try and avoid applause because it's this moment of contractual ending.

**RD:** It's partly about its deceptive simplicity, isn't it? It's that it can feel to somebody in the space that it should be more straightforward to resolve this. You know what I mean? It's simple. It's not a complicated ask in some ways, but then the devil's in the detail and you realise it is much more complicated than you think. You found a formula which is very easy to access because it's a simple idea.

**SH:** It is. But it's not that easy to sell tickets to, despite its reputation as being different and interesting and good. Actually, selling tickets to it is quite hard because you tell people what it is, they get it, but they don't get what *you* will have got by seeing it four times or whatever. You cannot tell anyone that. However much you tell them, they can't hear it. I don't know what it is, but they cannot hear that it's more complex than you say it is, until they do it, until…You've just exhibited some level of excruciation about what it feels like to be inside it. That's not just excruciating going, 'I don't want it. I don't think it should exist.' I'm reading that you're going, 'That's quite interesting space to be in.' That's not uncommon. Yet, selling tickets for that's really difficult.

I had a [realisation] last year doing *Arch* for the R&D at the National, which I had not spotted. Some of me obviously thinks, and of course it's true, that when you hit on a

show that works and goes around the world there's a certain amount of luck in that. It's not just skill. There's a certain amount of privilege and luck involved in that that you don't have any control over. But when I made *Arch*, I realised that… when someone came up to me and said, 'It's really very emotional, isn't it?' I went in my head, 'Well, of course, it is.' I suddenly caught myself doing exactly the same thing as I'd done in *The Money* where *I* get that it is, but how would anyone else know that it would be? I tell them I'm going to build an arch, I put the forma in the space, I put the blocks in the space, I put the ice in the space. I've told them it's going to be an ice and concrete arch and I don't know how long it's going to take. And then that happens. It's the same as *The Money*. We tell people, 'There's going to be some money on the table. You're going to have an hour to discuss what to do with it. You have to be unanimous. That is the show.' Then that happens.

If it was a magic trick, people would go, 'Oh, the magician is in the space between what I understood to be reality and what actually happened,' but because it's not and it's theatre or its art, I don't know what it is, whatever it is, there isn't that person essentially to go they're filling that gap with illusion, essentially. It's somewhat of a surprise.

*Arch* has almost exactly the same structure. People sit there at the beginning of *Arch* and go, 'I can see where this is going. It's going to take a long time. I'm going to get really bored.' And really successfully for me in that show, people could barely leave the room to go to the toilet even though it's mundane, a bit like *The Money* has got a mundanity to it, which is what's really challenging for TV.

**RD:** With the *Arch*, is conversation part of it or not in an explicit sense?

**SH:** Not in an explicit sense, but we will probably give people soup.

**RD:** Oh, really? That's nice.

**SH:** Probably we will construct a situation in which…In the one we did in France, we gave them champagne at the end. Actually, it wasn't even champagne and it was in paper cups, which is totally outrageous in France, but that's what we did. I thought it was a funny joke to sip not even champagne in paper cups, watching this thing fall over. It worked quite well.

I think we will construct something that actually enables people to talk to each other, not to me. The conversation with me is not very interesting, I don't think. I'm more interested in them talking to each other, I guess, because they'll be in a similar territory in it whereas I'm of course in a different place having sat with it for a long time or whatever. And they want you to answer something. That's not useful either because then why make the art in the first place if I'm going to then just answer the question? Not that I have the answers. Do you know what I mean? I'm not really interested in my role in that conversation at all. It was really interesting to see that I'd made something, without consciously doing it, that had a very similar structure, weirdly.

**RD:** It's interesting. I'm looking forward to seeing that at some point in the future. Going back to *The Money*, I know the categorisation of your work is a thing that comes up regularly, whether it's theatre or visual art or whatever, and it probably doesn't matter. With that project in particular, there's an interesting thing, isn't there, about the Silent Witnesses being an audience watching the players. In terms of the conversation, were you often thinking about the way the conversation would play out amongst the players in terms of the drama of it? How much were you thinking about the dramaturgy of the event from the point of view of the Silent Witnesses watching this play out? Was that interesting to you as a sort of…I don't want to say a voyeur, but somebody watching from the outside rather than…

**SH:** We have 'voyeur' tickets. We've done it twice or once, once we've done it. They're a third tier of ticket that can't join in, so they're the most expensive. They watch but they can't join in. Of course, they can read the show much better than anyone who's a Silent Witness. You have this, it's like a target. You're a Player, you can't really read the show because you're in it. You're outside it a little bit, but you're in it, you don't really realise that you're in it, as in you can't quite see yourself in because you're not being watched. But if you have a voyeur ticket, then you're not being watched. Then those people read the whole thing much more clearly because they're not implicated because they can't buy in because everyone's a player in the system. It was just a construct to go 'You don't have a voice because you didn't pay for a voice. You paid to not have a voice, essentially. You bought yourself out of having a voice. That was your choice.' That's why we make it very clear when we're selling tickets, this is what you're

buying. You're buying a ticket type. This is to not have a voice. This is to have a voice. Not having a voice is more expensive. Having a voice is cheaper. But you get a chance to have a voice if you want, but you have to pay more not to have a voice.

It's a very pointed decision about going, money buys you a voice, but also money buys you not having a voice as well if you really don't want one. Some people will say, 'I cannot imagine ever going to *The Money* without being a Player.' Some people will say, 'I cannot imagine ever going to *The Money* and being a Player. Why would anyone do that?' They will be equally absolutely adamant that no one would ever decide to be a Player, or no one would ever decide to be a Silent Witness. Just different people with different opinions, and of course sometimes those people surprise themselves and cross over one between the other. Again, there's no telling people before they've experienced it, that that might happen.

**RD:** Yes.

**SH:** There was a financial construct to it, probably, just from… which is weird, isn't it? We didn't have any money to put in the middle, so we made a role that paid money for their tickets, and their ticket money went in the middle, and then we wouldn't have had any money, so we made another role that had ticket money that made us some money in the show, I guess. That was just a way to make the thing happen. Clearly not to make us rich, but to make it possible.

**RD:** Sure. You must have had an inkling, or realised through practice, that it's interesting to have those conversations and to be a Player, but it's also interesting to observe people having those…there's a different… It's just that they're different pleasures, aren't they, or different…

**SH:** Allowing people flow between the two as well, is really important. It's a very important dynamic in the show that you can move between.

**RD:** How did that come up then, because that's an interesting device, isn't it?

**SH:** It came up because it allows a level of freedom. It's a valve that allows people that if they don't want to be there, they can leave, and that's really important because then people stay. It's learned through Open Space practice, essentially. It's the law of

mobility in Open Space. Basically, if you're not comfortable learning, contributing, then go somewhere else. Not because you're not wanted, but because you're more valuable than that. It was absolutely creating a system by which people could have their own sovereignty over their time spent. There are things, of course, in it, the social pressures of being on stage, and not wanting to get up and leave, because some people read it in a certain way, or whatever, I get. But essentially, the system gives you sovereignty over your own agency.

**RD:** Yes. That would apply to people going both ways, I guess.

**SH:** Yes, exactly. Yes.

**RD:** I get the ethics, if you like, of the Open Space principle and all that, giving people that agency, but just as a dramaturgical device it really works, doesn't it?

**SH:** Yes, because people don't believe anyone's going to buy in, of course. They just don't believe it. It just comes out of nowhere. Then, as soon as someone's bought in, they go, 'Oh, people, you can do this thing, as soon as the first person's done it.' It happens at around 37 minutes. 37 minutes to go on the clock.

**RD:** With the longer version, with the two-hour version, a similar percentage, is it? Like a similar way?

**SH:** I can't remember the two-hour version. I can't remember what the…I don't think I saw it enough to get the pattern. I know now that if it…it's not always the case, of course, and sometimes you'll go really late and no one will have bought in. Again, it's something that TV could not cope with. They could not cope with the not knowing for that intervention. They had to control that. Then it wasn't what it was. It was a different thing.

**RD:** It's interesting to think for the Silent Witness, I honestly can't remember whether…I've definitely been a Silent Witness, but I can't remember if I've bought in or not in the past. It's interesting to think about that because they're following the conversation, they're following the arguments, but there's a moment or a process to get to the point where they're like 'I need to…', usually it's people buying in then to say something.

I know you've mentioned, I think there have been cases where people just buy in because they think it's a great idea, they sign and that's it. Most of the time, presumably it's somebody who's got something to contribute to the conversation, the discourse. I need to say this thing. I can really empathise with that feeling because we've all been there haven't we? In meetings of one kind or another, where other people are doing most of the talking and we're just like 'I don't really want to embarrass myself by putting up my hand, but I've just got to because there's something that's not being said.' I think that's really it.

**SH:** Or 'I can help' and then you very quickly realise that, from the outside you thought you could help, but from the inside...

**RD:** Yes, exactly. This is what's so interesting. I was watching those videos you sent me from Australia and there's some cases of that where you think… the saviour's come. The Messiah is here. Somebody comes in with the air of, 'I know what to do. I'll knock your heads together. I've got this idea that will cut through everything and everybody can unite around it.' Certainly, in those cases, that often wasn't the case. Their idea was a bit half-baked or, people were like, 'whatever.' You could see they felt a bit crestfallen because the people weren't doing what they…They had this picture in their head of their role in the whole thing. Yes, really interesting.

You talked about *The Money* in relation to the theatre of it I suppose, and people watching other people having conversations. Do you ever think about it in terms of the wider participatory culture, if you like? I'm thinking about reality TV, fly-on-the-wall documentaries, that sort of thing. Do you ever think about it in terms of that at all?

**SH:** Yes, of course. All the conversations around it being a TV show were like…and then originally I thought, I know how to revive *Big Brother.* I'll just put some money in the middle of the table. Before we made it, I was like 'Maybe this is the route.' I'll just go to the producers and say, they have to do the task. Basically, we put some money on the table and they all have to agree how to spend it, and then it will just make it more interesting again.

Yes, I was always always interested in those…yes, I still am interested in...a lot of them I'm not interested in. But now and again, something comes along, like *Traitors* or

whatever. I go, yes, really clever, really good game, very well-conceived. We talked a lot about…obviously, we've made two TV pilots of it so we were in that realm and never...

**RD:** In terms of the quality of those conversations, for you, what was it? They were very different, weren't they, those two pilots? It was like chalk and cheese I thought, how different they were. What was it that was lost or what wasn't happening, or how was it different in terms of the quality of the conversation?

**SH:** In quality of the conversation, the first one, so it was low budget. We were in a studio that wasn't… it was really hard to get an audience to it. We didn't have big audience budgets or anything. It was one-day filming, the players had to be up higher than the Silent Witnesses so that the floor cameras could pick them up at the right level. There were some logistics basically that meant then if you're a Silent Witness, you had to not only buy in with six massive cameras on you, you also had to walk up some steps onto a stage, which was just a huge barrier, so no one bought in, which killed it. The cameras killed it. Basically, the studio killed it. It was just the stakes were too high for people. We knew as soon as it had done, Alice and I looked at each other and went, 'Oh, that's the end of that. There's no way.' We were persuaded by the exec producers, well, you never know what can come out in an edit. But we knew as soon as we'd done it, we were like 'There's no way this is going anywhere.'

The ITV one was a very different journey. It was very high budget, single day of filming, like top budget, primetime, ITV, shiny floor, celebrity host, different scale. The pitch was actually for it to be much more reality TV, so, one room, ten people, £100,000, one hour. That's it. They couldn't do that. They got too nervous about it not being interesting enough all the way through, but that is what it is. I wanted to hold that audacity that people would watch it and go, 'No, it will be boring for the first 45 minutes, but then it will be really amazing thing.'

TV couldn't do that. They just were like 'There's no way that's going to happen, Seth.' Which I still feel slightly disappointed about. Because I still feel in a way that's why it is different to anything else. They formatted it very, very heavily. That's the second one. The ITV one you've seen is just heavily formatted – have twenty seconds to speak about this, have a minute to speak about this. There is no real conversation in it. The

ten minutes, which I really had to fight for, ten minutes of uninterrupted conversation time, by that time they're so railroaded by the format that they cannot get off their rails.

They cannot get into the space that I was interested in being in, which is, 'Oh, your idea might be better than mine. I'm really keen on it.' Because they'd have no air, they'd have no space to do that. They'd just been railroaded into essentially conflict and individual gain, which is not what *The Money*'s about. It's not, it actually is the opposite of that. It didn't really have conversation in it, I suppose. Not real conversation. It was too manipulated, from my point of view. It was kind of ugly as a result because it starts off that show…You go, 'Okay, this is quite cool. I can see this.' Then, by the time you get to the end, you're like 'Oh no, I don't really want this anymore.' I'm pleased in a way that ITV said, 'I don't think we want to take this to series.'

**RD:** Although it's a pity I think, yes. Your idea of the £100,000 in a room, the *Big Brother* style approach would've worked better, would've worked well, would've been more interesting. For me, that ITV one, just was too far away from…it didn't feel like *The Money* in many ways, did it?

**SH:** No. I think if it hadn't been called *The Money*, I would've been more disappointed about not going to series. As in, I'm happy to make a thing with TV that makes me money so I can go and make something else. We are actually, we did have a conversation this summer with the exec who made that at ITV to talk about whether we'd re-pitch it. I'm up for that. Because it's business, isn't it? Also, I love The Money, but the West End run of it definitely dampened my love of it and it was really tough.

**RD:** It worked for me though. I get what you said about the post-show drink, but I actually remember, even though it happened in the space, I do remember that being a moment. There was one guy who I think was a…my memory is he was a Ukrainian guy, actually. A young guy who had been the bloke who was vetoing everything. A lot of people's ire was directed towards him, and then in the post-show, we had a drink and I did chat… We chatted and having been really sort of, 'I'm just going to block things and I'm just going to be this Iron Man and I've got this opinion. You can't break it.' Then he changed as soon as the money was off the table. He just wanted some affirmation.

Some 'I did all right, didn't I? I was just doing what I thought was right. I didn't mean to rub anybody up the wrong…' It was all that. That was the tone of it. I thought it was…I enjoyed it. It was nice to see.

**SH:** That kind of masculinity often comes with fragility, doesn't it?

**RD:** Yes. It was nice to see it in that space as well. That space is obviously a bit like your space in Exeter.

**SH:** Yes. Although for the show, for me, it's really fascinating that space because acoustically terrible, really terrible. Often the case with civic decision-making spaces. It's very hard for that show because it's really an acoustic show, actually, you haven't got visuals.

**RD:** Ironic for decision-making spaces.

**SH:** Yeah. Additionally, you can't move around that space, specially we weren't allowed to in COVID, so that made it very, very difficult. You couldn't get away from the central table because we couldn't rebuild the space. It had that big stage that we were using as a table.

You couldn't get away from it. One of the things I learned from the caravan is, you can't kettle people. They have to believe they can get away even if they don't want to. They have to believe they can pull out, away, so always when we have playing spaces, we make it possible for flow essentially, access. It's an access thing. There were things about that space that made it…That of course they're about power and control. They are inherited from a system that is about power and control. Actually, I end up going, 'To make a space for *The Money* that really works you do need to build it.'

**RD:** But it was interesting seeing it in that space. I know that, going back to its early days in Exeter, you presented it in a civic space, a decision-making space, and it was really interesting to see it in a historic decision-making space in London. It did bring into focus that resonance, I suppose. For you, that connection with political decision-making, was that a really interesting thing that you were looking to explore, that you were really wanted to have present in that piece?

**SH:** Yes. It was opportunistic to some extent in that those spaces all around the world are actually sitting in the middle of cities and not really used. When we went to Edinburgh and did it in Edinburgh City Chambers, most times you get to go to Edinburgh finding a space is really difficult. We walked into that space and they said, 'Oh, no one's ever done anything in here before.' To some extent, it's opportunistic because those spaces are affordable and available.

Of course, interesting, in terms of contextually. We've done it in Lagos City Hall, we've done it in Victoria Parliament, we've done it in the Houses of Parliament. We've done it in Edinburgh City Chambers. We've done it in the mayor's seat in Bern. We've occupied some really extraordinary, powerful spaces, politically and civically. That is contextually quite interesting. It doesn't mean that the shows in Sydney Opera House aren't still actually amongst my favourite shows. They really are. Some of them were just so dynamic and brilliant and unforgettable and energised.

**RD:** Regardless of context almost, you are creating a microcosm of what political leaders have to deal with aren't you?

**SH:** Yes. Interestingly, I was going to say, one of my cousins was a chief advisor, a very, very powerful civil servant in Australia. All his family were like 'Oh, when you go and see it, he'll definitely buy in, he'll definitely buy in.' Of course, he doesn't. He doesn't, because he goes, 'Oh, yes, I recognise this. This is a busman's holiday.'

**RD:** It's toxic, I'm staying away.

**SH:** In a way, of course, it reflects what is happening every day, and lo and behold, it's really hard. I'm not excusing politicians. I think they're in a very weird place, right now particularly, but the system is difficult. It's difficult. What they've got to do is difficult.

**RD:** Yes. It does make you think that to some extent, doesn't it? It makes you think, a lot of our discourse around politics is slightly divorced sometimes from the reality of, 'Okay, but what would you actually do if you were in charge?'

**SH:** This just goes back to my point about… I have this real frustration and probably this character trait of going, 'All right, I'll do it,' kind of thing, without having any idea how

to do it. This leadership trait of stepping into a place that's a bit broken. I find myself going, 'Why does no politician ask questions? They just do not do it.'

The article by Rory Stewart in *The Guardian* at the weekend said, 'Oh, none of us knew what we were doing.' Everyone's like 'Wow, it's the first time anyone said that.' No shit, nobody knows what they're doing. They're voted into position, they have no idea about their portfolios, have no experience of them. They don't even, a lot of them, have much leadership training or understanding of how to run anything and yet they do not say it.

They would be much better placed if they said, 'Oh yes, I've got no idea, but my responsibility is to find out and to lead a process of people who do have an idea and to ask the right questions.' And I'm absolutely astounded that no one has the audacity to do it in the system. I don't see it anywhere and I find it extraordinary that there's so much self-preservation as it were, and so much toeing the line.

**RD:** Do you think that *The Money* encourages people to be more honest? That it encourages a better version of that?

**SH:** It's a game. It's just a game, so you can never tell, I mean people are playing it, aren't they? They're being versions of themselves. No, I don't think that it does, but I do think there would be more interesting structures to our political system that would allow us to have conversations and actually take responsibility instead of just shouting from the sidelines at the people who can't do it, but actually build a system whereby you're much more engaged in the challenges of the decision-making and take more responsibility for it.

Difficult to build but I still believe it's possible.

I also believe that democracy has to acknowledge that we're in zombie democracies right now I think because of social media or because of digital. The fact that we don't vote digitally, we haven't got in the water with digital. I feel like that has to happen. From a systems point of view, I don't know. *The Money* is definitely. It's just a game. Do I think you could build a system whereby people were more engaged and actually engendered honesty and responsibility? Then I believe, yes. I believe that you could. I've never seen it, but I believe you could.

**RD:** It's interesting, the whole Citizens Assembly thing seems to be gaining a bit of traction, doesn't it at the moment? I noticed you brought up Rory Stewart. I know he is a big fan.

**SH:** David Jubb's doing…

**RD:** Jubb's doing a thing down in…

**SH:** Even in that show that David was in, where he made everyone, well, invited everyone to be quiet for two minutes.

**RD:** David Jubb?

**SH:** Yes. He was in a show and he…

**RD:** Of *The Money*?

**SH:** Yes…invited everyone to be quiet for two minutes and think about what they would do. He created this system whereby basically, very off the top of his head, went, 'Let's all be quiet for two minutes. Let's think about what we would spend the money on. Then we'll just go around one at a time and share what it is we thought about and vote for it there and then, and if everyone agrees, we'll go with that idea.'

Everyone was quiet for two minutes. The audience watched quietly for two minutes. They all went round. He was last. He proposed his idea, which was a good idea and was not remotely Machiavellian although it does look it, in hindsight, that he created a system and then won *The Money.* Which is quite funny.

What is interesting is suggesting that everyone be quiet because what *The Money* doesn't allow is for people to be quiet. What you can do when everyone's being quiet is think and what you cannot do when someone else is talking is think clearly. That's why it's hard. Whereas what he did is he made it much easier and it was a really fascinating intervention, a leadership intervention essentially.

I don't know how conscious he was of how extraordinary it was at the time, but I haven't really seen it since or before in the show. Silence is a very useful tool for people. We don't use, generally speaking.

The other thing that I should add is that kids are very good at *The Money* so they're very used, very, very used, to being in a group of peers where they don't agree and they have a conversation about it, and they come to an agreement and they compromise. They have a different relationship to money, but essentially, they're extremely good at agreeing, essentially.

**RD:** Gives us faith for the future.

**SH:** They will grow out of it, but I just mean as kids they're…

**RD:** You know that because they've just come along with parents or whatever to *The Money.*

**SH:** No, we've done it with groups of kids, but they just don't find it…They're so used to being in the playground with that level of conflict and solving it. They don't find it as problematic.

**RD:** Do you think that is partly that they haven't learned to be dysfunctional around money or they haven't learned how, bloody everything relies on money and the world doesn't go around without money and money's in short supply and they haven't learned to be anxious around money?

**SH:** No, I think some of that. Probably that they just haven't inherited the responsibility for money in quite the same way until they're a bit older, but also they're just extremely experienced at being in diverse groups of people who think different things and having to get along. What do we do, we make choices about what A levels we do and then we're with some people who are a bit like us, then we go and do a degree or we go to work and we have a workplace that's what we've broadly chosen, or it's chosen us, but essentially there are people a bit like us there. Our social groups get much more like us as we get older, essentially, until they're pretty much exactly like us, and so we're not very experienced at being in groups where people have different opinions to us, or whatever, really, really different worldviews to us. Actually, *The Money* works quite well with different worldviews. Kids are very used to that, and they're very used to putting up with it and moving through it and making an agreement, so they find it a lot easier.

**RD:** The silence thing is interesting from David and makes me think about how conversation is talking, but it's also listening, isn't it? I don't know whether you sense that in *The Money,* whether sometimes you think that there's a lot of talking, people aren't listening to each other, but maybe on other occasions you think, 'Okay, people are really paying attention to this person who's…'?

**SH:** Often people will bring attention to people who aren't being listened to, or they'll give space to people who aren't speaking, or they'll actively go, 'You haven't spoken. Do you want to say anything?' They'll go, 'No, not really,' or something. Or they'll say, 'Yes, actually I want to say this,' and it changes the game massively.

There's been situations where someone's been a bit mean on something and the whole of the rest of the group will just come around behind the other person, but they also won't vilify them. They'll just sort it out. It's really beautiful to watch because humans are generally good. They don't want to be horrible to each other, generally speaking.

**Appendix 4. Dan Barnard and Rachel Briscoe (Fast Familiar): Interview by Richard Dufty in London, 29 September 2023**

**RD:** In a lot of your performances, and the one I know best is *The Justice Syndicate*. I know in lots of your pieces, certainly in recent years, conversation plays a really important role, [a] central role, so I'd just be interested in you talking a bit about the process of conceiving and developing some of those projects and the position of conversation in your thinking about them.

**RB:** So, we were talking about this. We made *The Justice Syndicate* in 2017, 2018.

**DB:** We started back in 2017, definitely.

**RB:** I think the place we're in now is really different to the place we started, but I'll talk about the place we started. I think that *The Justice Syndicate* was very much about, can you get a group of strangers to have a conversation about something important? I think that was very much in response to the Brexit vote and Trump and all of those things. When we were like, 'there's this thing happening called polarisation. That might be really bad.' Little did we know how bad it was going to get.

Kris, who is the neuroscientist Kris De Meyer that we worked with on that project, his big thing is about groups and how groups form opinions and group dynamics. In a way, we made it as a kind of experiment, I suppose, because it's really hard now to get ethics approval to do things like the Milgram, the famous Prison experiment. In a way, we made that show as a way of testing some ideas that Kris was interested in as well. That was informed by his experience of being someone who does engage with people who hold different opinions to him online.

It was very much about, yes, a group of strangers, can you get them to talk about something important? People are always like, 'is it a trial show because you guys love crime dramas?' The answer is, 'We do love crime dramas, but no'. What we were trying to find was a format where a group of strangers have to have a discussion about something important. The only thing that we could think of really at that point was a jury

I think in our work, which is slightly different to some of the other people who I think you'll talk to, people are always themselves, but with what we call like an 'alibi'. In *The Justice Syndicate*, your alibi is that you're a juror in this, but you're still very much yourself just because…

**DB:** Which you could 100% be as a citizen. That could be something you are next week.

**RB:** A lot of people have contacted us and been like, 'I'm a juror next week, I feel I've had training.' We're like, 'I don't think that's the aim.' It took the form of a jury show because that was the easiest way to do that. With that show, what Kris was really interested in was, could you force a group to polarise? Then in a debrief, could you help them unpack that experience? It's a form of inoculation, I suppose.

Can we do that in a very safe art space and then get people to go, this is what happens. This is what happens when these buttons are pushed. Where else in your life is this happening? Then when it does happen, people would be more resistant to that. That was very much where *The Justice Syndicate* came from. We really didn't think it was going to be a good show. I thought people would find it very boring.

People really loved the chance to talk to other people about something important because I think life is really busy. We were just talking about… you don't even see your partner! When do you get to sit down for two hours and talk about something, abstract ideas about truth and justice and what have you?

**RD:** That's interesting. I hadn't realised that with *The Justice Syndicate*, you were, in a sense, deliberately aiming for polarisation rather than…

**DB:** Well yes, we knew that it would either, or Kris knew... We very much deliberately designed the evidence so that it very much could be either way. The order that you hear it in very much takes you first one way then another way. I think Kris thought that it would either go groupthink or polarise. That's the two ways it can go. That's what the data proved – that either everybody would groupthink one way or the other way equally, everyone would groupthink guilty or groupthink innocent, or they would split pretty much down the middle and fight. Those were the three… those were the ways that it went. He was right in that position.

**RB:** We did it like ninety times, so there is a huge amount of data that somebody at some point should analyse.

**DB:** And groupthink is also dangerous as well as polarisation. I think polarisation is more fashionable to talk about than groupthink.

**RD:** *The Justice Syndicate* was the first one of those projects…because looking online at the projects that you've done since.

**RB:** Cash cow, right? I keep using that format.

**RD:** It's a similar sort of format, isn't it? But there has been an evolution there, hasn't there, in terms of the place of conversation and this dialogue between polarisation and consensus building?

**RB:** 100%, yes. That's what we were thinking about. I don't think we would make *The Justice Syndicate* now. I think it's a little bit of a dickhead move to be like, 'Oh, no, we can manipulate this group, or you can make them polarise, or whatever.' I suppose the most recent show that we've made in that format is a piece called T*he Acquisitions Panel*, which I guess is very much a response to the so-called Culture Wars. The aim of that was to take a group of people *together* through a subject that either polarises or that people are frightened about speaking to because they are worried that someone's going to shout at them, they're going to use the wrong language, all of these things.

I think in a way that it was a response probably because we're a little bit older and mature, but also a response to, I suppose, the changing political environment, because I think the Culture Wars is a massive victory for the right-wing because in a war, you have to take a side. If you get stuck in the middle, you're going to get shot. It's not a war. I think framing it as that has made people be really frightened. I think there are people who really care about it, that's a really small percentage of society. You've got the super-woke people, I suppose, like us at one end here, and then you've got toxic right-wing racists over here but most of the people in the middle like, 'I don't know. I mean, I don't know.'

With *The Acquisitions Panel*, we wanted to make a piece about decolonisation without ever using the word decolonisation and a piece asking who gets to choose the stories

we tell about the past. There are multiple stories that we could tell about the past – what informs the choices that we make? With that, it's built to keep everybody together. I suppose we do that in a number of different ways. I suppose a good example of which is like, so in *The Justice Syndicate* and all the shows where we try to push people apart, we give people binary choices: 'Do you think he's guilty? Yes or no.' In *The Acquisitions Panel*, the big question that you're addressing is, 'do we acquire the object for our museum?'

You never vote yes or no until the very last stage. It's always a slider of like, 'how much am I leaning towards this? How much am I leaning away from this?' That sounds like a really tiny thing, but actually, it's not, because it means that you're never asking people to nail their colours to the mask. You're always going, 'Where are you at?' Shifting from a six to a four isn't a big deal, but shifting from a yes to a no is a huge big deal. Things like that, things about the order that we put evidence into, we break things down a lot more in *The Acquisitions Panel*. We're getting people to, I guess, shift from the system one, intuitive thinking to that more reflective system two thinking.

The aim of that is to get people to the end of a really difficult conversation, but together. I think it's quite an inspiring show to watch, I think, because you just see people... For us to watch. Yes, for us to watch. No one else watches it. I think you see people in their versions of their best selves. I guess there were some questions there about whether this work is the response to social media.

I think what we were saying basically, for us, it's a response to, I guess, neoliberalism and this idea that the right-wing press pedal that other people are frightening, other people are nasty, other people are going to be horrible to you. They're not. They're really not. It's so great to give people an experience of two hours where people turn up and listen to each other and are open to having their minds changed and to learning.

**RD:** That journey, that's interesting, that journey from *Justice Syndicate* through to *Acquisitions Panel*, in terms of how the conversation typically plays out across that spectrum…you've seen that, have you? That it's gone from, with *Justice Syndicate*, a more antagonistic tone to something that's more understanding, generous, consensual?

**DB:** *Justice Syndicate* was nearly always…basically always very respectful and civil. It was more like civil debate than ever aggression or anything like that. In *The Acquisitions Panel*, it's partly how it's designed, isn't it? That they much more, as a group, they all go on a journey together, so they all shift in terms of the things that they think and say as it goes on, but they're less in conflict with each other. They're more building a thing together or building a set of ideas together normally than arguing about what the right thing to do is.

**RB:** I think it's also about the discussion prompts. I think that one of the things that we really believe, and that sounds a bit controlling, is like, don't just say to people, 'What do you think?' Because then you just get chaos. I think that with *The Acquisitions Panel*, the discussion sections are really targeted. It almost guards against people just getting on their hobby horse riding it around the room, which is what I think you see in so many discussions.

I think in a way, the quality of discussion is massively informed by the question that you ask. I think that workshop facilitators, all sorts of people, need to take much more responsibility for that. Human brains are really susceptible to some really crap stuff, so I think you need to design against that if you want good conversation.

**RD:** I don't know how *The Acquisitions Panel* works, but is there a certain amount of trust-building before you get into the meat of the issues at hand? Is there a certain amount of getting to know the other people on the panel or not really?

**RB:** No, we never really do that. It's really weird. I think we sort of go, 'You're in the water, swim.' And people do.

**DB:** In a lot of our pieces, especially *The Acquisitions Panel*, there's a lot of information, you're watching a lot of videos and reading documents and things before you have to discuss. You never really converse with nothing to talk about. By the time that they converse, there is a thing to talk about.

**RB:** Yes, that's true. Actually, even in *Justice Syndicate*, we talked a lot about like, 'What if someone just doesn't talk at all?' In *The Justice Syndicate*, the first time anyone ever speaks, it's to read out a statement, because we were like, 'Okay, at least people then will open their mouth and read something, they will have spoken, and then that gets

that bit of fear out of the way, and the next time, the fear will be about what they say. Let's not ever give them a point where they're worried about speaking and what I'm saying.'

I think there's a lot of scaffolding around, yeah, taking fear out of the equation, but it's not like, 'My name's Rachel, I'm from South London, and I like biscuits' because I just think it's naff.

**RD:** Yes, because I was looking at… there's some great video about your climate change piece, *Strategy Room*.

**RB:** That's different.

**RD:** How does that fit into that sort of spectrum, do you think?

**RB:** It uses the same platform.

**RD:** Uses the same platform as both?

**DB:** The platform has iterated over time, there's quite a lot of new features to it, but they all run now off the same software.

**RB:** It's the only face-to-face show that has a facilitator. All of our other shows, your facilitator is your iPad. We can talk about why that is if you want, but with *The Strategy Room*, the aim was to reach a real cross-section of society and we tried to do it without a facilitator and we realised that most people who come to our shows normally have a university degree and are used to talking but actually sometimes you need someone to be like, 'Great, Richard, so can we hear from someone else?' Or whatever. That one has a facilitator, and then I suppose the other thing…

**RD:** Because you weren't assuming it was going to be the university-educated?

**RB:** Because it wasn't. Yes.

**RD:** It was specifically made for a different context?

**RB:** Yes, it was very much designed for 'anyone can play this.' I think you have less of a contract, because we ran it in all sorts of spaces. I think weirdly when you do shows in theatres, the thing you're playing against is the behavioural norm is – 'I don't speak in a

theatre normally.' So in a way you're doing everything you can to draw people out, whereas if you're going into a working men's club or whatever, it's a whole different other thing. I think it was the right decision, I don't think it would have worked without a facilitator. I'm going to mention this now so we can come back to it if we want, in terms of the unwaged worker participants. We paid people to do *The Strategy Room* because it wasn't for them, it was for councils. It wasn't a public engagement project. It ended up being that because it was fun and people had a nice time, but everyone was paid £20. Lots of people were like, 'Oh, I would have done this without.' Or, 'I'll give this back because I had a nice time.' But, because it was to get information for someone else, we felt like it was really important to pay people. Also, because otherwise you just get rich, retired people.

**RD:** Fair enough. Just zooming out, looking at that move that you've made towards this practice, this conversation-based practice, you hinted at some of the reasons for that. Do you see yourselves as somehow responding to the state of public discourse and social relations out there at the moment? Do you think it's responding to something that's very much going on at the moment in our world, in our culture?

**RB:** Yes. I think most artists are, right? I don't know.

**RD:** Specifically in terms of a move towards something more participatory and where you're really asking people to share their points of view, to share their opinions on things, and communicate actively with each other.

**DB:** Neoliberalism wants everybody to be an individual. I think it's really important that people are collectives and communities and things like that. That's part of it, I think, for us.

**RB:** I think also, it's partly to do with the nature of stories. We have this idea that an individual will solve the problem because if you know the hero's journey and all these things that underpin the stories that we see everywhere. No individual is going to solve climate change. No individual is going to get rid of the colonial horrors. There is this thing of, actually the answer has to be collective. Creating spaces where people can realise that and rehearse that I think is really important.

**RD:** It's interesting to think that the project that I experienced of all those was the one at the beginning that you see as maybe the more problematic one now look looking back, *Justice Syndicate*. I can see that you were making life difficult for us to reach agreement. But my memories of it and I think I might have only played it once, might have been twice, but was that actually compared with a lot of my experiences through social media, there was generally, a listening that was going on, a generosity of spirit, a willingness to learn, to understand, a self-awareness, not in all cases, but in many cases that you don't see all the time in our culture and conversations that happen on social media or wherever. I think that's an interesting aspect of what it seems to me like you're doing within the framework you're putting around those conversations.

**RB:** No, absolutely. Yes, I think we have a tendency to generally do our work down and to hate on that a little bit. Yes, absolutely, and I think also creating spaces where people can change their mind, that's really important. I think some of the really great shows of *The Justice Syndicate* were when people said things and the whole group went, 'Oh, yeah.'

I remember that, I think it was a show at DocFest, where one of the jurors was a black guy. Basically, the question I suppose at the heart of *The Justice Syndicate* is, 'he totally did it, he 100% did it, but you can't prove that.' Particularly towards the end of when we were playing it, and this is also why we stopped with that show, people got into, 'hang him from a lamppost,' partly because of MeToo.

**DB:** We made it before MeToo.

**RB:** That was another big thing that changed actually and changed and made us really uncomfortable. This show in DocFest, the guy was like, 'No, this is about the rule of law and the moment that you don't stick to the rule of law, you open the door to basically to people like me getting it in the neck, to groups in society who are already victimized, marginalized.' The whole group went, 'Oh, yes.' Because it was that moment of being like, we want to do the right thing in the moment which is like, 'the guy really did it,' but actually what does that set a precedent for?

That was great. Those moments where you go, or where people go, I don't agree with you, but I need to understand why you're saying that.

**RD:** Yes, 100%, and of course, those are the conversations that are so hard to have on social media, aren't they? Where you really…you take the helicopter view, and it's not about your basest instincts, your knee-jerk reactions. That's what I remember feeling. You left space for those conversations to happen and seemed to go for me on a journey through just responding to the sort of, 'Oh, my God, he said that, she said that…' – those knee-jerk reactions based on whatever prejudices you might have – to then conversation about 'what precedent are we setting here?' and 'let's talk about law'…

**RB:** I think the other really important thing – because you talk about a 'journey going through' – is that you have a shared goal with those other people, and you don't have a shared goal with people on social media. One of the psychological experiments that I remember we talked about a lot when we were making *The Justice Syndicate* was this thing called the Sherif Summer Camp Experiment, which basically was two summer camps in America.

They experimented basically by using resource shortage to generate real hatred between these two groups of lads. Then the second part of the experiment was like, you take them out somewhere and they were all fighting each other, whatever. Then it was like, 'oh, look, the bus has broken down and we need to get it back to the village or wherever they were all staying.' They had a shared goal and they were like, 'okay, cool. This is what we do now.' That thing, that by giving people a shared goal, you can actually bring people back from quite a polarised place. The whole jury format is so clear to people, I think in a way, the fact they have a shared task means that you have to get on with people.

**RD:** There are examples of projects where conversations are happening between audience members/spectators and there's a lot more latitude in terms of what subjects might be covered, where it might go.

**RB:** No, don't give people freedom ever.

**RD:** I was going to ask you about that. It seems to be that with all of those projects, there's a clear decision, you're working up towards this point where a decision has to be made and there's lots of way markers along...Your thoughts on *that* versus something a bit more relaxed, I suppose, or open. For example, during lockdown I

experienced a project that Quarantine did, which I think they have done in person for years and years where they just get two strangers together with a menu of things you might want to talk about. It is really lovely. It's not a game to be played. There's no winner at the end of it, no decision to be made. It's a souped-up version of breaking the ice with somebody and getting to know a stranger, but that's not quite what you do. Is that partly about a fear of the easy roles that people can fall into, the prejudices people can fall back on sometimes when you do that sort of thing?

**RB:** Yes, and the fact, like you said, it's a souped up getting to know you game. Great! Where is the art?

**DB:** I think even back when we made *theatre* theatre, I think we were always very interested in stuff that was really about something... big in the world. I think that's what keeps us interested, really. I think it's nice that people have a nice conversation with each other but...

**RB:** I suppose *Social Sandwich* was a bit like that.

**DB:** Yes, *Social Sandwich* was a bit like that, but…

**RB:** Not it wasn't actually.

**DB:** Yes, no, it wasn't, it was about conspiracy theories and lots of other things.

**RB:** Oh, yes.

**DB:** That's another thing.

**RB:** I don't know. I think in a way, you make things that you want to do, right? I've got friends, I can go have a nice chat with them. I don't need someone to make a show to do that.

**RD:** Yes, there is something nice though – and I've experienced it in your projects as well, where the experience is maybe is a bit more managed than some others – there's something nice about being able to talk to somebody you've never met before, in an open…and when you're being asked to be authentically yourself and to express your honestly held views about whatever the issue is that's on the table. That's a refreshing thing, isn't it? Sometimes in everyday life, there's no forum to do that.

**RB:** No, 100%, but I think with that format, you are quite vulnerable to rogue elements and edge lords, do you know what I mean? It's great if you are coming in and having a lovely conversation, but there are people who are not going to do that.

**RD:** Presumably though with *Justice Syndicate* and other projects, you've had that experience where people can be setting out to be disruptive. Have you had that experience with those projects where people will try and break the rules or be…?

**DB:** Very, very rarely.

**RD:** No?

**RB:** With *The Justice Syndicate*, we have the eviction thing.

**RD:** I'd forgotten about that.

**RB:** So, it's this idea that a group member can be expelled, and that's where it diverges from a real jury. In ninety shows, no one has ever been expelled, but lots of people have said, 'the fact I could have been, made me dial it down a bit or made me just…' I suppose there's a measure of accountability built into it.

**DB:** The rest of the group can expel you. We don't do it. The rest of the group does it.

**RB:** Yes, it's about getting a certain threshold of votes and then you can be expelled and initially it's anonymous, and then later on, it's not anonymous. I think there's three places you can get rid of someone, and we put it in because if someone started using hate speech or was just dominating everything, we wanted the groups to be able to get rid of them, and that felt a more elegant way of doing it than us being like, 'you...!'

Then there's a point later on where, it's in a lot of the really back-to-back voting, where we *thought* that… For example, if I'm saying he's guilty and you are saying he's not guilty, and you're making a lot of really good persuasive arguments and you seem to be getting Dan on side, and I'm worried, maybe I will vote you out. We thought people would do that, but they didn't because it didn't feel like a game. By that point, people were like… I think maybe because the *jury* is such a thing.

It was like, 'actually, it's important to have people here disagreeing.' I think that's fascinating. I talked about this project to a Singaporean company that I'm working with

at the moment, and they were like, 'in Singapore, they'd have been voted out.' That's really interesting, that we are so attached to the role of the jury that we go, 'even if this guy is completely blocking what I want, it's important that he's here,' which is fascinating.

**DB:** Like the way a lot of people voted for Corbyn to be in the leadership race who didn't want him to lead the party and then 'oh shit, he's leading the party now.' I think there's something about really valuing diversity of opinion and open debate and things.

**RB:** That's what people should talk about with great British values actually, because it really is.

**RD:** That's interesting you moved on to that, because I was going to ask you about that. Because Rachel I was listening to a thing, it must be on your website somewhere, but I can't remember what it's in relation to, which project it is in relation to, you talking about something being polyphonic, the idea of multi-voicedness. I just wondered in terms of your thinking about all these projects…talk to me a little bit more about that. I suppose it'd be interesting if you could relate it back to that journey you've gone on from making plays to handing over agency to an audience.

**RB:** I think it underlies everything. I think it has do with… I think humans are very bad at living with complexity and with uncertainty, and we live in a very complex and uncertain world. Almost the more chances we can give for people to sit with that and find ways of being okay with that, the more important it is.

I think *The Acquisitions Panel* is 100% about that, because it's like there are 1,000 stories you can tell about the past. There are infinite stories. Only some of them get told. Why? I think all of our work speaks to this thing that we're all really different but somehow we have to find a way to get along. It's not about everyone having to be the same. It's about being able to have a conversation. I know in the questions you talked a bit about like antagonism and agonism. All of the Claire Bishop stuff. I think that the art is important because you can put a frame around it, us having a disagreement within a show isn't going to ruin our friendship outside it and stuff like that.

**RD:** You come from a playwriting background, don't you? Going back. It's quite a journey, isn't it? From the playwright sitting down, the monological thing of writing a play. These are the words…

**RB:** That's easy.

**RD:** It's also a profound thing, isn't it? Does it feel weird for you now, looking back? I'm with you. This 'polyphonic practice', if you want to call it that, feels like it's somehow speaking to the complexities of the modern world…Also about recognising maybe the hierarchies of our industry and the world more generally, and how it may be a way of beginning to disrupt some of those hierarchies. You think that's true?

**RB:** Yes, essentially. I don't know.

**RD:** All the power isn't just in your hands. You're saying, 'Okay, yes, recognising we are setting up a framework, setting up a frame for this, but, within that, we are still trying to devolve some power to other people.'

**RB:** Yes and no, I think it's really complicated right. I think with dialogic or interactive there can be this myth of like, 'Oh, the audience have all the power. The audience have all this agency.' What we ask the audience to do is super managed. We're not saying do what you want. We're saying talk about this thing for seven minutes, and then we're going to bong you to make you move on. Are we giving them power? I don't know.

**DB:** They think there is a choice. They can acquire the object or not acquire the object. They choose what 100 words to write about it.

**RB:** True, but I don't think it's like…We talk about technology as like our magic cloak of invisibility. It enables us to control a space without being there. It's a disingenuous thing to do, but I think it leads to a better experience. I don't think it's like a beautiful, harmonious utopia where everyone has power. I think it's more like a benign dictatorship. But if you look at the world...I don't know, you disagree?

**DB:** No. I think there is actually a lot of dramaturgical structure in the pieces we make, that I think somebody who didn't come from either playwriting or studying narrative or novel writing or something, wouldn't quite approach in the same way. I think actually, there's a lot of the playwright still there. I think also, the characters in our pieces

appearing in videos have to say quite a lot of information quite fast, ideally, with some jokes and some personality. It's not very noticeable, because people are so engaged in the task that they're in, but I think there's quite a lot of the playwright's art in what Rachel does.

**RB:** I think what we do is we write the dramaturgy of the experience. The way that we talk about it is we write the skeleton. Then the people bring the flesh and the clothes, and normally what you see is the flesh and the clothes, but if there wasn't the skeleton, there would just be a heap on the floor.

**DB:** We did *The Justice Syndicate* just under eighty times, and someone would still say something that I'd never thought of or heard of before. The same as *The Acquisitions Panel*, I'm still hearing new things. Around thirty shows or something. There is the structure and the space within this structure.

**RD:** Presumably, it's not a binary of either you hold all the control or…

**RB:** 100% not. But I think, for example, I think Coney's work is much more along the spectrum to have a nice time and do what you want. I think we're much more controlling.

**RD:** Talk a bit more about the tech thing because it's all so interesting, isn't it? The use of technology, iPads, whatever it is, goes along with this facilitation of these conversations. How do you see those two things relating to each other?

**RB:** Do you want to talk about the embarrassment thing?

**DB:** There's an article I've written about this, which I can send you, but I think there's some things that the tech does. Tech allows us to disappear. I think if you have a human facilitator, they have a lot of status and power, and the audience often look up to them. The tech means that the audience have to take on some kind of an agency, more than they would when there was some active facilitator there I think. That's part of it.

I think also there's this stuff Gareth White talks quite a lot about – embarrassment in an interactive performance. I think a lot of that embarrassment is that there is a participant who is being watched by an audience, and the participant is worried about

being embarrassed in front of the audience, but is also worried about *embarrassing* the professional actor and goes along and tries to make everything nice and easy, but you're not really worried about embarrassing an iPad. And you're not being watched by an audience. People have asked us a lot if it would be a way of making more money, if you can have an audience watching you playing.

**RB: '**Could we have twelve people playing? Can we put it in and have a hundred people watching?' No.

**DB:** I think there's lots of ways in which the technology avoids embarrassment and gets the audience to take on agentive behaviour than they would if there was a human being.

**RB:** And to tell the truth. It's like when the doctor is like, 'How many units of alcohol do you drink a week?' and you're like, 'Seven…'

**RD:** Maybe with the anonymity of it…

**RB:** There's been studies that show people are much more honest. It's just like 'enter a number on a screen.' You don't have someone like… I think we've had terrible experiences of interactive theatre. I think we hate interactive theatre. I don't know why, it is always like someone dressed up as a Nazi guard yelling at you. Just fuck off.

**RD:** You've obviously been to the same shows...

**RB:** You know what I mean, but you can't say fuck off because you probably know their girlfriend or whatever or you will trash it for everyone else. I think that technology…we think it's a way of leading to more high-quality conversations.

**RD:** Does it also, do you think, mean that the experience connects with other everyday life experiences [like] sitting in a meeting? I don't know. Maybe removes it further from the artifice of the theatrical event or the…I don't know.

**RB:** Maybe. I don't think we've ever really thought that. I think the only time we thought about that was when we built the *Syndicate* platform online during the pandemic and ran another show during the pandemic on that. That felt like, because

we just did everything on our computers during the pandemic. That felt a bit like, 'Oh, this feels a little bit like being on Teams but…'

**DB:** I believe we've had people say, they said this actually when we were in Reading, that they like in meetings to have sliders on decisions rather than binary votes and then the numbers to be revealed. Lots of those structures, people actually think would make better meetings.

**RB:** Yes, but I don't think the technology is like, 'This doesn't feel like a theatre…' I think the room that you do it in is interesting. I suppose at BAC it was interesting because it's a civic building. I think certainly under David Jubb he always talked about that a lot. I think that's really inspiring. When we did it in Dublin Fringe, we did it in the Four Courts which is the busiest court In Ireland.

**DB:** The national court of Ireland.

**RB:** Which is incredible. We're in a shitty room at the back, but we made sure we brought people in through the front past all these portraits.

**DB:** A shitty room in that building is not... it's still beautiful.

**RB:** I think in a way we tried to lean into the…make it feel more important. Whether that means it's theatre or whether it means it's real life, I don't think we think in those terms. I think we know what will make you feel like this matters. We did *The Acquisition Panel* in Copenhagen. We felt like Milo Rau. It was incredible. They put us on a stage, there were lights. Talk about an aesthetic!

**DB:** They lit it beautifully.

**RB:** It was incredible, but you rarely get that for an audience of twelve people in the UK, but that felt like it mattered.

**RD:** Okay, I thought you were going to say the opposite, that it made it feel too high stakes.

**RB:** No. I think it felt like people were at The Hague or something.

**RB:** It felt so like…

**RD:** It really mattered?

**RB:** Yes.

**RD:** It's interesting you talked about David Jubb actually, because one thing I was going to ask you about was citizens' assemblies. It's a slightly tenuous connection because I know David Jubb set up this Citizens in Power company, which is really focused around trying to promote citizens' assemblies as a new form of governance.

Anyway, I think, again, something I read that you'd written or something I heard on your website, you were talking about, I think, citizens' assemblies and an interest in that. I'm just thinking about the state of our democracy and where next for Western democracy, and whether you're speaking to that in some ways with these things that you're doing?

**RB:** I guess with the more applied stuff. We did a presentation to DESNZ – which is the Department for Net Zero something security or skills, I don't know – about *Strategy Room* the other day, and they were like, 'Isn't it just a citizens' assembly?' I was like, 'No, it's not.' I think the principle is great.

I think it's great that they do the sortition and they get people from all different walks of life. Fantastic. I think the format lends itself to people who have gone to university because you receive a lot of information. Then you have, for me, quite unstructured conversations. I think it's like the structure determines what you get…

**RD:** Have you observed them happening in the past?

**DB:** We did *The Strategy Room* at a citizens' assembly in Barnet. It was quite early on, which I think was not ideal. I really saw the cultural capital playing out in the discussions in a way that we didn't have in other performances of that piece. It is very deliberately a whole range of walks of life and income, all that sort of thing. But it was very much…the just retired, very successful businessman had come having done loads and loads of research, this research into Net Zero. He'd come before the citizens' assembly. Then because we were on the first day, he was bringing out all of his theories and facts and figures. There were loads of people who were very anxious because they

felt like they didn't understand or know much about Net Zero, being very very swayed by him and feeling stupid. It felt 'rah,' I didn't like it.

**RB:** I think more they really pushed against the format. They were like, 'No, we're going to talk about this. We're not going to talk about the thing you've asked us to talk about.' It wasn't the first day, they'd had a weekend before.

**DB:** Oh, had they?

**RB:** Yes. Because that had been the format. I don't know, I think the principle is great, but I don't think it is the silver bullet, just because I think humans are not the wonderful, rational creatures we would like ourselves to be.

**RD:** How is that different then, from the normal operation of *The Strategy Room*?

**RB:** Normally, we worked with twelve different councils, and depending on what the council wanted us to do, we would deliver it in whatever setting. Some of the councils just made an event and got us to do it in the library and you got very informed, very lovely people with lots of opinions about climate change coming to do it. Some places, we went to centres who work with people recovering from substance abuse, and we ran as part of a session for them, and that was very different.

**DB:** Food banks.

**RB:** Food banks, faith spaces.

**DB:** That mum and baby group place, that was good. They were not within the context of a citizens' assembly.

**RD:** Got it.

**DB:** I think maybe sometimes it depends on a lot know…I don't know, I haven't done loads of research in citizens' assemblies. It felt like this one in Barnet, a bit of the format had been, there was a PowerPoint, and then people get to look clever by asking combative questions and/or the audience then polarise in the discussion afterwards, which is what often happens when there's some sort of a presentation of information. Then people will either sit in silence or attack the presenter or somehow develop a polarisation among themselves.

**RB:** Or a proliferation of, 'This is more a comment than a question,' which, of course, is like, 'Yes, play out your cultural capital,' I suppose.

**DB:** Or 'what about electric vehicles?' when they're scheduled for next Thursday and we're talking about waste collection? I don't know. All these sorts of things were playing out. I think our piece very much holds a space, it holds a conversation, holds a theme. I think in a way that can be seen as more controlling, but I think in a way it prevents a lot of these common group psychological pitfalls that people would otherwise fall into if you just let them loose.

**RB:** I think also citizens' assemblies are very expensive. They are super expensive.

**DB:** To run, you mean?

**RB:** Yes. I don't think it's an option at scale.

**RD:** No. Sure. What was I going to ask you about? Can you talk to me a bit about *Social Sandwich*? Because that sounds like an interesting project. Going back to that discussion about how you might be responding to social media…

**RB:** I suppose that was the only one that really engaged.

**RD:** …and trying to propose a different approach to online discourse. It was directly taking that on, wasn't it?

**RB:** Yes. It's really not my favourite project.

**RD:** Okay.

**RB:** No, it's fine. I think the interesting project that it grew out of was a project we made called *Smoking Gun*, where the conversation happened in text groups over a week. Basically, people got sent information in the morning, and then you had a half-hour chat window when it was 'safe' at seven o'clock or nine o'clock, and you were in a group of 10 people, because we found out that basically that meant seven people would turn up, which is a good number. You didn't know who anyone else was. You were encouraged to use a code name and an avatar. Nobody knew the gender or age or any of these other things about anyone else.

**DB:** Or even what country they were from.

**RB:** Or what country they were from. You had to work together to figure out a whistleblower thing. It was cool. It was fine. Some people hated it. The really interesting thing about it was looking at those chat logs and looking at the behaviours, because I think there is sometimes this perception, because of things like 4chan, that anonymized online stuff is going to be bad and bring out the absolute worst in people. What it did was, when we asked people afterwards, people felt they could behave in a different way and it wasn't a bad different way. One of the really interesting things was that so many people assumed that everyone else in their group was a man because they seemed like they were confident, proposing all these ideas.

Then, on the day after it finished, we did a voluntary Zoom meet, 'Come and we'll put you in groups with the people who you were with.' Everyone was like, 'This is a bunch of women. Why do I think that…?' Some people as well said, 'This really suited me because I'm not someone who likes to speak in a group, but writing is fine.'

I think we came out of *Smoking Gun* being like, 'This is really interesting.' Text conversations between people who don't know the things we normally base judgments on, like age, ethnicity, and gender, stuff like that. I think the interesting part of *Social Sandwich* was what we wanted was to set up conversations between strangers in different countries in a way that I think really responded to that pandemic thing of like, 'I'm stuck in my house. It is as easy to talk to someone in Reykjavík as it is in Earlsfield.' That was the interesting bit of it.

Then it's partly because of where the money came from, but it was supposed to be about disinformation. We did a thing where they were given a task where they shared a slightly creative prompt to get them talking about things that were interesting.

**DB:** To see each other as a human, as a life.

**RB:** I can't remember what any of them were.

**DB:** What did they say?

**RB:** Was it a photo?

**DB:** There was the photo of what's in your fridge, of what you can see out your window. Things like this.

**RB:** Ways of getting to know each other, which aren't the things you draw a snap conclusion about. Then I think they had three pieces of information that they were sent, and they had to, first of all, rate how much they trusted them or believed them. Then they had a text conversation about that.

**DB:** Something from Reddit, something from Twitter, something from a news website.

**RB:** It was fine.

**DB:** I think people had quite a nice time. I think for me, part of the issue with it was it's actually a huge job to build audiences in many different European countries at once. That's actually really hard. We had *some* partners who did *quite* a good job of building an audience in other countries… It's free as well. If you've bought a ticket to a thing, you're definitely going to turn up.

**RB:** Actually, to speak to your point earlier, I think the thing that people really liked was having a conversation with someone in a different country and just… Something that was quite low stakes, but actually, particularly at that moment in time when we were all losing our minds…

**DB:** The app also translated, so if you wanted, you could see the original.

**RB:** Oh, yes, that was the other nice thing.

**RD:** That's clever.

**RB:** Yes.

**DB:** You could click and go, 'Oh, this person's typing in German. They'll probably be in Germany or Austria.'

**RB:** That was really nice.

**RD:** Yes, that is nice.

**DB:** Then turn it back to English, which was quite nice.

**RB:** For me, it was a bit like, I don't know the shape of it, it didn't work.

**DB:** *Smoking Gun* went on a real journey.

**RB:** *Smoking Gun* was a real narrative. Yes. I guess it's a little bit, maybe it is about coming from a theatre background, I think we are a little bit like narrative junkies. There needs to be an arc. There wasn't an arc on *Social Sandwich*. It was fine.

**RD:** Each conversation had a shape, but the whole thing didn't go on a journey

**RB:** Yes.

**DB:** Yes.

**RB:** The idea was that they were escalating conspiracy theories on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, all the way through, and then I think the last day was about how people fall into conspiracy theories. So, I think people who did every day probably had some sort of arc and I don't think it's the only time we've done that. I think we often build experiences for people who are going to do everything and not everyone's going to do everything. I think if you do everything, it was great. I think everyone else had a nice time.

**RD:** Going back to the relationship between technology and conversation, do you see... it's really interesting, all this talk about how you are control freaks in a way and how you're also narrative junkies and you want to control the experience in many ways more than maybe some other artists who are interested in audience conversation. I was just relating that in my head to the way that, on a much larger scale, technology companies – Twitter, X, whoever, Facebook – control conversation across their platforms. Do you see yourselves – obviously you haven't got the nefarious goals…

**RB:** Not as rich as Elon Musk.

**RD:** …that I'm sure Elon Musk has, but do you see yourselves as, I don't know…do you think you're using the same techniques?

**RB:** No, we don't have the money.

**RD:** No, no.

**RB:** I think a lot of that is about algorithms and it's about promoting. I think the types of engagement we're doing are really different to any of those platforms. To go back to this whole social media thing, I think that's changed hugely. Since the demise of

Twitter, I think it's really, really different. I think that there can be a bit of a… just because we're now making more work in the digital civic space, I think within the arts and academia, there can be like 'social media' in the way that my mum talked about social media.

**RB:** Do you know what I mean?

**RD:** Yes.

**RB:** It's like TikTok is so different in terms of the way that it's asking people to engage to Facebook, and now the game is TikTok, the game is not Facebook. Do you know what I mean?

**RD:** Yes.

**RB:** I think we need to be more nuanced in the questions we ask about.

**RD:** Sure.

**DB:** I think we follow a lot of what's happening in that sort of thing. The Center for Humane Technology have a podcast called *Your Undivided Attention*, which I really like. I think Joe [McAlister from Fast Familiar] follows these kinds of debates quite a lot as well and they propose a lot of ways in which social media companies could structure things better. I think some of those proposals for how to have better conversations feed into our thinking about how to structure conversations in our work. I think there is a branch of that – these people who've been in social media companies and are now trying to make them better – that kind of thinking that affects how we make work.

**RB:** I think the whole techno-social engineering, the idea that these platforms make us behave like machines. I think that YouTube is built in a way that invites certain types of behaviour and makes those behaviours [more] frictionless. I think those are the exact same principles that you use in any user design. I guess you're using some of the same tools, but potentially not for evil.

**RD:** Yes.

**RB:** I don't know. It would be great if we could, right?

**RD:** I suppose I didn't phrase the question very well, but I suppose I was thinking more about the experience for the participant and how, on a very superficial level, you're engaging with technology in your shows, you're having some social discourse enabled by the technology. I suppose I was trying to think about how…clearly, it is profoundly different, those interactions are very different to engaging with somebody through TikTok or Facebook or Twitter or whatever it is…But I suppose I was trying to think in my own head about how they were different and I suppose reaching for your thoughts in terms of the experience for those people involved, what you wanted that takeaway to be in terms of how they relate to other people participating? And maybe in your heads it's not in any way related to… it's not some sort of antithesis in your head with the way that people relate through platforms like…that's a false comparison… Through all those projects, and maybe it's different for each one, what are you hoping will be the experience for the participants do you think, particularly in terms of how they relate? Do you think about that? Are you interested in that?

**RB:** How they relate to each other?

**RD:** Yes, how they relate to…

**RB:** Oh, 100%. I think we think about that. I think we don't think about...For us, I think technology is *just* the way of achieving it.

**RD:** Yes, sure.

**RB:** Someone once was like, 'Oh, I forgot I had an iPad,' and I was like, 'Great, that's perfect.' That's better than a five-star review from Lyn Gardner because this [technology] is just the way to get this…in terms of people relating to each other…

**DB:** I think time is the biggest thing, but that's all theatre. All theatre gives you two hours with a topic, whereas I think social media is getting shorter and shorter. So you can really spend a lot of time in an artistic experience thinking about one thing. I think it's probably different now, but there used to be the statistic of very, very few people that had had a conversation lasting more than two or three minutes about climate change, and then within a theatre piece of any kind, you can get people to think about climate change for two hours.

I think that deep dive into something is something that you can really do in an event in a way that, scrolling from one thing to another and reading a few lines of an article but probably not all of it that's shared online and so on, that very *fast* behaviour that you do on social media, is very different from what we do in our work.

**RB:** Which is as well, I suppose, it's about shifting you from intuitive thinking to reflective thinking. I think in terms of what we want people to take away from it, it is that thing of, like, if you talk about something, probably nothing bad will happen. I think that's actually, that is it.

**RD:** Say that again.

**RB:** If you talk about something with someone, probably nothing bad will happen. That person isn't going to kill you, you're not probably going to get cancelled. All these things. Because it's when we stop talking that democracy dies and the bad guys win. I think it's about spaces where we can talk about the stuff that we would rather avoid.

**RD:** That's interesting, you talk about democracy dying. Is there something that you reflect on in terms of the post-truth populist political landscape that you feel like this is…because it feels to me like, across all of those projects, there's something about having to evidence your opinions…or that you're all on the same page, you're asking people to look at the same…Sure, we might have different points of view on this, but it's all rooted in a response to this same set of facts. Is there something about that, that's of interest?

**RB:** Yes, I guess so. I hadn't really thought about it in those terms before. I think the thing going forward, like next year, a lot of our projects are about trust, which is really interesting because I think we are living through a crisis of trust in lots of our institutions. Whether it's like politicians because of all the behaviour during the pandemic or…you've got every right and lots of reason not to trust the Met…and all of these things. But if you stop having trust in politicians, the judiciary, science, all of these things, that is the end of democracy. I think that's really, really dangerous. That's when populism wins by undermining all of those things.

I don't know about how the form of the work speaks to that, but I think in terms of this subject, a lot of it is about finding out *why* people don't trust whatever and how that

trust could be rebuilt. I guess that feels much more of a sort of… I guess an activist than an artist thing to be doing. I think that's another shift that's happened. No offense, but we don't really care whether it's on at BAC anymore. Once upon a time, that was like, 'Oh, my God, we've made it.' Now it's like, if we can get policy change, that's the goal. It's not about Lyn Gardner or whoever.

**RD:** Of course, yes. It goes back to that time thing, doesn't it, of having the time to get beyond the surface prejudices or whatever the first statement of position to really understand where those people are coming from? That feels like that's different to the general direction of our political culture. It's all soundbites and it's about taking a position and then holding it, whatever. Whatever. Even if you're arguing black is white or whatever.

**RB:** I think also, just to touch on one of your questions, I think it's where this work differs from the experience economy and why we fail as people within the experience economy, because that needs to be short, it needs to be replicable, it needs to be shiny. Like, Christ, we're making work for twelve people that lasts two hours! It's not that…I think, yes, there is something about depth rather than getting people through the door that is really important.

**RD:** Yes, okay.

**DB:** There's an analogy that I think of sometimes. I don't know how useful it is. Theatre-theatre is really useful because when you watch, like, Oedipus go through a set of situations in the journey and go, 'Oh, wow, that's what Oedipus did, what would I do in that situation?' And I think in interactive performance you can actually do, 'Oh, what did I do in that situation?' Actually, having to take a position in some way and then reflect on it afterwards. All of our shows have a debrief. That's a big thing. There's always the thing and then there's always the chance to reflect on it afterwards.

**RB:** Really uncommercial bloody decision.

**RD:** I mean most of this work is not very commercial at all, so that's the obvious answer to those accusations of complicity with the neoliberal economy.

**RB:** Which is terrible.

**RD:** It's true. It needs a huge amount of public subsidy or whatever. It's interesting about the debriefs and quite a few of these sorts of projects do that. There's often a different sort of…there's the conversation within the frame of the game or the whatever it is, leading up to the decision, whatever it is, being made. Then there's the decompression conversation. That's usually a facilitated, structured thing in its own right, is it, for you?

**RB:** Yes.

**RD:** Rather than glass of wine and just an informal chat?

**DB:** It's normally the whole group around a table.

**RB:** We need to control them, Richard!

**RD:** I'm clearly getting this message.

**RB:** I'm joking.

**DB:** I think then, everyone can have the same conversation. I think if it's a glass of wine it can descend to small groups…

**RB:** Small talk.

**DB:** …and small talk. I suppose it's about still keeping it big talk.

**RD:** For you, the purpose of that?

**RB:** I think there's a bunch of things. I think there's a care element, like spitting people out into the tube when they've just been talking about sexual assault or decolonisation. I just don't think it's okay to do that. I think that it's helping people. It's taking people back to the real world *nicely* and with an awareness that they didn't have before. Helping people reflect on what's happened. I don't know.

**DB:** People are often very interested in what other groups did, and that played a huge role in *Justice Syndicate*. People genuinely didn't believe that anybody else could have come to any other decision. Being presented with the facts of how diverse that was, was really…

**RB:** Particularly when you had a real variety. We did nine shows at Dublin Fringe and we had an absolute split of what had happened. Any of those people could conceivably have come to another show. There, it was really interesting because it was like, 'Look, this is the effect the group has. If you'd been at two o'clock rather than five o'clock, you might have voted something different.'

**RD:** With those conversations, with *The Justice Syndicate*, you always led with, 'Here are the stats on the previous shows' or…?

**RB:** No.

**DB:** No.

**RB:** We had three psychological models that we would give them.

**DB:** Then normally people would ask for the stats, but if not, they were on the programme.

**RB:** We've now thrown away.

**DB:** We've now recycled them all. Yes, the front of the program was like tomorrow's newspaper whether he was found guilty or not guilty. On the back, there were pie charts with all the results.

**RB:** People always want to know if they're normal or if they're special.

**DB:** People always ask that.

**RB:** With the *Acquisitions Panel* it's more, yes, what did other groups do? What was real?

**DB:** Who was real and who was not real?

**RB:** I suppose that's interesting because the *Acquisitions Panel* sits on a documentary theatre kind of angle, and so people want to know what's real. I think it's really important because a lot of it is real.

**RD:** When you say real, what do you mean?

**RB:** Interviews with real people rather than actors.

**DB:** About half the videos you see are actors and half aren't. It is a bit Rimini Protokoll-ish, they're the only other people. No, they're not the only other people...

**RB:** There are loads of people doing documentary theatre, but yes.

**DB:** Yes. Okay, fine. There are lots of other people who do it, but that was one example.

**RB:** That's a very long way of saying it, but it's about increasing the impact and making sure that you've dotted the t's and whatever it is. Taking care of people.

**RD:** In terms of the care thing, do you then have a sort of open question for people to talk about how they're feeling and the response to the content of the show or not?

**RB:** No, because people tell you if they need to.

**RD:** They tell you.

**DB:** We do have an 'Any other questions?' thing.

**RB:** We have an 'Any other questions?' Sometimes people bring it up there, sometimes people come and talk to you afterwards. I feel like we're not therapists.

**DB:** I think just that decompression space does a lot.

**[…]**

**RD:** I was going to wind it up but there is a question that's bugging me. You've talked quite a lot about how you're not really handing over agency to an audience or you're being honest about the degree of control you're maintaining and the level of manipulation that's going on. I suppose I was wondering fundamentally, is that really true? But also, why all these projects that are taking this form – where on the surface anyway, you are asking audiences to participate in a very different way to what you used to do when you were making more conventional theatre…

**RB:** Why?

**RD:** Yes. What is the nub of that? What is it that really motivates that and interests you in that?

**RB:** I think it's about, what are the conditions you need for people to be able to most effectively address complexity? I think it's a bit like if you walk into an art shop and

someone's like, 'Great, make something.' You're like, 'Oh, God, I don't know where I start, because there's this and there's this and there's this.' Whereas actually, if someone's like, 'Here is some charcoal, here is a piece of paper,' you know you can start. I think it's actually about, through narrowing down, you actually get to go deeper.

**DB:** I think structure gives you freedom. I teach part-time as well. I often find the more structure I give people to create within, the more creative that they are. I think freedom and agency…that they go together isn't always true. I think having a structure to your conversation actually lets you have a better conversation. I think we do really create a structure for what people talk about and so on, but I think they experience a freedom within that.

**RB:** Yes. I think the parallel is rules-based devising practice. I don't love their work, but people like Goat Island, so much of that stuff comes out of like this is the very restrictive set of rules that actually pushes you to make creative choices. I think it's doing the same thing but with participants.

**DB:** More like a sonnet or…

**RB:** A sonnet. Yes.

**RD:** Yes. All that makes sense. Why give them that? Involve them in an active participatory role rather…Why not just have them listen and watch? For you, what is it that's gained by having them speak and make some decisions and…

**DB:** Something about rehearsing action. The audience, they're rehearsing some action for the real world. I think we were making pieces about climate change where people sat in the dark quietly. We were like, 'This doesn't feel right.' You want to be able to practice the action that you want to then go and do in the world. I think there's a very selfish thing of we find it more interesting. We find it interesting to watch different audiences going on different journeys and having different conversations rather than seeing the same play night after night. There's that as well.

**RD:** I suppose, going back to what you were saying, it's an obvious way of introducing that complexity, isn't it? Just to have, albeit within the frame, the game that you set up, those multiple life experiences, perspectives, represented.

**RB:** Also crunch points. For The Acquisitions Panel, one of the things that they have to do is write a hundred-word interpretation text for the object. People are like, 'Oh, my God!' about this. I don't care what they write. It's the fact that by introducing a crunch point, they have to take a position. You don't have to do that if you're just sat there watching something that's nice.

**DB:** Agency's a really interesting topic, because people's experience of it versus what they're doing is always really different. Somebody said about the *Justice Syndicate* that, 'Oh, I really didn't feel a sense of agency.' I was like, 'Why?' He was like, 'Well, because of the structures of the law, that all you can do is find somebody guilty or not guilty based on the evidence you're presented with. And I actually found that really not an experience of agency.' I was like, 'That's the legal system. That's not something we're doing…'

**RD:** 'Can't really fix that for you.'

**DB:** I don't know. I think it's a really complex scenario.

**RB:** I think that agency is one of these things that's been sold to people. It's like, this is the trade-off for…We don't have any community. We've fucked transport in this country, all of it. You've got choice! I don't know. Then, when you dig into it, you're like, 'Really? Have you got choice or are there structures which means you don't really have choice?' I think that a lot of my frustration with interactive theatre is, 'Yes, you can do anything.' Great, what does it mean?

**Appendix 5. Rhiannon Armstrong: Interview by Richard Dufty in London, 6 October 2023**

**RD:** In some of your projects, some of your performances – I'm thinking particularly of *Can I Help You?* but there are other projects as well – conversation seems to play a central role. Just interested in you beginning to talk about that project and any other projects you think are relevant and your process of conceiving and developing those projects, particularly from the point of view of the role of conversation in that thinking and development process.

**RA:** Yes. *Can I Help You?* was the first ever performance that I conceived of and did. Is that right? Yes, that was like mine. I think a big drive that I had right from the beginning and that is what made me want to do something in the street anyway, rather than in a theatre, was that I was really aware [of] and uncomfortable [about] how homogenous the inside of theatre buildings were. I'd grown up wanting to make theatre and then I'd gone to university and learned about performance art and then wanted to do that. Even really young, I was doing very experimental things, but I suppose imagining them in theatre spaces, and then had that expanded a bit.

Then starting out being like, 'Shall I be an artist? Will I be an artist?' I was immediately like, 'Oh God, do I need to just make something for other people like me or my colleagues or…?' It felt like, 'I don't think that's a good idea.' I've been thinking about this recently. I've been really thanking myself for leaving the theatre building at that really early point. I think I felt that it was quite an insular environment to start to figure out my artistic voice, that would have all kinds of pressures about wanting to impress so and so, or, I don't know, I think I knew that was not a good environment for me.

Also, I think there's an awareness I carry because I'm mixed background class-wise. There's an awareness that I carry around that. So, the first piece I made was to go into the street and talk to people. I suppose at that point there's something going on there that has continued to happen when I make space in public, which is that I want the work to be understandable to a person without necessarily using the word 'art'. I want someone to be able to see what it is for them and get it, then choose to engage or not, by relying on that person's curiosity, so it's not announcing itself to you, it's putting

itself somewhere for you to come up to it and say, 'What's all this?' Then get a coherent answer that hopefully won't totally turn you off or at least that's clear. And answering 'it's art' is not clear to people. That's in a sense where conversation with people, with audience members, as part of the work started from, in the sense that while I was doing my performance, I wanted someone to be able to come up to me and demand of me an explanation. I wanted to be challenged like that so that I could figure out what am I doing and who for, and why.

In the performance works I've done in public space, there's always a space, and it's not always me who answers as the performer or the person performing who answers. With *Public Selfcare System*, because that's a one-to-one performance and tandem training session on how to rest in public space, the performer, who has been until this point *me*, who's taking that person for the one-to-one resting experience doesn't necessarily have capacity to also answer a passerby's questions at the same time because I'm focusing on this audience member, but I do have somebody who works with me who does that, answering the question of, 'what is this?'

I've always been putting the space for that conversation. That's an important one to me, the 'what is this?' It's important to me that the work has space for a real person to answer that question in a real way. The other thing about *Can I Help You?*, I guess, is that it was the concept in a way that the conversation was the work, or at least that the conversation was going to determine what the work was. *Can I Help You?* was me standing around on the street with a tool belt that had random stuff in it, that I thought might be helpful and a t-shirt saying 'Free Help'. That was the starting point. That was the offer – was that I was going to turn up in the street and that there would be a negotiation, I guess. That was my expectation, I think, was there'll be a negotiation about what help people might want and what I have the capacity to give on this eight-hour day that I've allocated as me with the skills I have and don't have, and my boundaries around personal safety, and we'll figure out what I'm willing to give, I guess. As it happened, what ended up happening was I would always have to tip it over into actually doing something.

It often was just that the conversation was the artwork. It often also was that the conversation ended up being about it being art. That often happens when people get

to, ‘But who’s paying for it?’ I do this thing of, ‘This artwork is here for you in the following manner.’ I’m going to explain that to you without saying it’s art. Then I’m explaining what it’s here for, what I’m here for, what this thing is for, what this offer is in plain English. The point comes where they’re like, ‘Oh, I see that. Yes, maybe I’d like to make use of this, but am I going to have to pay?’

When I say no, then the question becomes, ‘But who’s paying?’ That’s usually when I say, ‘There’s an arts festival or there’s a theatre over there, or there’s this gallery over there, and art is paying.’ I love that because it feels like somewhat of a healing moment potentially or bit of a healing moment for people who might otherwise feel like their taxes, their lottery ticket money is going on stuff that isn’t for them.

**RD:** That’s interesting.

**RA:** Yes.

**RD:** In terms of how it would generally that interaction would proceed…

**RA:** That one, yes.

**RD:** …that one with *Can I Help You?* You wouldn’t go up to people and ask them, you would wait for them to come to you.

**RA:** Yes.

**RD:** And often the first bit of any interaction would be that conversation about, ‘what is this? what are you doing, who’s paying?’ It’s asking you for explanation, justification for...

**RA:** Some people don’t need that, but some people do. I have a couple of photos. There’s one, in particular, that shows the kind of manner of being in the street particularly well, that’s like, I’m not approaching anyone, but I am standing looking attentive and expectant. If people are walking along, generally, my attitude is, I’m in your space. If this is your high street, if this is the place you go all the time, you know I’m out of the ordinary, so people will do a double take or they’ll catch my eye.

If somebody catches my eye, I might be like, ‘Are you wondering what I’m doing here?’ if they’ve done a double take or whatever. Interestingly, up north, people do just go,

‘What is this? What are you? What is this?’ They just march right up to me. Yes, it would be like that. Either, ‘What’s all this then?’ or I’m going, ‘You’ve caught my eye a couple of times. Are you wondering what I’m doing?’ They’ll be like, ‘Yes.’ Then I would say, ‘I’m here offering free help. I’m just a person, though. I don’t have any special skills, but I do have on me this. I’ve got *The Little Book of Calm* in case you’re feeling stressed and you want to read something in here. I’ve got some chewing gum. I’ve got change for a fiver. I’ve got a bin bag.’ Oh, and the thing that got really popular was hand massages. That was really interesting because I’ve got hand cream. Then a good few times I’ve given people hand massages in the street, and that is so amazing because it’s so intimate and also not at all. It’s very safe, and people see that as well. People walking past are seeing that. They’re seeing two strangers.

This is what I love about public space work, is an encounter between strangers and other people witnessing it, and what that can do in terms of planting something in someone’s mind. Yes, it’d be like, ‘What’s all this?’ I use the tool belt to be like, ‘I’m offering free help, and da, da, da.’ I’ll say, ‘I’m just doing it for today, so it can’t be tomorrow, but it could be this, it could be that.’ A lot of the times, especially I’m remembering on that tour, the CTN tour in Paignton, I think there were a few people who were just like, ‘Oh, people need help. It’s really good you’re here. I don’t, but people do.’ Then some conversation about what help people do need, that isn’t specialised, I guess. Then usually, with those people, I come round to maybe there’s something you can have out of it. ‘You’re saying you don’t need anything, but would you like something?’ Or that kind of thing about always thinking ‘Other people need things. I don’t need things.’ The first time I did it, a really fun thing happened where this guy came past and we had all this chat. Then he went away. He said, ‘That’s really interesting. Yes, yes, that’s really interesting’ and would go away. We had got to the fact that it was art. I was like, ‘I’m an artist, and for me, this is the art. Here I am. This is the art, but it doesn’t really matter beyond that.’ Then he went away, and then he came back, and he had his daughter with him. He picked up his daughter, who I guess was about 11 or 10 or something, I think. I met her, and we talked about what it was, and then he was like, ‘Can you just stay together for a minute? I’m going to go over the road.’ We’re like, ‘Okay.’ We stayed together, and I was chatting to her or whatever.

He went over the road, and he took a photo. Then he came back, and he was like, 'Look, I took a photo. That was the art. I got a photo of this artwork. It was you with my daughter over the road.' Obviously, because I'm an artist and I love art or whatever, it was like, that was fun for me. I was like, 'Yay, he got so excited.' It's, 'What is this?' Sometimes it moves on to, 'Okay, yes. Actually, I don't know what to do about this.' Or if people are together, it will be like, 'She's got a problem. Can you help her figure it out?' They're always pointing at each other.

Sometimes it's…people are ready to make use of the service without getting clear on who's paying and sometimes they want to know […]. Sometimes people leave and they don't know, they weren't told it was art.

**RD:** Sometimes, give me a sense of where some of the conversations presumably stayed relatively superficial, others got to some...

**RA:** Yes. Some of them are pretty short…

**RD: …**pretty deep, I assume.

**RA:** Some are like... One couple when I was in Rochester in Kent, they kept coming back. They would go about their business. Rochester was a bit more like tourists. It was like UK tourist place. They would go along, then they came back again, and they were just chatting to me. I think sometimes this is it, and then it becomes, and it has a lot become about listening. You just become the person who's going to listen. No one says, 'This is what you're going to do for me.' It just becomes that. They kept coming back and just chatting to me.

Something about the thing about help, I think I wrote about this maybe, no, maybe not, when Mel Evans and I did this article for *Scottish Journal of Performance*.

**RD:** Yes, I've read that.

**RA:** Yes. I can't remember if I wrote about this couple in that. Basically, they were a heterosexual couple of retiring age, maybe a bit younger than that. The guy just started talking about how being vulnerable is difficult. Then maybe that's because we were talking about help and asking for help, and things like that. Then he started talking about things and I couldn't quite grasp what he was talking about because it seemed

that the two of them knew. He was talking to me, but it was like a way to talk to her, without directly talking to her. At a certain point, it became clear he was saying to me/her, 'I know I need to talk to my kids about...' I think he was saying about his own abuse that he had maybe…I felt like he had been, I can't remember the details of it, but I came away thinking, 'I think this man is contending with the fact that he was a domestic abuser, maybe with this woman that he's with. Maybe he's done some work and isn't doing that anymore. That's been discussed between them, but it hasn't been discussed with the kids.' It was something like that. Some details were there, but not all, in that way when you just know that someone has found how you can help them in their own way, and you don't have to do anything other than just be there.

I didn't ask a whole ton of questions because I'm not here to fix your thing, right?

**RD:** Sure.

**RA:** I'm not a therapist and da, da, da. I guess we mused more on vulnerability.

**RD:** Yes. In terms of the way those conversations would generally proceed, you talked about how often early on people are just quizzing you on what…

**RA: '**What is this?'

**RD:** …categorise you…

**RA:** Yes, they're trying to place me, yes.

**RD:** Trying to place you. From what you said, that sounds like part of the intention of the piece, that you're interested in that. Is that right, or was that a distraction from then getting to the stuff which is about more general, human, what's going on […]?

**RA:** No. It's all totally part of it. I think the public space work, I'm trying to do something that's like, wait, that's not quite normal, where people are like, 'Wait, that's not any of the things that I can place,' because it's all somehow about public space and what are we doing with our public space. Like, 'Wait, that's not a consumer relationship. I don't have to spend money to access this thing,' because if you don't have to spend money, then usually, therefore, it's an advertisement. It's like, I remember one woman being like, 'Have Iceland paid you to carry people's bags?' I was

like, ‘No, I’m carrying people’s bags so that...’ That was my first thing that I started offering. ‘Can I help carry your bags?’ and then talk while I was doing it. Yes, absolutely, that uncertainty, trying to place you, is very much part of the work. Basically, the way I see it, most relationships are extractive in some way between strangers. Often in public space or semi-public privatised space, there’s an extractive or financial relationship going on. The idea that something is there for you in a way that you can shape, it’s not something we’re used to. That meeting moment where we come to understand what we’re here for, for each other.

I have boundaries as an individual doing that work. When I’ve done it with other performers, we have boundaries, but also, we don’t have a prescription about what it’s for. There’s an opening proposition and a core part of that is that this has not been predetermined, and so it’s there to be shaped by our dialogue as two people. And ‘I’m going to be totally transparent with you about who I am and what has brought me here. My main thing is, here’s what I think I’m here for, offering free help, blah blah, blah, I’ve got these things with me to help this along or whatever, things that might be useful. Also, I think I’m an artist, and I’ve convinced some other people I am. They’ve given me some money, so that’s how I’m here.’ Total transparency. Then that’s it. Now we can figure it out. That can be it for you too. You might be like, ‘Oh, interesting, bye,’ or you might go, ‘Oh wait, all right.’ That’s the next step, right?

**RD:** Yes.

**RA:** For me there’s… I talk about these spheres of audience with the public space work. There’s people who walk past, see the thing that’s out of the ordinary, don’t interrogate it, but the image stays in their mind. They’re like, ‘I wonder what that was because it didn’t fit into the things. I don’t know. Whatever,’ but it’s still there. It’s lodged as something different. Then there’s the people who inquire a bit, get that understanding, and they’re like, ‘Huh.’ Then there’s the people who inquire a bit, get the understanding, and then go like, ‘Okay, let me try and shape this then. Let me see.’ They have another thing. Then there’s whoever hears about it, especially I think from the second two spheres of people or any of them, like, ‘Oh, I saw this thing, and I don’t really know what it was.’

**RD:** In terms of conversation, then, conversation in relation to this idea of not being easily placed, categorised in public space, and how you're interested in disrupting maybe the normal social relations we find in public space, which can be, I think you're suggesting quite transactional.

**RA:** Yes, predetermined.

**RD:** Yes, predetermined. How does the conversation that you're looking to encourage fit into that? You're looking for a conversation that presumably isn't easily categorised as a transactional or predetermined… it's not fitting into neat roles?

**RA:** Yes, I guess. In a sense, though, it's 100% transactional because it's like I'm here for this time to provide you with help. I'm not looking for any particular type of conversation. I've reported what has tended to happen. I think that does get determined by who I am, how I am, and the way I get received. In the time that I've done that work, I've mostly been received as a young white woman. People bring their facility of interacting with a young White woman. There's a particular kind of facility that comes from different people, different kinds of expectations and facilities.

That's fine. That's all part of what comes for free with me being out on the street. I think the main thing is that the conversations that happen are not determined. That's probably the important thing for me, is that they get shaped by the two of us who are having them, and our interaction with one another. I suppose that's the main feeling I want that person who I've encountered to leave with, is that they did have, I don't know if the word is autonomy or power or whatever, but that that was something that they were able to shape.

**RD:** That's important to you, why?

**RA:** I think that's important to me when I think about people who, if you said, 'Will you come to this arts festival in this theatre or whatever?' would be like, 'Oh, fuck off. No.' That's when that's really important to me because there's two layers. If that person has an experience of something that they associate as art or theatre or performance, or with the thing, and that that felt like an enriching clear experience where they didn't have expectations put on them, that instead they manoeuvred around an experience and were able to shape it, and that they understand that as an artwork as part of a

festival or whatever, then I think that, for me, is thumbs up because I made an artwork that didn't fall into the trap of having expectation anxiety, or is it for me anxiety or whatever.

If you've come away from that without that knowing it's art thing, then I think it's also important and I've succeeded, because I've succeeded as an intervention artist in public space in the sense that we've been in public space, and we've been strangers who've met one another and have managed to shape our encounter through an honest meeting and have managed to care for one another. We've been *decent human beings*. The very first time, the context in which I conceived of this performance was for something called Bonkersfest. That was in Camberwell, and it was around ideas of madness.

That initial public intervention thing, the thing I was thinking about is, especially because that festival started in the context of care in the community in Thatcher years, and then essentially what that had meant for a lot of people is that they were booted out of institutions that they'd been held in for years. There wasn't really care in the community. They were just on the street. Reactions from people in Camberwell, at the beginning of the day, they were like, 'Oh, you better watch out. There's lots of crazies about. If you're here, young woman offering free help, these crazy people are going to take advantage of you.'

This line of when behaviour that is unexpected…what behaviour gets seen as mad, and when and why is that behaviour seen as a threat? When I've done *Can I Help You?* in different kinds of environments, there are some places if you go into a shopping mall, or in these semi-private now public out on the streets, streets that are private streets that are actually shopping malls, you can get, your behaviour is seen as a threat. My behaviour in performing this piece is seen as a threat. In other contexts, it can be seen as a threat because you can just be seen as being weird, but I'm offering free help. I'm genuinely offering free help and that's seen as a threat, so, treading that line about what's seen as a threat and what isn't. I was just thinking about that because that's the context in which the work, without it being a kind of rehabilitating an arts image, it comes from that being a street intervention into... where we become suspicious of people. People behaving weirdly in the street, or out of the ordinary or whatever,

there's a suspicion or a fear. Then, oh, it turns out they're offering free help, which actually just means they've given you a hand massage, whatever. Turns out that it's, we've just interacted with each other.

**RD:** It's interesting you were saying that one of your core objectives, if you like, with the project, but with the conversations that happened is that they shouldn't be predetermined. They could go in any direction and you want people to leave with a sense of that, indeterminacy or that it was… 'I had some power over where the conversation went…'

**RA:** Shaping it, yes.

**RD:** …shaping it. Thinking about conversation in public space, there's something in that kind of open conversation, which is inherently, certainly the way that you were managing it and presenting it, not determined. That's, in some contexts, seen as a threat or seen as oppositional or seen as unusual or odd, or a bit mad sometimes. That sense of things not being...?

**RA:** I don't know if that's seen as mad, because it's not like you don't get received. The fact that the conversation is open and we're going to co-determine it isn't something that's readable from outside. My experience is that when we're in that, we're in that, and that's a healthy way to be. It's not an undetermined rudderless sense.

**RD:** No.

**RA:** I'm listening to you and I'm seeing you and I'm responding to you and what you're choosing to bring to me of yourself in this moment because my only aim is to meet you. Actually, in a way, that's everyone's aim when they're walking up to me in the thing because they're like, 'What is this?' They're trying to understand it, but they're also, at a certain point, either they're like, 'Oh, I get it,' and they go, or they're like, 'Oh, I get it.' Then they're trying to meet me and meet it. I think that I try and bring more of that into the world because it's lacking or I feel it's lacking, or perhaps I've felt myself not being met or seen.

I'm just trying to put it into being. That is, I guess, the energetic material I'm putting into the world through the work. It's not part of how the work is seen, perceived, or reacted to as an artwork by people I talk to about the art. Does that make sense?

**RD:** I think it does, but surely the people who are engage... the approach in those conversations, there is something surprising, presumably, appealing to them that you don't fit into the, 'Okay, I'm used to having a conversation with somebody trying to sell something to me on the street. Asking for money for a charity.'

**RA:** Yes. It's notable. Generally speaking, I would say I think what happens is, then you go away and that has been of note to that person. It's a notable out-of-the-ordinary experience that they've had. Whatever has happened through this conversation, dialogue, that that has happened between strangers, it's usually stuff that for me as well, that's not the kind of interaction I have with strangers. There's the thing I mentioned in that article about the guy with the dog and we're carrying the wood, and he gives me a present. I don't go about my daily life doing that.

It's in the frame of this artwork that I manage to do that. It's an encounter that's very different from other encounters. It's of note to me in my life. I believe it's also of note to those people in their life. Crucially, I don't think it's threatening having gone through that. I don't think you come out at the other end being like, 'Oh shit, that was scary,' because of this constant listening, responding, and commitment to the fact that we really are co-piloting this encounter, and the listening that I'm doing. That's why I wanted you to watch that film, because that ties into this work I'm doing now, which is non-linguistic, non-verbal, but it's still conversation, right?

**RD:** Yes.

**RA:** The amount of heightened listening, looking, vibing with a person that you're doing to just be like, 'I'm trying to locate your desire in this moment, and I'm going to try and locate it. I'm going to try and pick up on it and I'm going to try and move towards it. You're going to do that to me.' That's how we figure out our non-verbal, non-linguistic, non-intellectual collaboration.

**RD:** There's a really interesting thing. Maybe it's in that article that you were talking about, where you quote somebody that you had a conversation with doing *Can I Help You?* I think, talking about how we… I think that they used the word 'a hardening of...'

**RA:** Oh, that was that couple.

**RD:** Yes.

**RA:** How we get hardened, yes.

**RD:** How we get hardened, which really struck me. Presumably, that is a thing of, initially, people are on guard. We all are in interactions with public space, in interaction with strangers…you categorise situations, don't you, and people…?

**RA:** Yes.

**RD:** You think, 'This is the role I'm playing in this interaction now with the bus driver or whoever it is – shop worker, beggar on the street, whatever.' Presumably, that's part of what's going on…that's working through some of that to a place that… maybe new roles have been established, but there's…

**RA:** Yes, there's a softening.

**RD:** …a negotiation that lets a bit of vulnerability or something else come into play. Is that right?

**RA:** Yes, I think so. Yes, for sure. I just have this image of eggs. What is it that softens an eggshell? Is it if you put it in vinegar?

**RD:** Not sure.

**RA:** Then that makes the eggshell... I was just thinking of eggs because we're like raw eggs. We're actually so gooey and bleh in the middle, and fragile, but we've got the little hard shell, and we're just like tik, tik, tik. I don't know. There's something in that in *Can I Help You?* We're not dunking in vinegar, but it's just the bit where we're meeting is softening a little. We're a bit more smushed against each other by the end. Which, it does have its risk. There is risk there. I live in London, and I live actually a small-town fringe life. We're in my studio now and often I cycle here from Maryland where I live through a park essentially.

Then I go into Central London occasionally, and I'm like, 'Oh, I can't deal with it. I can't. I have to disassociate. I have to shut down. There's too many people.' You see 1,000 people in a minute easily, especially in Stratford where I go, near where I live. There is a kind of risk where you have softened up and then you go about your life. Especially with the people who I meet and speak to whose space I really am in with *Can I Help You?* and with *Public Selfcare System*, especially with *Public Selfcare System* actually, where it's like, people who are maybe living on the street or spending most of their days on the street, perhaps rough sleeping. Especially those people, when we've had our encounters, and there's a softening, I'm really aware that then the re-hardening has to happen in that place. You can't go to your home, your room, your family, whatever, and protect yourself and re-harden and get ready again. The thing is also that I am really aware of is that people's intimate relationships are also fairly often not places where they can be vulnerable. There is something that strangers can do for one another in that. It's actually not as risky for me to really see you and who you are, and your faults and your whatever, to get to know you as a stranger and then go about my life because we don't have expectations from each other going forward. We don't have things we need. I don't know. We're not trying to fulfil our childhood wounds, whatever it is that we do when we're in intimate relationships. I do think there's an opportunity in that.

**RD:** Do you think that's a bit like a therapeutic dynamic that it's like talking to somebody that's not got a personal stake in your life?

**RA:** I think being heard. I think people use the opportunity sometimes of *Can I Help You?* of being heard by someone with something that they feel is too risky, like they might get rejected if they tell someone else. With me, in that context, they can tell me. I suppose by then I must have given enough of an impression that I'm not going to judge them or reject them, or maybe it doesn't matter because I'm a stranger and they can go like, 'Fuck you anyway,' if I do, but I don't, and I don't get that vibe. I also think…this is why Mel and I wrote, *Care and Reciprocity*, there's something I'm getting out of it too. I'm getting something like being able to be a certain way in a way that I don't feel I can be with the people that I'm closest to, or there's something there for me too for sure. I'm probably doing art as therapy that way around, right?

**RD:** Yes.

**RA:** Like the way people say about performance artists, and I was like, 'I'm not a performance artist. I'm not making an autobiographical show.' This literally happened. My mum forbid me from making autobiographical work when I was first saying, 'I think I'm going to be an artist or whatever.' She's like, 'You better not make autobiographical work.' That says something! I was like, 'Fine, I'm not.' Then I made *The International Archive of Things Left Unsaid*. She's like, 'Hmm.' There's a certain point a couple years ago I was like, 'My work is really autobiographical.' Also, it is art as therapy in some ways, right?

**RD:** Yes. It's interesting that we were talking earlier before we started recording, about your radio piece, *The Soothing Presence of Strangers*.

**RA:** Strangers.

**RD:** That speaks to that because it's a story of...

**RA:** That is autobiographical, yes, very directly.

**RD:** The story at the centre of that is around when you were nine, and a relationship with a bus driver and conversations over a long period of time it sounds like, and his care for you and yours for him. I guess that speaks to your need I suppose for that…

**RA:** Yes, for to be seen by strangers.

**RD:** Your search for that kind of connection, I guess.

**RA:** Yes. I think you put something… I've had this recently, where I'm like, I think I've acknowledged it to myself, 'Oh, Rhiannon you put things into the world that maybe you need or that you needed when you were a kid, or I don't know what, but you're putting things into the world that are, maybe you feel on some level, you needed.' I'm like, 'Also, I think other people could use this.' Maybe the fact that I had this sense of it being missing means that I know what to put in there in the gap. Other people have that gap too. Not necessarily everyone. I have that kind of theoretical knowledge. Then there was something I did in 2021 with Wellcome and one strand of it… It was called *How to Hold, Behold and Be Held*. It was a work that went out on social media

channels. Then one strand of it was called *How to Be Held*. It was commissions of musicians. I commissioned musicians to make entire tracks out of one tiny little piece of a song – I'd asked around people to tell me, one little riff or lyric, or something from a song that they loop in their own head or sing to themselves to help them through tough times. Then I commissioned musicians to make an entire track out of one tiny loop. It was offered as like, 'You can listen to these…' It was offered back to the people who'd said the track as like, 'Here's your full entire track commissioned by a musician of that tiny bit.' But also to strangers to use it to soothe themselves. Then, I don't know, a year later or something, I was having a really tough time and then I was like, 'Oh, wait a minute, I commissioned that entire playlist of soothing looped bits of things that other people used to soothe themselves. I too can access that.' I had to give myself permission to use it for myself. It seemed like not obvious somehow, like, 'Oh no, I made that for other people. It's like, 'The people I meet doing *Can I Help You?* That person needs help not me!'

**RD:** Going to get back to the conversational element. You talk about the need in you that's being fulfilled, but also you generalised and said maybe there's a more general need.

**RA:** Yes.

**RD:** How would you characterise, in terms of the conversations that you're having…You talked about a gap in terms of your reading of the way that often we relate to each other and the way we often communicate with each other. What's the gap? What's lacking that you feel like you're providing a…

**RA:** Kind of fit.

**RD:** Fit for, yes.

**RA:** With *Can I Help You?* or more generally?

**RD:** Yes. I was thinking about that project, but more generally as well.

**RA:** I don't know if I can be general actually.

**RD:** Okay, stick with that.

**RA:** Maybe I'll have to just do *Can I Help You?* I guess like, what is it, strangers…people in cities, maybe especially I'm thinking of London, which is where I live and have done for a long time, maybe everywhere, but I think especially in cities, a stranger talks to you and you're like, 'Ugh,' especially one on the street really, especially one who isn't making small talk. That's scary and people don't like it. It's not just London because people would love to say it's just London, but it's not. Some stranger comes up to you and goes, 'Today is just a really hard day.' You're going to be like, 'Oh my God! Get away from me. I'm sorry I can't talk right now.' But like why is that so scary? Usually, people just are needing to be validated or heard. Even someone who's walking down the street shouting, angry, usually you just need to say like, 'Oh, mate.' I don't know. I think I'm getting just philosophical now. I don't know what *Can I Help You?*... I also stopped doing, *Can I Help You?* I don't want to do it anymore since COVID. Not just because of COVID, but because in this country the amount of need there is, the amount since austerity and the Tories, the amount of collapse that is going on, it's not funny.

It was never funny, but this idea that there's free help or whatever. I walked somebody to the door of an alcohol services that was an open clinic one time. The thing we did was we walked there, we walked past it, we talked about why he wasn't ready, even though it was something he really wanted to do to sort out his addiction because housing was dependent on him sorting out his dependence on alcohol, and all the chain of stuff. We just allowed that to be and it not to be the day actually, even though this is the day that there was someone to walk with him, but the thing was there, the door was open. He knew, there was the chain. Now it's just not funny anymore. Anyway, I don't do *Can I Help You?* anymore because to be publicly funded art that's filling a gap of service provision is not okay. I don't want to make out it is. How can you stage that work again? How can you stage it whilst acknowledging that gap? It's very hard. You can't, I'm just one person.

**RD:** Why originally did you have that as the prompt, because you probably could have – maybe we should come on to talk about Public Selfcare System in a bit – have a setup which didn't involve an offer of help or offer of being able to do whatever task to assist them? You could have had some other frame which allowed you to have meaningful conversations with people. What was the...?

**RA:** There was a frame. The premise was it can be anything. You decide what you need, but it's got to be something that I'm capable of giving you one person to another. I think that comes back to the access and inclusion kind of drive, which is, I'm an artist, I don't know what you need, or even what you want art to be. […] I don't know, you tell me. Sort of that. I think that was important, that we figure it out together. We figure out what help is. We figure out what art is. What performance is, I think.

**RD:** That sets up presumably a sort of caring, supportive, even compassionate tone to the interaction. I'm here for you, I'm not asking for money in return.

**RA:** Yes. I'm proposing to be a source of free help, and that's what I'm proposing.

**RD:** On your T-shirt, it says 'Free Help.'

**RA:** It says 'Free Help,' yes. On the back, like on trucks, there's a report. You can report how I'm doing.

**RD:** Oh, really?

**RA:** Yes. 'How's my helping?'

**RD:** Oh, ok.

**RA:** Then the first time I did it, I sprayed on my mobile phone number. I think when I did the CTN tour, it was the @, the Twitter thing, but you can report on whether I'm doing a good job or not because the proposition is this is free help, but it's not for me to predetermine what that would be.

**RD:** Did you find that… I don't know if it's that article we've already mentioned or somewhere else, but I read somewhere you talking about the kind of conversations that you can have when you're actually doing something practical, performing a physical task…?

**RA:** Oh, yes. When it's not the conversation.

**RD:** How that can be helpful in terms with the flow of a conversation. People feel relaxed and it's not like you've got to fill in all the gaps and all of that.

**RA:** Yes, that's when conversation is the point. I guess with *Can I Help You?*...it is an intervention. It is an intervention and conversation is the medium, but it's not the point. We have a conversation in order to figure something out, and then we *do* something together, which…sometimes the thing we do together is conversation, and sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's a hand massage or somebody else writing some tips in my little book of calm…or me teaching someone to tie their shoelaces.

**RD:** Oh, yes, I saw that. That was nice.

**RA:** Yes. That was really cool because that was a teen or tween testing the boundaries. If conversation is the point in a kind of less formalised way, I guess, the things that can happen while you're doing something with your hands... I'm trying to think about what we do…I suppose when we're writing the poems. When we're doing the *Poems Made from Words Found in the Bin*, that facilitation can be silent and it can also be quite wordy. I guess while people are looking down at their page or picking through the shredded paper trying to pick something, that often happens then. It's like they're trying to find the one piece they're going to use, and then some anxieties can come out. You can admit to some stuff about your anxieties, about your writing capacity.

**RD:** Makes me think a little bit about…and I know you talked about Adrian Howells maybe in that same article actually, or somewhere else anyway…but makes me think of some of his practice and the conversations that happened around intimate, physical interactions. For example, *Foot Washing for the Sole*. He's washing the feet, and there's quite a structured conversation from what I remember, but there was also plenty of time to be silent. There's not that sort of pressure of having to do one thing or the other. A bit like being at the hairdressers or whatever. You can chat away if you want, and often they'll chat back, but also, you can not chat. It's all okay.

**RA:** It's all conversation in a way. I know, I'm aware that you have this quite particular framework, in a sense, for what conversation is. If I think of it as a meeting, like a mutual meeting, that can be silent too. With when you were just talking about *Foot Washing for the Sole* and stuff and then I think what prompted me to do *Public Selfcare System* as well, what prompted me to do that was a certain kind of lived experience, and then seeing the potential for another public space intervention again, that I could

do, but that could also be described as something that's understandable. It's genuinely useful to have a tandem training session in how to rest in public space with someone so that you can then do it more easily on your own if you need to. That piece is… people book for it. They know it's art when they're booking, but also actually, when I did it in Dublin, somebody booked it very specifically as a training session, not as art. I don't know if they missed the messaging as in they didn't know, or they knew, but they had foregrounded the thing that they were very specifically there for the training session. That caused me a little bit of anxiety for a minute because I was like, 'Does this stand up as a training session if you have...' because also there, it was paid. I usually try and make everything free to access. That was…I didn't realise until it was too late, 'oh, these people are paying €10 or something to do this.' Anyway, I had a little anxiety, and then I was like, 'No, it's okay because it does stand up as a training session,' because I have this, it's got to be relevant to people. Even if it's not art, it's got to be directly relevant, but the people who book for that are already putting themselves... This is the thing with Adrian's work. As far as I know of it, he didn't do a lot that was intimate encounters in public space. He was doing intimate encounters in intimate space. People who book for intimate encounters, they've already identified something they're going to get out of it and then they've chosen to do it. I think one of the things I like about public space work, where people come across you, is there's no expectations because... or the only expectations are maybe like if it's art, 'I don't like it,' and then it's fun and validating to offer something that doesn't confirm that. People don't have an expectation. They haven't booked for a thing that they think it's going to be this thing and then you're going to let them down. People who book onto *Public Selfcare System* are already seeking to get something or they're already putting themselves somewhere out of their comfort zone.

**RD:** Talk me through how that… because I haven't experienced that project. I've seen pictures of it.

**RA:** You book for it and it's a tandem training session. It's described as a tandem training session on how to rest in public space. I come and meet you... I'm remaking it in December with a group of artists in Lisbon. The point of that is to make it something a bit different and something in particular that brings out the solidarity politics at the

heart of the work, which is not about selfcare, but it is about public care. That seemed to get lost a little bit when I was doing it before. I'm thinking about putting it on internationally and the understanding of how public space works, like how I want to move internationally – I don't want to just take myself and spread myself everywhere. I'm trying to think about that. Anyway, how it did work was you would book, I would come and get you at whatever the sort of festival ticket hub or something like that. Or we would have a meeting point, it's about five minutes away from where we're going to do the lying down, which is a spot that I've pre-identified but is informally arranged. It's not cordoned off. There's no formal permission, but I've quite carefully chosen the spot. On the walk there I explain what is going to happen, what we're going to do, and where it comes from. I say about my own experience of having had to learn how to rest in inhospitable places just in order to keep going about my day. I either would have to stay at home forever, or I'd have to learn to rest when I was on my way somewhere when I needed to, and really genuinely find a way to rest so that I could recover energy and carry on. I explain that context and then I explain what we're going to do, and then we get to the place, and we lie down. There is a script and there's like a guided set of actions.

I am very much holding that person in this experience that's going to be about ten minutes, fifteen minutes, and they know that. It's all about what the audience needs in that sense. In that context, I'm not like, 'we're going to go lie down and then we'll see what happens.' It's like, 'we're going to do this, we're going to... then I'm going to put my hand on your shoulder. Then I'm going to talk you through a thing.' And each step, I've said it in advance. Then also in more detail, I'm checking in each moment. 'I'm proposing I'm going to put my hand on your shoulder, is that okay?' 'Yes.' Then there's a little script and basically, it's a guided meditation to support them to find some mode of rest.

Then there's…I don't say anything for a bit and we're spooning on the street, resting. Then after a few minutes, I propose that I get up and stand nearby and leave them to carry on in the same manner, but without me physically next to them. If they're up for that, which they often are, then I do that. Then when that time is up, I come and get

them. Then we walk back, and the walk back is the space for... I pretty much just am silent and wait and see what they bring conversation-wise.

**RD:** Do they often want to talk?

**RA:** Yes. They often want to share what it felt like and the journey they went on, I guess, in terms of like whether they felt it was safe or not and then what they thought... some people are like, 'Oh, I didn't think I was going to be okay with you leaving.' Because I say 'I'm going to do this, I'm going to do the... then I'm going to stand to the side, but I don't have to or whatever.' 'I didn't think I was going to be up for you doing that, but then I was,' stuff like that. They have some immediate reflections on the experience and sometimes questions.

**RD:** Sounds like a quite profound… I'd love to experience it myself. A couple of times you talked about tandem…

**RA:** Tandem training session.

**RD:** What's that?

**RA:** It's literally just like a training session. If you do a parachute jump or hang glide, I did a hang glide as part of my R&D for this. If you're not a professional hang glider, you need to be tied to somebody else who is the one who knows what they're doing. That's why I chose to describe it as a tandem training session. It's like, 'I will be stuck to you, you'll be physically with somebody who has experience and is controlling.'

That's what I mean. I suppose about the guiding, that's also to do with that tandem training session language, is to do with being clear that 'I am the trainer, I know I have experience, I know I have established the safety of this arrangement, there's still risk. Hang gliding is a risk, but obviously, we can see it's risk, we're going to go lie down in the street. But I have done this lots of times before and I'm here to be connected to you while you do this.'

**RD:** Part of the point is to put them in a place where they might feel confident and equipped to do it on their own in the future.

**RA:** Yes. That's legitimately a real thing. It's a lived experience thing. You book onto this performance and what you get out of it is that you have in your body, in your lived memory, your body has done a thing where you have gone and lain on the cold, hard concrete in a busy central city environment with people walking around and cars and all of it. If it works out, you have actually managed in that hostile environment to rest.

Then if you were ever in a position where you were dealing with a disabling condition or situation where you found yourself in a hostile environment and what you really needed was to be able to rest, you consciously know, but also your body knows like, 'I have done this before.' I suppose you've done it before with a hopefully safe feeling of being cared for and stuff and you can conjure that too, even if you're on your own. Which is why I do the leaving people because then they have a little mini experience of that too. Of having been on their own, but in that safe...

**RD:** The conversation on the way back, that feels, in terms of the dramaturgy of the experience, important, does it as a decompression thing as a…

**RA:** Yes. I think with *Poems* as well, there's this thing that people get surprised about when they book it weirdly, where I'm like, 'Oh no, that was really... of course that's essential,' which is the receiving of the poem. With *Poems*, people write poems, and they give it back. It's not like, 'Oh, put it in the box over there. It's like, 'You give it to me, and I read it out loud to you, or we read it together and I say something about it.' There's something we talk about, the imagery or something about it. Maybe there's this recurring thing about being seen. Like, I want to make sure the thing is there for you, so I want you to feel seen by me or I want you to be able to let me know what it was like because I care about that, I guess. Maybe just like a lot of feedback.

**RD:** As you say, to be acknowledged as an individual who might have had a... I mean, there's all sorts of ways you might react to that experience, nice you're not assuming that everybody...

**RA:** That it's like nothing.

**RD:** …would react like whatever generic audience member's reaction might be.

**RA:** Well, I think that's it. There isn't one, right? Like there just isn't one. There's no generic person. This is why intersectionality and all these kinds of things… like this is why this is what we seem to be needing to get through our skulls is like, there's no generic. Everyone has a really different experience and if the work can build... and I suppose these pieces are very specific and we're talking about conversation so that...we're talking about works where I'm making a really specific space for truly exactly that, feedback conversation. There's other works where I'm using things like silence for people to process their experience. Their unique experience. Maybe I've released myself from personally needing to hear exactly the words of the experience. I'm still putting... I think the work needs to accommodate and acknowledge and especially since COVID, acknowledge that we're like... almost everyone, we're just all walking around, we're all traumatised people, constantly being traumatised. Especially now in the climate crisis and everything that connects to it, which the pandemic is one of those things. We're walking around as constantly traumatised people, being traumatised and dealing with our trauma, and artwork needs to leave space for you to be that and be connected to it, I think. Whatever might be happening for you, however you might have been triggered or whatever it is. Not necessarily that you need to hear about it, but that there needs to be space if there's something you need to let out, and maybe in an audio work that's silence. And in an interactive performance work, it's still the form of silence. It's like companionable silence. Usually, people will fill that with some words if you leave it.

Actually, in my work with like Lucy who I was working with recently, it's more things like processing time. If you've done something with stimulus and stuff, actually, she needs to almost go to sleep. Well, sometimes she does need to go literally to sleep, but she might need to just stop looking at you, interacting with you, so that her brain can take in and process what you've just been doing between you quite intensely. Leaving space for that, that walk back can be that too.

There's the pre, the walking there is also a space for people to be like… and people have used it to voice what they're anxious about. That's the thing about the public space stuff like the *Public Selfcare System*. It's not nothing to go and lie on the cold hard ground with people walking around and everything like that.

**RD:** Even the private space to do… I mean, because again, I was thinking, I don't know if you ever experienced *Held*, which was another Adrian Howells' piece where he does… I can't remember exactly. Years ago, he did it… since I did it. There's some sort of preamble of you chatting in a way. I saw it in the old Home, in Camberwell, Home Live Art, which was a nice family house, had a chat, can't really remember what about, but you end up being spooned on a bed, which is interesting and challenging in its own way. But to do something like that in a public space on…

**RA:** Yes, being stared at and the smells and the coldness.

**RD:** Yes.

**RA:** Yes, I guess like for me that space for conversation is about recognising that it's not a nothing thing for them to have come and done that. Adrian and I had like a whole bitching session in 2010. I told you about it. At the one-to-one festival thing because it was like, 'Oh, we're behaving like this is the titillating thing and you're going to do it. It's experience economy and everything.' Yes, we were bonded over this like the thing about *care*. Now, in the new way of understanding things and stuff and thinking about my own neurology or neurodiversity, I pay more attention to transitions in my own life now for myself. That's another word you could use for it, right? Like the transition.

**RD:** You mean in terms of performance, the transition of that audience member or that participant, that person from one like mode, state to another.

**RA:** Yes. Because also if you're... like Adrian and I both talked about, I suppose like bringing people… The potential we saw in one-to-one work was to like... because you can be so responsive, you can really move at the pace of that individual. And that allows that person to have an experience where they might be brought much further than they would think, or they might either literally do something, or in their own just experience and understanding, like go somewhere that was unexpected for them. Maybe you feel vulnerable because you've been vulnerable and you've gone further and then you need to… then 'off you go!'

**RD:** Well, it goes back to the hardening with the egg metaphor you were using, doesn't it? It's all very well as you say…it can feel cathartic getting to that vulnerable place and saying that thing maybe that you hadn't readily said before to anybody, certainly not to

stranger. Then yes, you are right, it's the transition back then into everyday mode of being where maybe you need some of that hard shell around you for a reason.

**RA:** That's important in the *Poems*. Sometimes in the *Poems* project, *Poems Made from Words Found in the Bin*, it's like this stimulus, this shredded paper that has like one or two letters per line, it's just enough to get over the tyranny of the blank page, but not enough to be prescriptive. Sometimes people can write something that clearly is very personal and was just hanging around somewhere on their heart or whatever. Because the way that is presented often…it is like you come across it in the library or in the park, I've done a rural touring version. It's like on the street outside the kebab shop, in the park. It is like, 'Oh, it's just a thing that you do,' that's your initial feeling about it. Like, 'Oh, it's just a thing that you do.' Then something can come up, you can end up putting something on the page that's really meaningful to you. Some people are like, 'Oh wow. Yes. Oh, I'm glad that's down.' Some people are a bit shocked by that. That's why the receiving of it is such an important part because then, if I'm sensing that, I can prolong that receiving moment and leave silence actually because I've got something to look at or something to do or whatever. But I can hold them there if I think they need a bit of like, help, space.

**RD:** One thing that was occurring to me was, going back to what you said about visibility, people feeling like they're seen.

**RA:** Oh, being seen.

**RD:** Your work. Conversation in relation to that. I just wondered if that idea of being seen, and you also talked about connection, whether you think... and I was thinking about the need for that, your need, but also the people you are having interactions with, their need. Just sort of trying to relate that in my head to the kind of wider cultural situation that we're in. Do you think there's a sort of a particular need at the moment or a need that's not being fulfilled or? How do you relate that approach in your practice to the general cultural environment that we live in?

**RA:** I think like, it's not becoming less relevant. I also, am always thinking 'and what though?' So, I've been on this meeting people in public space thing for a while. That's how I've ended up doing the work I'm doing at the moment with people for whom

language isn't a primary means of communication, is that there was like a prompt…That inclusivity on which I might pride myself, that there are people who I won't be encountering in the street because they're not included even in [the] street. If meeting one another and seeing one another and being together – I describe my work as 'relational' sometimes, and I don't think that in the way that a lot of galleries do, because I don't identify with a lot of the work that I suppose gets described as 'relational', but I do mean it in a certain kind of way, which is like the relationships are the work or that's somehow a foundational element. Now, I suppose I'm challenging myself now to... like I still think it's super relevant, but I also am aware that another thing that I think is really, really relevant and needed and on a personal level, is the skillset that I don't have because of the conditions into which I was born, incubated as a person and as an artist. Specifically, I'm thinking about the early 2000s now in terms of being incubated as an artist, which is, that was very individualist, like, you work on your own, there's not enough budget for a team, a group of people, individual artists making their careers, kind of thing.

I think what we all need to survive, was always needed, but especially it's going to be needed more, is to not only meet one another in our difference and in our strangeness, but to also have collectivity, have collective action, collective meeting. I've been so doing this one-to-one stuff, and then it's one-to-one encounters that are witnessed, so I am thinking about that wider impact, I have been…I suppose I'm just in a place of acknowledging and starting to challenge myself around that collectivity.

That's very political and not an artistic… in a way. I never meant to work on my own. I never wanted to. We were talking at lunch about working with different people. It just felt the only way you could do anything, and the way that you were encouraged by the systems around you, is actually as an individual.

I'm just trying to go back to your interest around meeting one another. Is it needed? Yes. It does feel like... I'm doing *Public Selfcare System*. I did *Public Selfcare System* a bit and then I stopped, I suppose, like particularly trying to find opportunity to keep doing it. Partly that was because it's an extremely high toll it takes on you as a performer. It's a fifteen-minute performance for the people who are coming to lie down with you, but

it's an all-day for you. It's a lot of antennae to have up, you're reading situations, you're reading the person, you're really reading, you're reading everything. It's just a lot.

It was getting, I suppose, I reacted to it being... That was the first work where I publicly identified myself as disabled. It was my first experience. Luckily for me, because I'm relatively invisibly disabled, it was my first experience of having that label applied to me and applying it, sticking it to myself. Then the way that my... that work was then received solely through the lens of this individual personal experience, almost titillating thing, as well as the focus on the individualism around selfcare industry and wellness industry. The overwhelming power of that made me be like, 'Ugh.' I sort of didn't want to do that again.

But now I guess then…and actually I tried at various points to get funding to make a collective version of that with other disabled artists who were going to each make their own one-to-one. Out of their lived experience and the idea of a street intervention, then we would come together to make a collective finale and I didn't get anywhere. I let it go. Then I suppose a few people were… with the mass disablement that resulted from COVID, myself and other people were saying to me this is really relevant. There's a whole huge number of people who are newly dealing with energy management issues and unable to walk more than ten steps. There's like nothing around to support them. Again, resisting filling a gap of medical provision, but also at the same time starting to think about working internationally and seeing, I suppose, an opportunity there to extend the conversation I suppose that is part of the process of that piece.

Now in December I'm going to devise a process of remaking with some artists, Lisbon-based artists, where we will come together, share our practices around this theme and around the structure and performance that has already existed and the proposition of remaking it together in a way that brings out the solidarity politics that are there, and a way that brings out sort of collectivity within whatever we choose to do in public space. We'll see what we do. We're not doing a performance, we're doing the devising process of remaking. If I imagine that process, it's one that results in a collective decision of like, okay, this is what the performance would be if we did it tomorrow.

I'm trying to crack open. I want that process to be…when I'm thinking about who I want to be as an artist who's moving around potentially internationally with my work, especially this public space work and I suppose anything that's conversational like that maybe and shaped by the people participating, then I want it to be cracked open. It should be cracked open. I should be engaging in a process where I can be told like, 'Here's what's missing from that work.' Or 'Here's a perspective or this is not being brought out at the moment.' 'This is what's really important in this location in terms of rest and public space.'

I'm thinking about the conversation about, *Can I Help You?* where I was saying that the conversation, the thing about it, the feeling of it should be that we've shaped it together according to who we are. In a way, I'm trying to think, can I make a remaking process with artists in a new location where those *artists* can feel like that?

**RD:** It's that how you get from acknowledging the uniqueness of an individual's perspective and lived experience, and no life story will be exactly the same. How you do *that*, but also look for the commonalities that give you that sort of potential for collective action. Is that right?

**RA:** Yes. I think actually I don't think we need to look for commonalities. We just need to agree on a collective action. Because, yes, and I don't know how easy that is without... it's like this thing that people say about finding common ground, and often that becomes... 'My experience of this is like your experience of that,' and that actually has the effect, I think, often of denying difference and difference of experience. If we don't have to do that, can we still agree on what we want to do as a collective action?

**RD:** Yes. Okay, picking up on that, when you have conversations, whether they are linguistic or non-linguistic conversations in your work, are you thinking at all, or what's your reflection on ideas of consensus versus dissensus, conflict and agreement? It sounds like from the way you've talked about your projects that you are looking for a meeting point that's comfortable and generous, and that you don't often experience antagonism. Is that right?

**RA:** Yes, that has been the case. I think part of what I'm challenging myself with now is that I have deliberately... I've set things up for that to be the case. I've experienced lots

of conflict in my working life with others, as we were discussing a little bit and behind the scenes. I think the works themselves have... yes, the works themselves have definitely… what I've wanted for strangers in the street, and what I want now for the young people I'm working with who are often excluded from public space, is like, people have enough barriers and I want the experience to be smooth and feel essentially *nice*.

Also, they might have gone somewhere they didn't feel they would, like somewhere a bit new and vulnerable but essentially cared for. Now increasingly I'm more seeking to challenge. I don't think the experience needs to be nice for me, because I need to be more challenged. I'm seeing these skill sets that I don't have and things like that and I want to develop them, but I know that that means failing.

**RD:** The desire for it to be nice or for a positive connection to be made through your work and through the conversations that you have in some of the pieces…Do you see that as on some level, a political thing or a practice that is offering something that's different to the discourse and the social relations that we're often presented with through, I don't know, social media or?

**RA:** Oh yes, the social media thing. I think I just don't really see what I do in relation to social media. I do also do works, artworks, that are interventions in social media, like the Slow GIF movement, which is in a way that is about our responsibility over public space as it exists online. What are we choosing to put there? Is it harmful, or how does it impact on our bodies and our psyches, the way that we have constructed public space online? But in terms of discourse and that kind of thing, I think I don't see it in relation to that. You might, and you can say something interesting about it.

**RD:** Maybe social media, the danger is it can feel like a bit of a red herring...

**RA:** I think it's a red herring to equate it with in-person conversation, or even compare it. I don't know, but...

**RD:** Whether it's represented on social media or just more generally in our culture which includes social media, it feels like we're in a particular place, don't you think in terms of how people seem to be relating to each other in terms of public discourse? Whether it is through broadcast media or...

**RA:** I think the thing about the nice thing, and I want to undo the nice thing. The thing I said about nice or somehow it's acceptance because there is... I'm playing often…and I think back to *Can I Help You?* in particular, which is this very direct encounter with strangers in public space. I am playing the like 'I am a bit wacky, I'm a bit out of the ordinary' thing. So we're not meeting, you're going to be meeting me as a little bit weird. Weird, non-normative, I think there is something where I'm putting these non-normative behaviours... To the other kinds of performance artists who I love to go and see, who are doing stuff in closed environments that is really out there, I'm like, maybe to some of them I'm super boring because all I'm doing is lying on the ground. It's very like, 'whoa, I'm going to care for you'. But there is something that I am doing deliberately about non-normative behaviour in public space, and that initial like, 'Oh,' and it being maybe… but then it's okay. It's still non-normative. It's still a bit transgressive, we're going to do it together, we're going to both lie down in this bit. Also, it's going to be okay. I think that, in terms of when you're saying about, I suppose because I'm hearing when you invoke social media and stuff, I'm hearing about polarisation.

On a personal level when I have conversations with people that are intolerant, where they're like, the person is being intolerant or prejudiced or whatever, my tact is usually to try and bring up difference and difference between people not necessarily being like a threat. That makes me want to just read. There's a quote that I... there's a poem that I re-read recently that's been really on my mind. It's there all the time, and I just wanted to read it to you. It's from this book, *People Like Us*, which is a Holly Revell photography project with I think trans masc people, or certainly trans people. 'A photography project exploring assigned female at birth, trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming identities and experience.' There's a poem by Chiron Stamp, who I knew first as a performance maker some years ago. There's like a whole bit that leads up to this, but the bit that I've really held on to […]. 'Suppose my transness has alleviated my need to understand you and instead gifted me the capacity to trust that you know your being best. And I am just fortunate to witness you.' That's really been on my mind about being liberated from having to understand another person. Like in

difference, we don't have to come to understand each other, we can just be different. What if we're released from that 'I don't understand', yes.

**RD:** In that case then it's when you're having a conversation…and I get what you've been suggesting all the way through this conversation that that doesn't have to be language-based, it can be sound-based or whatever, it can be other physical kinds of interaction. Are you looking for... it's interesting what you've said about listening, about that being an important part of that process, but also you talk about giving and receiving, don't you?

**RA:** Yes.

**RD:** In that process of listening, you don't equate that with understanding necessarily. It's paying attention to...I don't want to put the words in your mouth...

**RA:** That's fine. Put the words in my mouth. It's fine.

**RD:** Just wondering about all of those terms that you are using and how they relate to each other, really.

**RA:** I'm also thinking now about arts management, arts institutional relationships to what has variously been described as 'hard to reach communities' or 'diverse, whatever', all that bollocks, which is also important, it's not just bollocks. How are we going to get X type of people to come to our thing? How are we going to get them – us and them again – to see that what we have is for them or whatever? There's this like, 'Oh, what's the problem that we have to solve? Oh, it's one of communication. Oh, it's one of them understanding, or maybe we have to understand...' There's a kind of 'Oh, fuck off. Just go off.' That's what took me out, to be like, 'Oh, I don't know. I'm just going to go somewhere and see some people. We'll see how it feels. If they tell me to shut up and go away.' […]

**RD:** It's interesting another term that you… you mentioned it at the beginning actually, but it struck me when I was preparing to come and chat to you and looking at your website and stuff, that you see all of your work, or at least a lot of it, under this heading of *Instructions for Empathetic Living*. It's the idea of... Empathy is obviously key to all of this. Maybe not understanding it. I suppose it's just about different levels of

understanding, isn't it? It's like, you don't need to necessarily totally get every aspect of what somebody's talking about, but you are understanding at some emotional level, aren't you?

**RA:** There's an amazing person called Jill Goodwin who I met through my work in this sensory theatre world. Jill, I just regularly go to as a mentor touchstone, and a lot of people do. She has this thing that she wrote a whole PhD about, in *that* context, in particular in a specialist school context with young people who face the most barriers to access, about the need to find ways to just 'be with' a young person who maybe in our system has no outward indicators of them being present or understanding or whatever in the way that we understand them. How to find ways to 'be with', and then that's so important.

It's like I've taken that and I'm holding that in that sensory work, but I think I'm also taking it everywhere else. I also think in some ways she's articulated something that I was already trying to do, which is this…how all the means at our disposal to find ways to really 'be with' one another as we are, and seeking that feeling, wow, we really were *with* one another in that.

**RD:** You talk in that article, which we referenced a few times, you talk about looking for a different mode of being together, I think, is that…?

**RA:** Yes. Helping with, helping for… there's all this.

**RD:** I think in relation to that thing about the hardening and looking beyond the shell if you like that we walk around with and finding a different way of... 'Being with' is another way of being together.

**RA:** That *Instructions for Empathetic Living* it's funny. I gave myself that title before I'd done anything at all. It was thinking about this inspiration of Tehching Hsieh, this performance artist, and also I think being quite unsure whether I was going to get to make a living doing my art or even get any kind of opportunity, whether or not I was making a living, to share it or something. Basically, that was me giving myself permission that whatever I was doing would be part of this lifelong series. If I was working for another artist that's part of that, everything's part of this lifelong series, don't need to worry about it, it's all happening.

No one else needs to know either. It also gave me some way to check in. It made me check in with things like, 'Do I want to do this or not?' Because 'Does it fit with my ambition of my lifelong series title?' It made me push for change when systems and structures are forcing a way of operating on me that doesn't fit with that lifelong series title. It was interesting as first 'empathy', then 'care' became a word that was adopted in the discourse or whatever. It was interesting to me to observe my difficulty with that because inevitably when something gets put into that discourse, it never quite fits it, or it gets appropriated by nefarious forces. It's been interesting to be through that. I haven't let go of it because I do think it's something useful for me and I am living by it, but also, the instructions, it's a *question* really. It's a *quest* that… not that my performances are instructions for how to live empathetically, but that my ambition is that when I die or just before I die and I look back on everything, I'll be like, 'I think I lived my artistic life looking for the instructions on empathetic living.'

**RD:** At the root of that is about this 'being with' is it? It's about being able to be with different people, different perspectives, and to meet that somehow through some means. Is that right?

**RA:** I think so. It's also, if you're an artist, you're trying to put something in the world. There's some sort of sense that you're making change or bringing some...

**RD:** Or create spaces or frames in which that can... those are the instructions if you like. Is that right?

**RA:** I don't know, because this is the point, *Instructions for Empathetic Living*, it'll change in a year. It'll be something else that it means to me right now. I think that's fair. Feels at the moment…but this is the question I have on my mind: being with, holding difference... My contribution so far has been maybe to make spaces where... but it's also holding difference in yourself. It's allowing to be yourself. Allowing spaces where you can be okay with being yourself is how you can meet anyone else. That's why the care practices are so at the heart of it – whatever you write is a poem because we say it is, allowing people to be okay with themselves on the understanding that that's going to be the basis on which you can meet others.

I think my evolving like, ‘Oh, but you haven’t done this yet thing’ about the *Instructions for Empathetic Living*, I suppose is collective action and solidarity.

**Appendix 6. Jo Fong and Sonia Hughes: Interview by Richard Dufty on Zoom, 17 October 2023.**

**RD:** Thinking about *Neither Here Nor There* – which I haven't seen but I've read about a lot…I've spoken to people that have experienced it, but also I did see *Come Rain or Shine* in Brighton. Thinking about those two projects, but there might be other projects that you think it's relevant to talk about, I just wondered if you could begin by talking about the process of conceiving those projects and then developing them from the point of view of your use of conversation between audience members/participants, what your thinking was there in that kind of process, whether it came out of other work or how you got to that point of that being a thing in those projects?

**JF:** I wanted to start with that workshop with the…Well, I had some Creative Wales cash. I think this isn't that long ago really is it, but I realised I hadn't had a chance to *think* my whole life. I didn't know what I thought or what... and people were asking me questions as well. I was like, 'I need to know what I think,' which is probably to do with a background in dance, probably to do with a background in being very quiet. I got some cash to do a year-long *Grow Jo* project.

I want to go even further back now, even further back to the few moments when people have actually seen and heard me. Sonia was one of those people. We worked together in Quarantine doing a show, creating a show together. There's very few moments where people actually really sit and listen or hear, or there's not those moments where it's like, 'I need to get something out of you.' It's quite reflective, I suppose.

I never go to workshops, but I went to Frank Bock and Katye Coe's workshop. I think it was specifically about dance people and learning to speak and articulate. We did this exercise in the workshop, which was... The first question was so good. It was, 'As an artist, what do you need?' Sometimes I keep coming back to that as well because it's a good one. One person is talking, and one person is listening for six minutes.

They talk very much about it being a felt sense – the body will have responses, and that you should listen to that and speak from that in a way, which really rang true with me. I guess that exercise was an epiphany moment for me, which is very much about... I can

learn all the things that I need to learn. I'm interested in social, society, messy relationshipy, hierarchy, the whole biz. It was a moment where I thought, 'Oh I can really find out what's going on.' Then I have to flip over to Sonia because that's your practice, isn't it? Conversations has been part of what you've done the whole time.

**SH:** As a writer or a maker, I suppose, mainly I would ask people a question and then I would listen to them and write things down and keep going, 'Oh right. Say more.' That was my practice, basically. A lot of what I start off doing is by listening to people and then hearing what they don't say, and I suppose, listening to how they say things first in order to just... so that when I write it, it sounds like them. Also, I don't know… it's just a bank of stuff, of knowing how people speak and what they say and what they don't say. Also, realising people love to be listened to. It's very rare. If you go, 'Okay talk about you.' I feed in some stuff about me in order for it to be... just because it's an exchange. But mainly, I say in order for them to say more. I hope it's not a trick. It's the thing.

**RD:** Previously, Sonia, that was part of the writing process, was it, that you would have those conversations, those sort of interviews or whatever with people in order to feed into...to write? Writing pieces for performance or for...?

**SH:** Yes, for performance. I worked with Quarantine as a freelancer, but I worked with Quarantine for a long time, so a lot of the text was not necessarily... I wouldn't say necessarily written, but was shaped by me. As in, I would listen to what someone said, and then I would say, 'well, say it like you said it, but make sure you say this bit and this bit and make sure you end there'. Or it would be, 'Here's some text of what you've said to me,' or, 'The text is now a list,' or something like that. I'd done a lot of that and just in general, I think, I functioned a lot in my friendships as a person that would listen. I can hold forth if you like, but I often find myself as the person, people would tell me things, they would just tell me stuff...

**RD:** Was *Neither Here nor There* the first project that you worked on as Jo and Sonia as a... I know you were working on Quarantine projects but was...

**JF:** There was a bit more research.

**SH:** Jo's project, which was *Ways of Being Together*. Part of going to the workshop and *Growing Jo*, I came in as an artist mate.

**JF:** 'Creative friend.'

**SH:** What was I called?

**JF:** Creative friend.

**SH:** Creative friend, there you go.

**JF:** Rather than critical one.

**SH:** You can talk about yourself.

**JF:** Should I talk about me?

**SH:** Yes, talk about yourself.

**JF:** I moved to Cardiff in 2006, and I had a proper job with a rehearsal directing thing. Then when I finished that, I started concentrating on my stuff again. Then five years after living here, I realised I don't have any friends. If you want to make it work here in Cardiff, which doesn't have the kind of resources of other places or there's not big art dance places that you can go to and be supported… I have been supported since, but...I just wanted to explore what it is to form community. I think the word was about 'belonging.'. That was a thing that I was like, 'Oh gosh. Oh, dear' – a discovery of unbelonging or a discovery of a sensation of 'I haven't fully become who I think I'm capable of becoming' so the *Grow Jo* stuff, and then to do that with people. I had in my head that I wanted to do a show with many people that that would... and it was called *Ways of Being Together*. Literally, that's what we did. We'd walk together. I held my first-ever parties, and we'd do things like swimming. We'd walk the streets in various modes and dance and move and listen to one another. I remember very... I suppose there was an emergence at that time about LGBTQ coming outness at that time. It was a really interesting place because there was fifty people learning about each other and learning through touch. Trust is huge, isn't it, and bodies and dance and all of those things.

In a way, I'm trying to design a place where I feel I can flourish, really, and that means that everyone understands me on some level, and I understand probably more than the transaction, which is, 'You will be getting paid this and the time is this,' but actually, I know that your mom is not very well or that you've got three children or you have domestic violence happening at this time.

Those things make you aware of how to be in a room with people and knowing... we had this discussion yesterday about privacy, didn't we? I've had loads of therapy, but this idea that we need these private therapists because we don't talk to each other. What is it that keeps us in this private mode? Probably capitalism, probably structures, hierarchies, who's in charge? What's expected?

I was offering a space where people can be themselves. Looking back on it now, it's really radical. All the spaces where you go into where you're not you, or you've had to armour up to get in the room, or you get in the room and go, 'Oh, that's uncomfortable.' I think the first question that we explored was, 'what is community?' I liked that question because it was all the different angles of what that is and all the different overlaps of different types of community. We always spent time listening to one another, moving. The resonance of that exploration, which was a year...We did things like kitchen tables. Not everyone was in the show. Those kitchen tables were chances for me to ask questions that you don't get the chance to ask, really. I don't know. At that time, it was like, 'Well, I don't really believe this word "inclusion". I don't really believe the way that it's being used or the way the word "community"... I want to have a tangible sense of what that is.' I remember turning that over, really. The show happened and it ended in a meal with everyone in it and the audience.

There's this thing where it's forming this sort of community this way, but this extending that. I want to say that the legacy of that one year still exists now in terms of people's connections and who they work with and who supports who. It goes up and down, but it feels very real. So *Neither Here Nor There*...I think very simply, I said to a producer at Chapter, 'I really enjoyed having Sonia in the room.' You were there, you were observing. What were you doing? You were pointing. You were...

**SH:** We were doing the Kitchen Tables together.

**JF:** Yes, holding space. She gave us money to research a new work, which was *Neither Here Nor There*, which was odd and great at the same time because our position, normally is like someone else is in charge and we're like, 'Where do you want to go?' We were suddenly in this place of like, 'Where are we at now? What's in the air for us as people?' It's so nice to do work that's really connected to what are your needs, or what are people's needs, I suppose. It felt like those two pieces of work landed with people well because it was needed.

**RD:** Just so I'm clear in my head in terms of the order of things and the chronology. *Ways of Being* was... when did you do that?

**JF:** Started in the end of 2016 and then the show was at the end of 2017. Then I did do it a few years later in London with a predominantly East and Southeast Asian group of people. That was another conversation, sort of, and we did that one at the beginning of 2020, so that was the 2019 researching right through, growing community… All these people that are what I found to be very disconnected, very…first time speaking about what it is to be Chinese. All of those things like, 'Shall we lift the lid?' It was really at the front of everybody. It was great to have, well, yourself and various people in the room to say, 'Yes, this is awkward and difficult, but we want it.' That feels like another community that I'm really connected to in London as well, and the edges are very soft. They're not a club like this. They're just still trying to make... It's a bit like the ethos and the 'how' has been planted, so there's this sense of maybe welcome and openness that might not happen within established cliques or clubs or stuff.

**RD:** With that project so you worked with that group of 50 people over about a year, is that right?

**SH:** Yes.

**JF:** Yes. It takes two years to gather the people. At the beginning of this year, I did another large-scale thing called *How Should We Begin Again?* It was like I've got a really great grounding to a pool, but then it wasn't always just them, it was about other people as well being included in that. I think I'm just following things that I needed to do as a person in terms of support or an artist. Then also, I needed to look at my identity in a safe situation as well. I'm thinking back as well because when we were

doing that thing of sitting in the room together going, 'Okay, where's the director?' there was this urge for us to crack on with our own voices, really.

**SH:** Yes, definitely. We did *Neither Here Nor There* in 2018 for Experimentica. The conversations probably would've come into it, but because Jo had already explored this thing of six minutes talking that she got from Katie Coe and Frank Boch, and because the theme of Experimentica was time, and because we both watched independently a programme about serial music, and we were both struck by... What was it called C Sharp or something? It's just this score. There's a score, but within it you can do anything because it's just a time signature, and then you just do anything. So, what questions were in the air at the same time? We were very interested in our dads. My dad had dementia by then, and your dad was very isolated. So that came into it. 'What should we do about the world?' 'What matters?' 'Are we living in the right place?' We're not sure. All those were just questions to ourselves. Then I suppose there was a lot of testing of the questions and crafting of the questions so that they had an arc in a traditional sense but also that they were satisfying. They put you in a direction, but then let you go. It's a very particular question. It's not like, 'Do you like where you live?' That's not the question. The question is, 'How does where you live inform how you live?' to get into that or something. That took quite a lot of...steps.

**JF:** That was through conversations with each other and then, very nicely, just asking guests to come in for afternoons. An afternoon where, wherever we are in the make, they step into it and we go, 'Oh, we're here, and we're thinking about this.' Then they've got something to say... What was really great was every time we invited someone to come in, they'd come in the room and have a massive rant straight away about... I don't know, anything. That was really lovely because that fell into the work as well, like this arc of: getting to know you, 'what the fuck?', then 'what do you really care about?' That emerged as an arc.

It was like our guests were quite different, I think. It was great because they would prod something or bring something into the room that should happen in this. I remember Helouise, whose mum was ill with cancer, and we had a... What was her word? Oh, that makes me think. It was what? 'Battles.' Front of her head was cancer. What it meant was when we go into the show, we know what we're asking of people in

a way. We're informed about what range of meaning might happen when you ask a question. It felt like we'd really tested them out in one-to-ones.

Then we had a couple of group tests, which is mainly like, 'Oh, shit, I don't want it to go like that again. How do we stop it from doing that?' Learning about people's responses. Then what was nice in the performing of it is we were still learning about how this goes and what to avoid. Really bizarre things as well. This is very generalised, but if two men couple up into the show at the beginning, they sit about four meters apart…they don't open. There was a point in the thing where you see two men going towards two chairs. We'd leg it across and just sit down. To just know that that's not a great start for them in the show.

**RD:** They wanted to always be separate. Is that what you're saying, that they wanted to be...?

**JF:** There was a level of intimacy...there were barriers there for them to speak their truth in a way. There were barriers.

**RD:** I haven't seen *Neither Here nor There*, but I've seen the films that you sent me *To Tell the Truth.* With *Neither Here nor There*, is it right that you go on a walk, first of all, a bit like we did with *Come Rain or Shine*? Then you end up in a place, wherever the place is, and that's when something like the conversation that I saw in those films happens. Is that right?

**JF:** It's a bit different, I think.

**SH:** Nearly. We go for a walk, and that also came out of the process of... There's something about not settling down and waiting for the thing to happen. We don't really know exactly what it does, but it's really important that it happened. We could probably unpick it, but I don't know.

**JF:** There are a few things like when someone knows each other, there's a whole bunch of things that they have to say first. The walk's about what ten to fifteen minutes? It's like all the stuff that has to come out.

**SH:** 'Oh, how's your Jack?', 'Oh he's alright now' ... 'It's clearing up now.'

**JF:** There's that, and then I think there's other things like seeing where we are. There's an initial pairing up with someone you don't know that happens as well. It has a sense of protest there as well because we carry [placards]... It's actually in the picture.

**RD:** I could see it.

**JF:** And it's... I don't know what that is. It's very...

**SH:** It's funny.

**JF:** It's funny.

**SH:** People stop us sometimes, don't they? What's that then?

**JF:** I think there's something about a thing where you just say, 'All right, we're going on a walk,' and people have to go, 'Okay, we'll go with what you say we're going to do,' without it being too heavy or too...

**RD:** At that point, you haven't given them many things to think about. I think it's just 'let's just walk.' You can talk to whoever you want to talk to. Is that right at that point?

**JF:** Yes.

**SH:** Then they come in the room, and then there's another six minutes where they can put their coats on a coat stand and then grab a cup of tea or some fruit. No biscuits, no cake.

**JF:** No cushions.

**SH:** Water or tea or coffee or fruit. Nice fruit. You're not having cake. It's not that kind of gig. No cake.

**JF:** Not as cozy. We want you to sit up properly.

**SH:** Then we flip a coin beforehand and see who's going to do the first bit and who's going to do the second bit. We just improvise. Well, we know where we've got to get to, but we just go with whatever's going on.

**JF:** I think there's two solos in it. The first one is like through what we're saying, we're giving you permission to go anywhere. Also, here's the gig as well folded into that

because we're doing it, we're demonstrating or going, 'This is how long six minutes is,' without saying it. It's a big ask for an audience to go, 'Oh right. Oh, me.'

What's amazing is people do get into it, don't they? They do. Then some musical interludes. Then the second solo, which is more...

**SH:** That's where the rant came in. So the people that were ranting when they came into our room because it was... and we know we have to get to the question that says 'Is it getting better?' We know we've got to talk about small things and big things that are current for us, doesn't necessarily mean current in... They're current for us, whatever. It's currently bothering us or not. Then end with that question.

**JF:** It's a drum thing – 'Is it getting better?'

Then everyone goes… And then the next six minutes, it's like there's this chorus of people going, 'Is it getting better? Is it getting better?' in the room. They're just pondering on that.

**SH:** I sat with a man who said, 'Well, that's a stupid question.' I just sat until he..., I thought 'I'm not helping you out here, mate. You're on your own on that one. Go on.'

**RD:** That's the question that they're going away with, is it? 'Is it getting better?'

**SH:** That's not the last question. No, that's the...

**RD:** It's the question…they're going into couples, are they?

**SH:** There's the walk, the tea and fruit, one of us introducing. And then the first question is, 'How does where you live inform how you live?'

**JF:** Second one.

**SH:** The second question is, 'Where is your dad from?' We call it the easy question, but it's actually quite tricky for people, so be careful because we know that it can be a huge question for someone. Some people might not know and blah, blah, blah. Then we have a thing that says... what's the next one? It's a way of them both speaking. They both speak. Then what's…?

**JF:** There's the one person and the next person, and there's always a few minutes where they naturally continue. Oh yes, that's it, 'talk normally.'

**SH:** No, 'Is there anything you want to ask?'

**JF:** Oh yes, 'Is there anything you want to ask?' People either do that or they just continue with where they are. Then it's this little bit of music and a little bit of... Then the rants. Then, 'Is it getting better?'

**SH:** Then they're back. We've swapped them around by that time.

**JF:** Oh yes, there's a...

**SH:** There's a bit of choreography swapping them around. So during the music, we go, 'Okay, move.'

**JF:** It works.

**SH: '**One of you stay, one of you go; one of you stay, one of you go; one of you stay, one of you go.'

**JF:** I'm just going to sit here…Then we go into the battles question, which I always feel a bit uncomfortable about. 'What battles are you...'

**SH:** 'What battles do you need to give up, what battles do you need to pursue?' Something like that.

**JF:** This is a kind of thing where we're trying to stay away from people's medical stuff and get somewhere else. Then we listen to a piece of music by Nina Simone, which is extremely moving after you've heard these four questions, and it's about being free.

**SH:** During that, we have a card that says 'Listen.' So, people are still chatting, and then we close it down a bit so that everyone is... because it's long, it's a six-minute song… so you close it down so that everyone's listening. By the end of the song, we're all in a moment of listening rather than chowing on our chit-chat.

**JF:** Then there's this of kind of like, 'Right, we've got the final chapter…', which... I don't remember the question after that. Is it, 'No...'

**SH:** '*Look here*, what is the truth of your life? It sounds like a really hard question. People go, 'Uggh!' but actually [answer it] really quite simply.

**JF:** I like that very, much isn't it, because it's deeply, deeply deep but also funny as hell! Then sauntering into…

**SH:** In these times.

**JF:** …in these times what...

**SH:** What do you hold dear?

**JF: '**What do you hold dear?' which is... I like the discovery of all those questions. That is just through chatting, isn't it? Then I'll say, 'Is it getting better?' There are certain ones that'll just stick. Then there's no ending to the show as well. Sometimes you end up with people going, 'Thank you very much' and off. Then people that just keep going with the conversation. And what's interesting is the moments where…I find it fascinating to do…but then there are many people who say, 'I haven't told my wife this.' Or, 'I have no one in my family to talk with about this.' There's some kind of connection made that is still very clear to me even though we've done the show a lot, there's still certain people that…I know where they live. There's this, not active, but silent empathetic thing going on… to them in Cumbria or whatever with their disabled son. It's that active connection.

**RD:** With each question you ask, there's this six-minute rule. Only one person answers each question, is that right, and they speak...

**SH:** Out of a pair... The next person doesn't answer the question, they answer another question, a different question. The questions are some kind of a follow-on question, even though the other person is answering it if you know what I mean. It follows on from what the other person possibly could have talked about… that they will... So it is a conversation but it's not.

We try for them not to answer somebody's... not to work out anything for anybody, to not advise anybody, 'Oh well, I think what you should do in that situation…' 'When I was listening to you, I was thinking she should get some better trainers,' or… I don't know. That's not the wish. The wish is to listen without having to think of what I'm

going to respond or I'm going to talk without anybody correcting me or saying, 'Well, in my experience, what you...' It's just that they have this space to think aloud and be heard.

We do talk in the beginning, in the opening bit, which is modelling it – a lot of it is about listening. Quite a lot of it is about that you're just there to catch it or to receive it. You don't have to do anything about it. You don't have to nod. You don't have to perform listening. You can nod if you like and smile but don't say anything. We don't ever say that you're not going to answer this question, you're not going to respond to it, but there's something about the way we say it that you're not listening for things that you have to remember in order to be able to say, 'Oh yes, you know when you said this.' You don't. That's not your job. Your job is just to go 'Oh...'

**JF:** I'm just remembering. There's so many profound things that happen, like that man who was in Summerhall, and he had a learning difficulty.

**SH:** I think he had a massive stroke. He was into Edinburgh, and he was going to everything and all the weird stuff.

**JF:** What was the question? Was it, 'In these times, what do hold dear?' Then he just listed names.

**SH:** He went, 'Oh, Julie,' blah, blah, 'Oh, Fred Bimble.' 'Oh Tracy thingy.' Yes. That's what he said.

**JF:** Yes.

**RD:** Did you find that sometimes people wouldn't speak? Would just be silent with each other. Did that happen or not so much?

**SH:** I think people will resist… One of my friends came along, who's notoriously… really… I love her, but she's incredibly impatient and always wants to... She will say so herself, she's a 'behalfist'. She'll do things on behalf of people, so she'll think, 'Oh, that person won't be able to speak for six minutes, so I'll speak for half of that six minutes.' 'No, Janet. Shut up!' She broke the rules.

**JF:** We are rule enforcers in this because if you don't do it right, it doesn't work. My dad also came. My dad's someone who has no one to talk to and is not very practiced in saying things. He's in his third language. English is his third language. He's lived here for 50 years, but he was born in Hong Kong. This kind of person who's on the side of everything, and I was like, 'Dad, I don't know if...' He wanted to come because he is very keen to see what his daughter is doing, particularly with visual arts like dance and stuff, he really gets it because it's not language based. I said, 'Oh, I don't know if this is for you.' Then he came in anyway with my Mum. My Mum is fine. She used to do all the talking for him, and so she's getting right into it, but my dad is with this lady who's being…paired with this lady…and this lady's being very generous. She goes first with the, 'Where does where you live inform how you live?' She goes first, and Dad listens all the way through without going, 'Oh, you need to do this.' Then it was his turn. I just remember it so vividly because he was like…the question is, 'Where is your dad from?' He is turning it over. Then he has to go over to the coat stand to get his glasses. He puts his glasses on. He's like, 'Awkward. Awkward.' Finally, he does tell this woman where his dad's from. I've not had that conversation with him. I just remember, because at that moment, normally we're in it, but for some reason, both of us were out of it. I was just talking…watching him in every action…saying to Sonia what he's doing. Then he got to the end. And do you know what? I can talk to my dad now.

That's really big, isn't it, that – massive? Maybe it's in the blurb as well. We don't say, 'Oh, come to view our show!' We are quite cryptic about how we speak about it in the publicity. Normally, the people who do come is via word of mouth really as well, a lot of that.

**RD:** Just going back to something you touched on at the beginning about these projects, and that particular project, fulfilling a need in you but also a need in, whatever you want to call it, society or people generally. Can you just talk a bit more about that and what you think... you have already…the sense that people just don't get to have those sorts of interactions generally in everyday life… certainly, not everybody does. A bit more about that.

**JF:** The big need is I want to change it all so that I'm all right in it, in the world so that I'm not going into as many uncomfortable situations, whether they be social or

workplaces or places where... This is the slow arc of trying to shift culture in a way. I've done quite a few walks lately and another show which is about being our fullest selves, that practice of doing that. People are picking up on that, and I'm sure none of our ideas are original, but they're filtering into various practices, I think as well. I'm like, 'Great.'

What's the need? The need is to shift...the world wants to go in a particular direction, doesn't it? It's really keen on doing that. Just feeding it these other ways…or just breaths, taking a breath, really. They feel like really small things, but they feel extremely important. Some of it's like, 'Oh, I need my partner to have more friends.' He's got more friends now. Thinking about things like the loneliness of men at the moment like, that stuff. They feel like really small acts, but…I think I have many personal default modes that are to be quiet, small, invisible. So, I have to almost keep practicing them. To stay in the world, I need to be in the world. What's your…?

**SH:** Well, I was thinking actually the thing that I do with my *I Am From Reykjavik* project. Part of that, before I go and build a small house somewhere, but before that and really integral to that is I hopefully go to the place and I meet people who are in some way a bit like me. They can be black. But they can be fat, or they can be...used to be a political activist or likes cooking for friends or... I've got a whole list, which interestingly over the years things drop off and new things appear because obviously one changes.

In that, I meet people and I ask them to take me to a place that is something to do with how we are similar. Sometimes it just ends up as a coffee shop, but then we have this conversation and nothing gets recorded and nothing is noted and I don't keep a record of anything. That conversation of no consequence, it makes me feel like I have the temperature of a place... Also, so that I have fuel to know why would I build in this place, what is present in this location apart from what I can see, what else is going on?

In different countries, I have these five, six, seven people that I know quite well. Probably if I did turn up at the house and say, 'Oh, can you help me?' They'd go, 'Yes, come in, come in, come in. What do you want?' There's something of that, which is a need for me. But also for the build. They don't always all come to the build, but I feel

like there are people, and when they do come it's great, it's really great when they do come, the people that I've met before. Then they come when I'm doing the build. I don't know – it's something that they know and I know.

**JF:** The second date.

**SH:** Yes, but there's something about how it goes and what it means because maybe I know what they're carrying. Might not be massive or terrible. I just know what they're carrying, and they know what I'm carrying. Should someone come and be untoward, then there's two of us going, 'No, no, no.'

**JF:** Small armies.

**SH:** Yes, tiny, tiny, tiny armies. Then I can bring that part of me. Like you were saying, the fullest self, the aim of my show is to bring my whole self to one place and all be there. If I have other people who know 'Ah, I know she likes cooking for friends,' or you know...Then I can be the person who likes cooking for friends. I might forget that. I might just be the person that's like 'just got to get this bloody house built'. But there's this other thing that I am in the world. There's something else that happens that I can't really explain. There's also something else, I think like the walk, we can name some things, but I think there's also something else that happens. I don't know what it is. There's also something else that happens, I don't know what it is, about meeting those people and having those conversations in those places, which is really important. Luckily, most of the festivals will go, 'Yes, that's fine. We'll pay for that as well.' They don't go 'well, what are we going to get?'

**JF:** Do the people who walk with you get paid?

**SH:** The people that come with me, no. They get a coffee and cake.

**JF:** It's a cake moment.

**RD:** Coffee and cake is…

**SH:** They have to be self-selecting because they have to be pretty curious or whatever already but some of them, yes. Then another project that I'm doing, I'm just thinking about the... You asked about what's it doing for society? I think that's quite a lot for

me, but one of the things when we wrote…we had to write some words down to get the first piece of money for Kathy Boyce to get us the money, from whatever they were called – Live Art UK.

So we said things like, 'There's a shrill abroad.' And especially now, but at that time, there was no room for complexity, or ideas or what is happening, so we need to speak long to each other rather than Tweets or something. We need to have a longer conversation about what's going on.

Those longer conversations, however they are, whether they happen over time or they happen because you just get to speak for six minutes, which is longer than you nearly ever get to speak in any situation. Then those things would allow for complexity because we say... You can start off and say something else and then actually disagree with yourself because hey that's what we do…You can change your mind. You can do that.

**JF:** That was a big moment. Liz Aggis telling me 'You could change your mind.'

**SH:** I think a lot of that long talking, complexity, we don't... Just because we think this, doesn't mean it follows that you think that. So with me that 'I am this and I'm this and I'm that and I'm this and I'm that and I'm this and I'm that...'

**JF:** Wherever we get to, we explain. This is a line in the show really is 'we're not going to solve it. It will remain unsolved.' So we're asking people to hang out in this uncertainty, 'whoo-wah.' 'We're not going to sum this up today, everybody.' I don't know. It feels like forward motion, I think.

**RD:** Those ideas of uncertainty and complexity, they're somehow related to the kinds of conversations that you're trying to make happen, is that right? Those conversations, they're offering something that's not there in our general experience of communicating with people. Is that right, because there's a culture, isn't there of *not* that?

**JF:** People operate as really certain, really like 'We know how this will go and nah, nah, nah.' Uncertainty...When I first started putting it in an invitation which was a section of... the whole thing was about uncertainty in a way. There's a quality. I was saying it's a good quality to have, or a good value to have, because we claim to know all the

answers and that when we're thinking more... We've got more language around it now, that all of those different perspectives, all those different people and experiences. No, you can't sum it up. I have a big flinch around particular bosses that like, 'I know how it is, and this is how it should go,' and I just…wanting to mess that up.

**SH:** Also, I suppose get used to it, and invite it, because then you can... Uncertainty can be terrible. If you don't like it, it can be terrible, and for sure, in extremes, it's absolutely horrific. For sure, absolutely horrific uncertainty, but it also allows for other things or better things, or other things at least, to happen.

**JF:** More things.

**SH:** More things to happen and more possibilities. There is something about hanging out in that area. I think it can allow, won't always, it *can* allow for more generosity. We saw that in the pandemic, some of us. It can allow. It can also allow for everyone grabbing toilet rolls. It can go either way. But it can allow for generosity. A lot of things you do and I do is about an invitation to some generosity as well. The generosity of listening. It's a thing, I think. Not just financial stuff.

**JF:** People's time…just their honouring of this whole person in a way. Something bigger than what's normally...you just have to chunnel through sometimes, don't we? But yes, whole people.

**RD:** Do you think that listening thing, is it partly about... I think you said this in other words, but about paying attention to things and people that we generally...maybe there's a feeling that people don't pay attention in a proper way to the individuals that they encounter and that listening in your projects is partly about that, is it?

**JF:** Thinking about the moment where South East Dance wanted to put in the blurb, 'Come to this kitchen table and meet Jo and Sonia in a non-judgmental setting.' I had to write back and say, 'No, no, no, sometimes we are judgmental.' In listening, I might be hearing things I don't necessarily want to hear. Like, 'Really? Oh wow, you think like that. Fucking hell.' But I think it's good for me to know that that's there. In our little circles of friends or family or whatever we have similar or connected views. When you come across these other views in real life, it's like, 'Oh, that's what we're dealing with. Okay, it's good that I know that.' Sorry. It's just reminded me of…

**RD:** That's good because I was just going to ask you about that, actually whether you did come across, whether generally in *Neither Here Nor There* and other projects you talked about, everybody's basically on the same page in terms of values and politics and all that. Or whether you have moments where that's not the case and it becomes more antagonistic or whatever and how that plays out and whether that then means it's quite hostile or whether people tend to work through that and find other things where they can... whether they work on that difference or they park that and talk about other things, I don't know.

**JF:** More recently, I led a workshop in a festival called Performing Gender, and I went there with my friend Dee. We're in the middle of a make at the moment for a new thing. In it, we discuss labels and there are labels we choose and there are identities we choose and there are ones that are placed on us and those that... At the same time as perhaps needing these labels, I'm also like, 'I'm really not into this as well at the same time.' There's all these million different versions of that. And in the room were people with learning differences, people who are non-binary people. There was a really diverse, amazing room. There was one man from Holland. He was actually the funder of the festival. Or funder of festivals, let's say. I don't know if he knew what he was giving his money to. He had lived in this country for 10 years. He said, 'I don't know why we need this. In Holland, we don't have this.' Which I thought, for a start, is a complete load of crap. What it meant was I get to practice gently explaining or challenging him to think differently.

When you've got this whole room of people that are going… in the mess of that and also finding comfort in trans... whatever labels it is that they are identifying with… it was so great, like the people with learning difficulties, like the young black woman who had learning differences, the way she talked about her identity was so amazing, so clear. Not learned but really, truly, from her. Then talking to this man where he's like, 'I don't get it. I don't need it. I don't understand why this.' Just talking a little bit. I got to practice in that moment like, 'Okay, if this was to happen in the show that we're trying to make, what would I do?' It was me hopefully moving the world on slightly and gently.

It is that first seed, isn't it? The first plant where your perspective on how the world is gets changed. I remember very clearly me and Colin sitting watching telly. There was amazing programme about a school teacher who kept calling all the girls 'love' and all the boys, 'lads.' He was learning all of his own behaviour. Afterwards, me and Colin just sat after going, 'Oh God. You call me "small", and I call you "tall."' You could feel your neurons, your brain cells, moving around in those moments. I like to think that I moved his brain cells a bit, but also, I'm not going to work on you.

**SH:** I had that with the man that said 'that's stupid…' But I have the six minutes because I think I'm not meant to be speaking so...

**JF:** It's awkward, isn't it?

**SH:** 'A better question would have been something…' he said. I don't know what he said.

**[…]**

**SH:** Brian Eno calls them 'scenes', aren't they? There's a thing that are called scenes, which is a bit like what Jo was talking about – building a community. Things get grown by scenes. I don't know. The New Romantic scene or the punk scene. It's used a lot in music. Much as people might say 'I sat in my room and I came up with the idea of punk or whatever.' Not possible. It's the whole what's happening, who's around, where's a space.

**JF:** How much money there isn't.

**RD:** Coming back to the conversation earlier, do you think that's where some of your projects come from then, a sense of... rather… I'm just thinking about how your work relates to more traditional performance practice, the 'pros arch' experience. It's us and them, we'll do a thing, and you'll sit quietly in the dark. You'll have your emotions and your thoughts. You'll go away into the night thinking about those things, and that might be amazing.

So many of your projects seem to be not about that. Seem to be about... I don't know whether you want to call it co-creation or co-authorship or just involving audience members as participants. In some way handing over some element of control, opening

things up. Is it partly about that sense of the hive mind or the sense that we are... I know it's a bit of a cliche but better together, there's more to be learned if you just have different perspectives?

**SH:** I think that's our blurb, isn't it? 'Many voices, many people being heard.' Better than that…

**JF:** Personally, I don't have or I haven't had the confidence. There's a lack of confidence. I have made work since halfway through the '90s, and I'd hide it. It was work that wasn't really recognised. It was maybe led by a female. It's got a different approach. It's interested in different things. I say this because my history is very much go on a stage, do what you're told, or some devised things, but also a particular structure of making.

There aren't loads of examples of female dance makers. All of us, we're all failing because there's no big history to call on. We've got Pina Bausch and whatever but... Also, we recognise as well that we're following maybe… Early on, I was even following male gaze models of what is dance, and I found that on myself. There's this lack of confidence. I remember making a triptych of films called *Witness*, where I highlighted three women. They were all in a moment of change and they danced and they spoke. I watched it, and I was like, 'Oh my God, that's amazing.'

Suddenly, I wasn't centring my work. I was suddenly centring these three female voices that need to be heard. I was like, 'All right, how do I do that? All right. I need a website. All right.' Just like okay, that's me launching into a public sphere and going, 'This is really important.' Whereas up until then, I was like, 'I'm really glad only two people have come or whatever.' There was that.

Something like *Ways of Being Together*. My name's near the top of that show or research or whatever. But I had a core group of artists. I had so many people around me, who believed in it, to make sure that I can keep going with that. Again, that's out of a need isn't it, to explore a different way of doing something or a different story and to do that supported. On my website, it says 'director, choreographer, performer, or something.' I design and I write, and I do... Actually, I'm a bouncer as well. I bounce.

The stuff with George is like, 'Oh, right, he's bringing this, and I'm going to bounce that.' That's fun. It's a fun way to make and to...

More and more now, I feel it's more like creating an environment where people feel creative or the truth is able to come in the room. Even with *How Should We Begin Again*, which is a giant installation. At that time, there was such lot of grief in... what was going on in London? In London, there was a sort of thing that was quite present. Then when I redid it in Cardiff, there was grief, loads of it. I was like, 'Oh my word, how do I…?'

I don't want people to leave their grief at the door and then come in and work. In a way, we have to make an environment where the grief can exist within this space as well, that there's room for that in the work process. It wasn't hard to do that, but it is an environment where, like I said, people can be themselves, or they can be truthful. They can flourish because they're not *performing* being creative or performing being present or performing... We perform all the time. I don't know. I've gone off on one there.

**SH:** For me, it is about what do I need to make possible for *me* in the world? Does anybody else require such a thing? Then but not in a sort of 'I'll do a focus group.' Just provide some gentle conversations with people or just listening to people who are... I'm not asking a question, but what I'm hearing is, that's what I'm hearing. This is something that's happening. This is what I'm picking up. Then the forms are different because actually we're only just getting it in the UK…We have had it for a while, but we're behind it in terms of…if we think Europe's ahead, but they might not be ahead at all. Actually, I'm not even looking to Europe. The thing about it is… I'm looking to the Ice Age. The role of the artist is this person that sits around and thinks about... can think they're part philosopher, part shaman, part imagination person. 'Oh, look at that', in the circle around the fire...I'm just saying that yes, we can do this thing where we present things, but actually, as if you've ever watched the RSC, no not the RSC, but the National Theatre on television. Jesus, you don't want to go to the theatre, do you?

They're meant to be really good. I don't know what they're called anyway. I was like, 'God, I'm so embarrassed. This theatre […] Why did we give them any money?' Wise

Children. I'm sure it's great live but not on the telly because we had to watch it all. You just say, 'Why would you go and see that?' It might be brilliant live, but we're alive. I know it's boring, but we're all in this room together. Maybe there is more on the stage than there is in the audience. Maybe I know you all. I probably do in the audience, so what's that then?

**JF:** You need a pretty good reason to go to the theatre now. You've got a telly. I love my telly. There's something about that we're all in a room. We're all in this moment. The reason I go to the theatre is generally to see my mates. Either they're on the stage, or I want to go and see my mate, and we'll have dinner, and we'll go. There's a couple of things. I have been really delighted lately about different kinds of theatre and themes and stories that are happening or in galleries or stuff like that. I go in the gallery, and I used to just go around going, there's nothing for me. There'd be one thing that I connect to.

Now, given probably another resurgence of Black Lives Matter, and I go in there and I'm like, 'Oh wow, look at how, look at why. Look at all that stuff.' It's really inspiring. With theatre… one thing is tonight, I'm going to see *Life of Pi* on the main stage at the WMC. Have I been to theatre much? Not really. But I want to see how they do that. I want to see the spectacle of that. Then with this show with Dee that we're developing early on next year, me and a bunch of people are... It's called *A Brief History of Difference,* and Dee would identify as post-binary. Looking at that moment where the binaries are not the key thing, but something else.

There again, we're not going to get to the end of how that story goes. We're not going to solve that and complete it and go, 'Come and see the show, because we've got the answer.' But what I liked in the tests of the work was the people who were interested in coming to see the show had a connection, probably with their identity, that made them come and see the test that we did. The feeling in the room that I loved was them all being present for this. Dee is not a performer. They've not performed very much ever. I wanted the room to feel like here are our supporters who are curious, and they want to flex this conversation. They're going to be holding this space for this performer. They're going to be witnesses and present, and holding it, which is what happens. I'm not looking to do the big tour where you go to places that you don't know anybody. We are

actually designing the tour if it happens, as 'where are our people?' Let's go to our people and let's do it that way. There was something really beautiful about how the audience role is different to traditional watching of theatre.

**RD:** I suppose it's true of any interactive audience participation-based practice, but particularly where you're getting people to engage in really thoughtful, meaningful conversation like you both do. You can't do that with Netflix. You're right that we live in a culture now where there is so... telly is not like it was when we were younger. There's so much… there's lots of crap, but there's loads of brilliant stuff as well. There's just so much choice, isn't there? Theatre, and other things as well, I suppose, live music and stuff, are competing with all the amazing things you can just do much more cheaply probably at home.

You're doing something that you can't do very easily at home. Getting people to have meaningful conversations is really emphasising the embodied nature of it. You've got to be there in that space at that time with that group of people, and you've got to respond. It's also that responsive thing that telly can't do so well, which is, 'Okay, I'm...,' That's in conversation, isn't it… in your projects that you are having to think through conversation, through 'Oh, they said that thing and that's made me... that's triggered a thought, that I didn't previously have, and it's now made me think differently about that thing I thought I had a fixed position on.'

You talk about that, and you were referring to those notes you both wrote before *Neither Here Nor There*. There's that thing you write about reflecting, coming up with new forms of language and words, new terms, and thinking through what you've already talked about, giving the conversation time and changing your mind. People having the opportunity to contradict themselves, be messy, change their minds. You're coming up with new formulations of thoughts and new uses of language that maybe you wouldn't have got to without the help of that other person being there and responding and without so much the judgment that you get... because there's the social media thing, isn't there as well. How's it different? How's this sort of practice different to the interaction, the conversation, the discourse you get on social media? I suppose that's become so toxic in many ways, hasn't it? About...

**SH:** You don't care how it lands. It's not that even the speaking, you don't care. Not even the speaking. Well, you don't care how the speaking lands... but I don't know, it's terrible. It's very different. That time, it was 2018. It wasn't probably quite as virulent as it is now and how people shut people down.

This is slightly off-subject, but we also did, as part of this, during the pandemic, we did a thing that started with Arts Admin where we did a…It was called a workshop. Again, it had no outcome as if... I suppose in a workshop, you presume the people that are running the workshop know how to do this thing, but the workshop was called *Nettles, How to Disagree*. We were just exploring what it is like to disagree. We used similar techniques. It was all online and breakout rooms and let somebody speak and don't sort it out for them and all that kind of stuff. I can't even remember the whole form of it.

Again, that wasn't really about how to disagree. I suppose it was just the beginnings of understanding how disagreement happens. Where is it in your life? What is the cost to you of disagreeing either silently or vocally? When you say it or you don't say it, what are you carrying? How do you get rid of that, whatever the feeling is either way? We didn't come up with any…It's not like we say, 'Well, first of all, we're going to model the something disagreement. Then we're going to model the something else disagreement, and you are going to respond to that.' It was just understanding or trying... the beginnings of understanding what disagreement is or how it turns up in your life.

**JF:** I think I didn't move on from what the cost of disagreeing is. I got stuck in the vibration and the health cost of disagreeing or not disagreeing. What was spectacular was how much knowledge there was in the room. We were just carried through that last part, weren't we? Half of the workshop was us being carried through by the whole group. There was, I remember Sky and I think maybe Donald. Maybe there was about five people that were just carrying this whole thing forward in a really beautiful way, I thought.

**SH:** Then so they had discoveries also of the disagreements they hadn't realised they had or held and how long they'd held them for and what the cost of it... We didn't know what we were doing, but we did. We knew we didn't know what we were doing.

**JF:** We made a plan, and then the plan included this bit where we haven't thought about what we're going to do here.

**SH:** The thing was, 'This never works, but we're going to try it anyway.'

**JF:** Oh yes. A whole discussion with many people never works. But it *did* work, respectfully and…

**SH:** It never works but we'll try it anyway.

**RD:** Does this come back to the ways of being together? I mean not specifically that project but just the whole concept of how we, as human beings, are… It feels like all your projects, both your solo projects and together, are around that theme – how human beings negotiate, how we can listen to each other, pay attention to each other, how we can navigate disagreements.

This is an unformed thought – whether you thought, and maybe this is just being overly nostalgic or something, but whether you thought that it was increasingly harder for people to be together without bad... that was in the culture, that it's harder for people to be together without conflict or antagonism or something that's not happy.

**SH:** I don't think it's harder to be... I think it's harder to be together and have a meaningful... I don't know if it's harder to be together and not have a meaningful conversation. It's almost that the conflict doesn't happen, or it just happens in a shouty way. In this moment in time, there's not a way of saying something about Israel and Palestine without making a really solid position. You can't be speculative about it or unsure about it. You have to take a position and then hold it. In some ways, I completely understand that because otherwise what are you saying? Just don't speak then. I'm sitting in the nice place in Pontypridd and just had a chocolate brownie and it's all very nice thank you very much. My speculation – who gives a shit what you're speculating about Sonia, that's not you, you're not about to get bombed or whatever, but that's the extreme. That's the extreme of it.

There isn't a space for someone to say something and you to hold it and like it or not like it or not even like it or not like it. […] There isn't much space for that anymore. I don't know if it ever happened. It might be to do with time that we feel like we don't

have enough time, that we've got to get to the next thing. We're very, 'goal, goals, goals. What's your goals?' 'When I go out tonight, what's my goal? What do I want to achieve?' Whatever. There's not much…

On my way back from Wales last time, there was these two blokes. I don't think they knew each other very well, but they knew each other quite a bit. Thank God the train broke down because they were *just* exchanging facts. You said a fact? I said a fact. You say a fact. There was no… I don't know, not even a challenge of the fact, but 'Oh, well. I wonder…' They had the reason – 'Oh yeah because in 1729, there was a thing and then, of course, everybody had to move there, and then, of course, the thatch roofs came in…' 'Mmm, it's like when the timbers and they made boats…' 'Mmm, in Massachusetts…'

**RD:** That's quite funny.

**SH:** It was but […] they just exchanged facts. 'Oh my God, we're only in Shrewsbury!' They are having a nice time. That's their nice time. For me, I'm like, 'Can somebody say something they're not sure of?' Just see how that leads you into an interesting... They were happy exchanging facts. Well done, just I don't want to hear it.

**JF:** I think some of this is about having an experience, isn't it, about shifting how we operate. Happily, some of the spaces that have been co-created are safe, I'm going to say they are safe, even though you can't claim that. You can't claim a space to be safe can you, really. From what people have told me, another thing has happened, a way, or something in the air, that means we can be different, we can operate differently. Even the act of not speaking shifts our default modes, doesn't it? It shifts how… sometimes in conversations we're working out what we're going to say next. And this is operating in a really different way.

I'm thinking back to a show. I knew Sonia but I made it before with two other artists called *An Invitation.* It's called *An Invitation*. There was a score and things happened that we know will happen. But the idea is that the show says 'we are all the performers, and we are all the audience and anything could happen.' That's what it's saying. To do that show is really ultra scary because anything could happen. Sometimes you're having to work out how to make stuff not happen.

I have to tell myself and the cast this sort of idyllic notion that people are great. That's where we start from. The idea that people are great. We enter the room and paddle and bounce our way through the whole show with the idea that this is landing well, with the idea that we're not being judged. It's a little utopia, a made-up fantasy. Actually, what happens is people *do* experience that buoyancy and that different mode of being with people. They *are* part of that somehow.

I'm thinking, should I use this word or not? Is this a therapy for all the people that came to see it? Is this a therapy where we shift all the models and modes of how we've been taught or led to believe was the ways that we're supposed to interact and the things that we're supposed to talk about? Opening it up somehow, or stopping those two men from... Maybe it's a lot of fun for them…

**RD:** Right at the beginning of our conversation, you talked about capitalism. I think you were suggesting that that was a big force, shaping a lot of our everyday social interactions and relating it maybe to that goal-oriented interacting you were talking about Sonia, of 'I'm here with this other person, and it's a transaction. I want to get this thing out of this person.' In making your work, do you think you're challenging that kind of capitalist mindset and culture that shapes how we interact with people?

**JF:** Say it. Say it.

**SH:** Someone came back and did their review. They weren't a reviewer, but they said, 'Oh, it's the opposite of fascism.'

**RD:** This is *Neither Here Nor There*, yes?

**SH:** It's the opposite of fascism.

**RD:** That's a good review. That can go on the poster.

**SH:** Yes. I think all theatre anyway, maybe all art forms, ask the question, 'How shall we live?' That's the question, isn't it? Our proposition is that we speak to each other more, we speak longer, we don't enter into something knowing what we want and hoping that we'll get it, but going, 'I'm not sure. What do you think?' For me, I do think it is very bound by the super paradigm in which we live.

You could go down a whole conspiracy theory, but it is amazing when you walk down the street and people are not even looking. Now we've got six senses as to whether somebody's approaching. They walk in and say, 'They're not going to see me. They're not going to see me.' They've known. I was there, somehow. Peripheral vision, it's got perfect. They're looking at their phones, but they *sensed* me. Maybe we've got new senses. Peripheral vision is getting fantastic nowadays and sensing of other people around, but interacting with other people around... it's not like I don't like playing my stupid games. It's not like I'm a paragon of anti-capitalist virtue.

**JF:** Totally middle class, right?

**SH:** Yes, we have chocolate brownies.

**JF:** We have thrived perhaps through working in the arts. Imagine that.

**SH:** A very unusual thing. I don't know. For me, as I say, it could be different, couldn't it? Could it? I did a very small project this weekend on a street. It was run by a company called Gentle Radical, the whole project. It started with a conversation with the neighbours. 'Well, what is it? What is a neighbour then? Tell me about neighbours.' Then working out the lanes and different places called the alleyways or the ginnels or whatever between roads, used to be a place of chatting and exchange and chit-chat and playing and all that sort of stuff. Now it's just a tip place. I said, 'Let's reclaim the lane for an afternoon.'

I wrote some of the things that people had said down. We made pretty banners. We hung them in the lane, and people came. Some of the neighbours that were involved brought out tea, brought out cakes and made cakes. This is actually the story. I remember I went to church once. This is a great thing. The preacher was breaking down the five fishes and the two loaves or whatever it is.

He said, 'What actually happened was that someone said, "I've got some, anyone...?" "Oh, actually, I have got some as well."' It's actually what happened, and that is what happened on the lane is that people were going, 'Oh, I've got a table, do you want a table?' 'Yes, bring your table out.' 'Oh, I can clean that bit of the lane.' 'Okay, clean that bit of the lane.' Then someone goes, 'Oh, we've made these pakoras. Do you want a pakora?' That's five loaves, two fishes... There were some people that had shit all

resources because it was a multiple occupancy, mainly refugee place, but 'do you want to borrow my kettle?' 'Bring your kettle thank you.'

**RD:** It's interesting that that happened in a public space isn't it? Because going back to the conversation about capitalism, there's so much of... I feel this particularly in London. So much public space has been privatised. It's corporate space now. One thing is you don't have rights to do whatever, to protest or to do whatever in those spaces. But also, it's just laden with certain expectations about how you're behaving. If you're not behaving as a good shopper or a good whatever, then people look at you funny, or private security guards come and ask you questions.

It's interesting that you're reclaiming a small bit of public space to say let's do something that's not about making money and selling stuff. It's about everybody bringing what they've got and making a temporary community or re-establishing an existing community in this space.

**SH:** It's a tiny thing, and it may not last, but they've swapped numbers and set up a WhatsApp group. Who knows? That's another one, it starts as a conversation – 'I don't really know x, but I'm interested in neighbours. Tell me about neighbours' and this thing opens out to...There is a possible other way of being here. I'm just suggesting, and I can't help you as I don't live here, but I'm just suggesting that there's a possible way of being. That's all…

**JF:** Is it a default that most people are frightened of people? Is that a thing, or is that just me? Why don't we feel we can interact? Of course, I did things on my street like lots of people did in lock down. What did I do? Give away strawberry plants and things like that. There were really lovely interactions, and it changed how I felt about where I lived in quite a big way. It felt like I not only owned the land that this terraced house was on – two up two down. But also, it felt like I owned that street, and I owned the bit that went right behind the Royal Oak and had a wild cherry tree. I felt like I owned that, and that's a different sensation to… Living in London years ago, I had to tell my housemate to just not come in my room because it's the only bit of land that I have. Can I protect this bit? It stopped but…

I like the idea of not asking permission as well. You asked the council to clear this mess, but I like the not asking permission. Apparently, that's a good way to make things start happening is you don't ask permission. You just do it or start it.

**SH:** I have to say just one other thing, which I thought right at the beginning, is some of these things also… you've talked about blurring the edges and things, comes from your interest in permaculture, a lot of this…

**JF:** Yes, which is also flawed as well, isn't it, like everything? The permaculture, I think it has built into it a... it's an accumulative thing. Once you plant a pear tree, it's planted, and every year, you'll get pears, which means each year, you could add some fruit bushes, which means that you can give some pears away because you've got too many. There's this kind of accumulation of resources and then accumulations of connections, accumulation of space that we can... Certainly, when I lived in Adamsdown, I was really yes in a better position than most maybe on my street. Not everyone, but in a better position. Just this idea of being able to share support felt essential. Now, I live in the poshest village in Wales. It's the most Conservative village in Wales, really.

**SH:** Oh, wow.

**JF:** I didn't choose to move here. It was my partner who needed to really for health reasons, and I was like, 'Okay can we afford to do that?' 'Okay, yes we can actually, we've got a bungalow here.' There are people down here that have got electric gates and four garages.

**SH:** I have not seen anything.

**JF:** That's here. I was like...

**SH:** 'I don't want to do any work here.'

**JF:** I'm not necessary here, and then after that, I started seeking out who are the people who've got the... 'Oh God, there's a lady there. She looks Chinese.' Or, there's the shop around the corner. I don't know. What I've learned actually is what comfort is – to be able to sleep through the night and the neighbours are not just arguing, or there's drug deals next door. I understand what some level of stability or comfort is more than... If you don't ever experience it, you don't know that there's another way.

The people are still rattling around in the mess, and I'm in the most Conservative village in Wales.

**SH:** Really? Bloody hell.

**RD:** We should probably wrap it out now because we've done two hours. But I keep being drawn to that sign behind you the *Neither Here Nor There* sign because after our conversation, it's taken on lots of other additional meanings. It made me think of a thing about physical space and neither my place, nor your place. It's about the creation of the space in between, isn't it? Both the literal physical space in your performances, you're creating a safe space if you like where those people can gather and different rules apply and all that sort of stuff. But also conversation is a bit like 'neither here nor there', a good conversation.

Like you've said it's that nuance. It's not about the fixed…, which is why it's interesting. I was thinking about the fact that it's on a placard and obviously usually on a placard is a very clear slogan. This is my really clear position like you said, Sonia, about Israel and Palestine or whatever the issue is. That's why it's ironic, isn't it? That's what you're looking for in those interactions. It's not the fixed position. It's the meeting point in between, which is messier. Anyway.

**JF:** We were chatting yesterday because we haven't had a lot of time to move a project that will happen next year forward, and we said moving into a different type of... Is it resilience?

**SH:** Resistance.

**JF:** A different type of resistance, which is actually about doing it without any harm coming to us in any form, doing it in a pleasurable way. That's probably impossible, but it's part of the next chapter, I think of…

**RD:** Do you think *Neither Here nor There* will have another outing at all or not?

**JF:** We were asked to go to Portugal, but that's gone quiet. How'd you feel about doing it again?

**SH:** I love the conversation, I'm very fond of it.

**JF:** Oh yes?

**SH:** Sorry, I know you want to wrap it up, but I just want to say one thing is that actually it's not... When therapists come, a lot of them go, 'You shouldn't do this. This is very dangerous.' Apparently, if you're in the business, it's not a safe space at all, it's terrible. I think underneath that, is a belief that if people are adults, then they can hold themselves. Even if they have traumatic and chaotic lives, they can still be in charge of themselves. We put things in there in the beginning to say, 'It's up to you, you go where you want to. If you go and you find yourself going down some alleyway, and you know what's going to happen at the end, turn back if you want to turn back or go if you want to go ahead.'

**JF:** I think capitalism is putting us into competition with one another, which is why we're frightened of one another.

**SH:** Okay, there you go.

**JF:** Actually, I'm saying it's not a competition, and we can get on with it. I've written here. I don't know which is worse. Capitalism, patriarchy, or racism. I sometimes don't know which one's the worse one.

**RD:** They often overlap, don't they?

**Appendix 7. Paul Clarke and Jessica Hoffmann (Uninvited Guests): Interview by Richard Dufty in Bristol, 27 November 2023**

**RD:** Thinking about *Make Better Please* and *To Those Born Later*, and *Billennium*, *Future Places Toolkit*, and *Give Me Back My Broken Night*. Maybe Jess, you can start by… can you talk a little bit about where you think our use of conversation in those projects has emerged from? Can you think about how it relates to our wider practice and where that's come from? Can you think about how to locate that?

**JH:** I think it's come from the very beginning of Uninvited Guests. I think it goes back to the first show, it goes back to Guesthouse and Film and those early shows, when we had conversations with people to gather content. Those conversations pre-show, pre-performing of the work, those conversations would form the content for the work. And so I think the idea of having a conversation with your audience, whether that's in the performance space or outside of the performance space, has always been there. And I don't think it was particularly intentional, I don't think we planned it as a kind of way of working necessarily. I think it's just sort of happened organically. I think we've just followed our noses in that way. But yeah, I think it was there from the very beginning.

**PC:** I think that's quite interesting. I hadn't really thought about that, but I think you could think about the sort of documentary theatre practices that we were using early on with *Film* and with *Guesthouse* and with *Schlock*. The conversations with the public happened in the research process and that was a way of generating content and there was a shift where those conversations became part of the work and framed within the work and that's a transition isn't it that's happened.

**JH:** Was that *Make Better Please*? Was that the moment the transition happened? It was, wasn't it? I think it was, yeah. That was the first time a conversation took place within the show itself.

**PC:** But then maybe the other… maybe the other sort of origin, the other sort of genealogy or where it comes from in the work might be thinking about something like *Love Letters* also and thinking that, whilst there's not much conversation in *Love Letters*, you know we did set out to make an event that was like a real social event in the theatre. So we were thinking about, you know, how we might use the theatre as a

kind of device for getting people together and getting people together in that case to kind of express their love and care or celebrate their kind of love and care, and in that instance yeah we were borrowing from other kind of forms like the wedding reception or the wake but it was about, you know, how can we make a social event happen in the theatre that might generate some of those… in this case not necessarily conversations, but might generate some of those kind of feelings and exchanges, have some of the same effect, move people in the same kind of ways that real social events like weddings and wakes do. And in a way that was also an open kind of structure. It's got a resemblance to some of the things that have come afterwards where, you know, it's like actually what we've created is not really the content, the content is kind of co-created with the audience, with the participating audience, with those who come along on the night. But what we've created is a structure for the contributions that the audience, the participants, will make and they populate…so that's what's sort of authored, it's like the structure. And with *Love Letters* those are dedications and song requests that are emailed to us, and there's a bit of dialogue that might happen with the… you know in a way you could still think in that instance the show, or at least the encounter with us or with the show or with the experience, does happen before the show begins because there's this invitation to contribute and to make a dedication and perhaps there's also a bit of an exchange or a dialogue with you as performers as the requests are kind of made and edited or added to. So, there's a bit of collaborative writing that happens to co-create the script or co-author the script for that evening's performance. But there's a kind of resemblance there where like… okay in this instance it's pre-scripted, like you have the script for the dedications, the order is decided in advance, but in a sense it's still a conversation with the audience and the work differs every night. So it's not a big step to then think, well okay let's, as we did with *Make Better Please*, let's shift that so that the decisions are made on the night and the conversations take place there and then and the content emerges out of what matters to people on the evening, and it starts with the conversations framed within the theatre and in the room.

**JH:** I was going to say *Love Letters* is different. The form of the conversation is different, so it's like, yes there's a dialogue and there's a conversation with the audience, but not

in the way you think about a conversation, how that kind of 'someone talks, someone listens, someone else talks, someone listens,' that sort of conversational…so it's more of… it's like it's using music to have a conversation, or it's using that shared experience of whatever emotion…so it's like it's a different, it feels like a different *form* somehow of […] conversation to other shows that we've done.

**RD:** Do you think that…because one thought I have is that in our work, right from, as you just said, right from *Guesthouse*, *Film,* we're thinking about audience members as kind of 'content providers' aren't we, the sort of shared authorship idea that runs through pretty much every project we've ever done. You can describe some of those early dynamics as conversation-based, but happening pre-show. But regardless of that, the journey to conversation occurring within shows is one of the exploration of that whole idea of how... the relationship between us and audience members with them as…and how we are providing a frame within which they provide the content.

**JH:** It's a lot safer when you do it before the show because you get it in advance, you can kind of, you can curate it, you can manage it, you can edit it, you can think about it, you can structure it and so you're more in control. Whereas if you're having that conversation in the moment it's just more risky as we discovered with *Make Better Please*. It felt huge, high stakes of risk, if we're going to do this live we don't quite even... though we've got a structure, we don't quite know how it's going to work and things are so in the moment, it's much much more risky. And I think as we sort of discovered I think that becomes a sort of…some people really really like that and some people really don't like that because there is that potential for it not to work very well. But I think we were quite excited by that because it was a completely new way of exploring how we gather content. Somehow, I think we weren't quite brave enough to sort of just stick with that, with literally just holding that conversation. We had to then make it into sort of a show and have lights and turn it into something else. It was sort of like two shows stuck together.

**PC:** Yeah, I think it should have been more focused on the conversation and the Quaker meeting. That's what we learned, didn't we? We probably could have forgone a lot of the theatricality that we were having lots of fun with but probably wasn't completely necessary.

But yeah. The shift was to taking that risk of starting the show with almost no content and the show being responsive to the day's news, kind of in conversation with the day's news and what the concerns were that the people coming to the show that evening kind of brought with them and what mattered. The content would become what mattered to them and it did start with conversation. It started with those conversations around the tables with tea and newspapers, and staging the kind of conversation that might happen around the breakfast table on a Sunday among a family, probably with similar disagreements, probably more disagreements, and all the kind of conversation you know that could happen in a café. And then, you know, the content emerged out of that and was guided but largely determined by... those conversations were structured, they were hosted, they're all facilitated, but yeah, the content for the show that then unfolded was gathered from those initial gatherings.

**JH:** I guess the conversations we had were quite guided. In terms of the questions we were asking, it wasn't like 'What's in the paper today?' It was like, 'What's the most distressing thing you've read?' I think one of them was around what's the most shocking thing or upsetting. There was something that was quite a negative…and then there was I think there was a sort of negative and positive yeah…

**PC:** Or was it just 'what matters to you?' 'Find something that matters to you?'

**JH:** Yeah, maybe one of them might have been 'Find something that matters.' But I'm sure we were sort of pushing them into finding something that had...

**PC:** Well, they wrote more than one thing down didn't they on the flash paper. Or was it only one thing that each person wrote? Yeah, you each got one piece of flash paper.

**JH:** You chose one article each didn't you?

**PC:** So, it was the article that mattered to you the most? I think it was just that, I think it was like find one that matters to you.

**RD:** And then the conversation was around what you'd found and what you felt about it. We asked for volunteers to sort of kick things off.

**PC:** Well, we went round and people said what they'd found and what the story was that mattered to them in the news that day and then we kind of tended to go back and

got people to tell their stories, to say a bit more about their stories and why it mattered.

**JH:** Oh yeah, they went round and read the headline, that was right, they read the headline and then we went round and investigated it in a bit more detail after that.

**PC:** And then we asked someone if they would be up for sharing.

**RD:** Wasn't there a sort of, we had to establish a consensus amongst the group on which one was the one that felt like the most pressing issue of the day, is that right?

**JH:** I think you're right.

**PC:** Which tended to be reasonably straightforward because you would tend to shift towards discussing that story, like it would tend to be the story that some kind of debate or conversation happened around or that maybe people had opinions on, I suppose. And then in a way the Quaker meeting is also a kind of conversation, the Quaker meeting set up that sort of followed. And it sort of stages listening and witnessing and speaking.

**JH:** When we got into the big circle, was the invitation to whoever's going to stand up to talk about the story, just stand up when they felt ready to? It was, wasn't it? So we didn't instruct them to stand up, they just did it in that Quaker style of… yeah.

**RD:** We had spokespeople, nominated spokespeople for each group

**JH:** But when they stood up was up to them.

**PC:** But then the second time we returned to the Quaker Meeting format, for the hopeful stories, there wasn't any guidance of that kind, it was just that invitation to stand when you chose to stand and speak about a story that gives you hope or makes you feel positive that could be from your local community, your own personal life or from the news in recent days. Everything was like a sort of rehearsal or like they were sort of practising. So, we had the small group, people kind of practised having a conversation that was quite guided. There was a kind of decision that was made about who would be the representative, who wasn't necessarily the person who'd chosen the

story because in some instances I think it was someone else who just felt more confident telling the story.

**JH:** Just remembering that the spin-off show that had a million names…

**RD:** *Society of Friends*.

**JH:** That was us trying to respond to the fact that we didn't pursue just the conversation and the Quaker meeting and just to do that part. That was a response to that. So, I forgot that we did that.

**RD:** It's interesting what you were saying about the Quaker meeting section being another form of conversation, you're absolutely right. Because although people had a sense of what they were going to talk about, they would often reference what somebody else in the room had just said. 'As whoever said, we picked up on the same story…', or 'It's not exactly related but…it speaks to a similar idea.'

**PC:** Yeah, they would respond.

**RD:** With, you know, sometimes long gaps, unlike an everyday conversation. But there would be a sort of listening and responsiveness which was quite interesting.

**PC:** Yeah, I think it kind of… it draws things out in the conversation and it sort of extends the silences which are also part of what structures a conversation. So it's extended periods of listening and then attentive listening to the story that someone's sharing, but each story was kind of... the invitation was for people to have a dialogue through the story and what they said about why they matter to them, which from my experience of going to the Quaker meeting was what was happening…was that actually collectively a structure was kind of, or a sort of sermon or an argument, was kind of arrived at for the day because people would reflect and through their reflection they would be moved to speak and actually, collectively, you would structure a sermon through that conversation, in multiple voices.

**RD:** It's interesting that project, isn't it, thinking about what happened in terms of the audience journey through that piece, and the kind of issues we sometimes had. I remember in Liverpool for example when we did it early on and people got really, quite a few people were quite angry with us afterwards weren't they because they felt we'd

sort of created an atmosphere of trust and conviviality to have those conversations where people felt like they could be really honest and authentic and, you know, about their politics and the world and, you know, maybe they also volunteered personal stories and then they felt like we sort of took all of that content and then didn't sort of, then sort of pushed them away for the majority of the rest of the show and didn't sort of... it was a sense that we'd betrayed them in some sense, wasn't there? A sense that all the trust…I suppose thinking about it from the point of view of conversation, often to have a good conversation you need to sort of have that atmosphere of reciprocity and listening and building up of trust and you're safe here and you can be honest with us and you know we're going to be careful, we won't... and there was definitely a sense wasn't there that we sort of had, we'd broken some sort of bond of trust.

**JH:** I don't think everybody felt like that. I think that was the sort of feedback that, yeah, we'd opened something up in that way and then we'd shut it down and then that didn't feel like a fair contract or something. Yeah, I agree.

**PC:** Well it shifted didn't it from being something that was like very participatory and in which there was a mutual exchange that was fairly kind of, I mean it wasn't balanced because we did know what was coming next in the structure and we were facilitating the conversations and it was scripted, scripted in the way that like a seminar might be, or scripted in the way a workshop might be, that's like you're facilitators… But then it shifted into something where we were no longer facilitators and we were performing.

**JH:** Yeah, they were the audience, we were the performers.

**PC:** It went towards something that was a bit more spectacular or more like, yeah, more like sort of spectacle. In which the relationship with the audience shifted into something a little bit more conventional but still within the world of ritual, I suppose, where they were sort of witnesses rather than kind of passive audience members.

**JH:** Yeah, we were trying to take their content and sort of process it, vent it, make it better. Yeah, transform it, whatever. So our *intention* was to sort of, not to shut them out, but to take it and, yeah, make it into something else through that form of ritual. But unfortunately it came across as a sort of shutting down because we then became theatrical and...

**PC:** It did return. We came through that, perhaps slightly conventional catharsis or sort of venting. We went through that kind of crisis and it does then resolve into another form of conversation where we return to the Quaker meeting, people stand to express their kind of hopeful stories, and then we also hear…those stories are recorded and they're taken out onto the streets and...

**RD:** But it was sort of intended to be… it was meant to be abrasive and subversive wasn't it? Because certainly in my head, whether this is post-rationalisation or whether we thought it at the time, but, you know, that first section was sort of sitting around having reading the paper, the sort of Sunday morning kind of... was meant to be sort of in inverted commas to some extent, and so that section that followed where we all, you know, the newspaper phallus and we had tea going everywhere, it was, you know, it was obviously an *upending*, a kind of, we were pointing to the, I suppose, the limits of polite, rational Sunday morning conversation when it comes to the big issues of the world, weren't we? We were sort of saying, actually, that that sort of conversation will only take you so far.

**PC:** And the problematics of that, you know, the kind of news as spectacle and as entertainment, and, you know, we did work through that. So there was this section that followed where, you know, you were standing in for the people in the news and asking the public to participate in… well in that case a conversation which does kind of speak of politics, bearing in mind the inability of politicians to actually answer a question with an answer rather than a soundbite. But yeah, there was another form of dialogue, wasn't there, which was like you seated in the centre saying, for instance,

**RD:** 'I am the Pope.'

**PC:** 'I am David Cameron, what would you like to say to me?' which was a dialogue with no response and it was solely about projecting that on to you as you stood in for people with whom we could have no dialogue, in some cases our representatives.

**JH:** I think people found that a bit frustrating didn't they at times, that we weren't answering. I mean I know that was the point, but people got a bit frustrated by the fact that we didn't respond and we just sat there and smiled at them.

**PC:** I don't know, it depended on whether people understood the game of it. It would become a dialogue between them through you as a kind of intermediary, so it would be like a sharing of different kind of positions or like...

**JH:** I mean it was basically a big provocation to get them to sort of vent and get angry and there's a lot of kind, you know, if you're going to stick the sort of hated figures of society and say, 'I am that person what you are you going to say to me?' it is quite a provocative conversation.

**PC:** Yeah, we were messing around with having an effigy. You were in a sense the kind of effigies. You were kind of inviting the kind of abuse that people wouldn't necessarily... for people to speak their minds in ways that you wouldn't to those people perhaps in person were they really there. But then there was also the kind of staging of some of the stories from the day's news and that was about that was partly about trying to kind of stand in for the people in the news in order to kind of measure the distance between us and our lives and our kind of context and our place, our situation and theirs, and partly recognising the impossibility of that, that we can't be in their shoes or imagine… we can't have their lived experience or imagine ourselves in their political situation, particularly these extreme scenarios that that we were tending to try to represent. But we were trying to kind of bring them into the room and explore that kind of distance. But again, it's sort of, in performance exploring some of the ways that news becomes spectacle and entertainment in other kind of forms of media like newspapers and TV and radio.

**RD:** Yeah, and I suppose sort of exploring our, because I hadn't thought this before... 'I am David Cameron'… And then people getting angry with David Cameron or me or Jess who is standing in for them. And sometimes it really felt like they almost... the suspension of disbelief is really working. And they really were seeing us as almost the real thing. But it's a version of shouting at the TV isn't it? In some ways, the whole show is about a sense of political impotence or something and trying to explore different tactics from the deliberative democratic thing of chatting about the issues in the newspaper, to venting at the TV, to then, 'Fuck it, that hasn't worked. Let's just burn the place down' sort of thing. Let's satirise them and let's laugh at them.

**PC:** I think we were trying to kind of, yeah, there was a purpose to that shift from the kind of convivial that was about trying to be…wanting to be kind of critical of those convivial conversations over the newspapers in our kind of quite safe environment where we feel that, ethically or morally, we need to know what's happening in the world and in the news, obviously all mediated through our mostly very biased press. But we feel the need to kind of know, but we don't tend to act or, you know, most of us are not, including us, we're not activists. So, you know, I think those kind of convivial conversations are entertaining and they make us feel better, but it seems important to question or think critically about what they actually do in terms of making any social change.

**JH:** We talked about the placards, do you remember the whole, we were going to go and make placards, that was in the early stages of rehearsals.

**RD:** We did have placards on the walls didn't we?

**JH:** Yeah, but we had conversations about actually going out.

**RD:** Were you writing the slogans on the placards? It was you or Billy wasn't it?

**JH:** They got filled up, didn't they, as we went through. But there was a period of time when we talked about actually kind of, you know, having placards and starting on the street and ending up in the theatre and making it a bit more of a kind of rally or making it a bit more kind of, a bit more of a protest or a bit more political…that falls out onto the street rather than just in this bubble of a theatre space. But that didn't actually come to anything, did it? we didn't quite get that far, I don't know why, I can't remember why.

**PC:** I think it became sort of *about that* more than like an attempt to really make some kind of invented protest. I mean it would have been quite fun to like…actually the sort of protest that's about all of the different issues that matter to the people who happen to have gathered that day is also quite a nice form, I mean yeah, it'd be good to do that wouldn't it?

**RD:** Just in terms of the set, if you like, we were referencing protest placards, weren't we? It does feel like the whole thing was us exploring the limits of political discourse

and how political discourse is framed – i.e., for a lot of us, by the press, or now I suppose you'd say, you know, people like Elon Musk and others with their algorithms, on Facebook and Twitter, you know what I mean…how…the problematics of the language that we use.

**PC:** And also political theatre, I mean there's lots of language of political theatre in there, wasn't there, in a way, like, you know, there was like Agitprop in there and Living Newspapers, those kinds of references were also kind of in there.

**RD**: And Ubu Roy…And I suppose sort of, you know, a bit of Welfare State. The burning at the end…So just moving on then from that project to *To Those Born Later* […] What are your thoughts, through the prism of conversation I suppose…it's quite different those conversations that we were having amongst people. I mean I know there were various iterations of that project, the live version and the online version, but yeah, it was a kind of constant thing around people going into groups of different sizes and having conversations. What do you think the kind of shift then was from *Make Better Please* to that, what was being explored through the shift?

**JH:** I mean, first of all, we were using technology, so there was that kind of, like, we were gathering the information through Typeform on our phones, so even when people were in the space with us for the live show, we were asking them questions and they were giving us the information for that through their phones, which was then represented on a screen, and then we would sort of have conversations about that. So, I guess the form of collecting the content shifted. And I guess the conversations themselves were maybe, I was going to say smaller, but yeah, maybe they were sort of smaller. So, we had like one-on-one and then we had like four, didn't we? And then we had, so they kind of gradually increased in terms of the…They were quite personal as well, I think. So that was another shift, maybe more into the personal.

**PC:** Well, it went from sort of personal to more general and more political, didn't it? Or from kind of local to global.

**JH:** But I think it probably, in terms of the conversations with each other, we hadn't made anything like that where conversations would happen with them independently, where they go off and have a conversation that's quite a personal conversation, that

we're not, they're having it on their own, we're not facilitating that conversation, that's an independent conversation that they're having. So that was the first time we'd done that, in terms of a shift.

**PC:** The balance was further towards dialogue and conversation rather than theatre. There was very little theatre. We also took a step back, even as facilitators, so that it was mostly self-directed conversations with some guidance, but that guidance was more instructional than live facilitation.

**JH:** I think it's probably the first time we were more in that facilitator role than performer role in terms of how we manage the whole thing, the conversations. I think we'd learnt our lesson from *Make Better Please*, didn't we? And we thought, right, we're not going to go on to some big theatrics here, we're just going to, even though we did a little bit at the end, we tried to do something with it at the beginning with the live version, didn't we, where we tried to take their words and there was a sort of imagined going into the future? Oh no, we imagined that the time capsule had opened and that we were reading their words didn't we?

**RD:** We still did that with the online version didn't we?

**PC:** Yeah, we kept that with the audience as sort of two audiences, didn't we? Two gatherings – a contemporary gathering now in order to collect contributions to the time capsule and then the thought experiment of imagining yourself as a future audience who's gathered in one hundred and fifty years time for the opening of the time capsule. So you know, within that, there's also like a conversation between times that's happening. It was trying to set up a conversation or a dialogue between kind of contemporaries and their ancestors, future generations, but it's also with the past because of course we're also kind of contributing lots of things that speak to us of probably our parents and grandparents.

**RD:** I suppose the kind of fictional framing of *To Those Born Later* is, you know, it was, yeah, it was, it was quite, there was a sort of honesty about it, wasn't there? I mean, I know we never had a time capsule, although at one point we were seriously thinking about burying one but...so it's still a fiction in that sense. But it's quite straightforward, the idea of 'We're making a collection. You need to have a conversation with each

other to make a choice or to share what you want to contribute to this.' I suppose the idea of us always working with all audience members as providers of content, it was the most unvarnished approach to that, in that the fiction was very like that, wasn't it? It was like, 'The time capsule is our show. We want to work out what you want to put in the time capsule.' Whereas, other shows like *Make Better Please*, we were asking for their contributions but they weren't quite sure exactly what purpose… or what we were going to do with it. It was more straightforward. In some ways it did help create a certain atmosphere around those conversations, didn't it? People feeling like they can just be relatively chatty and honest.

**JH:** Interestingly, in both of those shows we were asking them, in terms of the question, 'What really matters to you?' So, you know, it was like, 'What really matters to you in today's paper, what story?' And then in *To Those Born Later*, it was, 'What really matters to you in your community or in the world?' Or, you know, 'What matters the most for you to save for future generations?' So we were kind of asking quite similar questions, actually. But we were obviously kind of doing different things. And they were both quite political, as well. Like, *To Those Born Later* was quite a sort of, it was quite sort of political in a quiet way, whereas *Make Better Please* was quite political in a sort of shouty way. But they were both kind of…there was a politics to both of those, isn't there, about the world that we live in and the choices that we make and what's important and a kind of reflection on our world and what do we think about that.

**PC:** Yeah, they encourage other… you know, there's other, I don't know, related words like 'discussion' and 'debate', I suppose, which they also both encourage. I mean, they encourage chatting and conversation and dialogue, but in some instances, also kind of actually a more sort of political discussion or debate. But I think it's quite interesting to think with *Make Better Please* there is a sort of conversation that's happening beyond the people in the room, it's like a conversation with the newspapers and also with the commentators and the politicians. It's a bit broader than the frame of the people in the room. And I think the same with *To Those Born Later*. At one point we had messages sent to the future addressed to the person who would be living in your house in the future or your children's children's children's children, so it's also… it's thinking about

that too isn't it, it's thinking about 'What would I say to them?' – again it's sort of a conversation or a dialogue – 'What would I want to say, what message or advice would I want to give? What would I want to pass on to those people in the future?'

**JH:** A lot of that is what we might lose isn't it, so it's like a warning or it's...a slightly negative aspect to that, because it's a kind of yeah 'Don't do what we did. Do it like this.'

**PC:** I guess the objects you know, the objects and the images…it was very focused around a photograph or an image that you'd found online of a particular place that was significant to you for instance. So, it used those to give the conversations, the chats, a focus didn't it? So actually, what we were interested in was the sharing of the story. We were interested in people's stories and people exchanging those stories and connecting through those kinds of meaningful…making some kind of meaningful connection through those stories, but they were like triggered by or like associated with those objects. In some ways we were interested in the object. We were probably most interested in the story.

**JH:** But also how those stories connect us. Again, it's about that sort of connection or shared... you know we've all got grandparents who've left us something, or we've all got, you know, a favourite place that we've been to in the world or we've all got…so it's like, it's what connects us.

**PC:** Or differentiates us. Because that was one of the most interesting things with some of the online versions, when you did have people from different cultures. Like, 'I'm not familiar with this, this isn't meaningful to me, so actually I can have an exchange where you articulate that and tell me that story, I can learn something.'

**JH:** But even if you're from a different country and you have a different cultural experience, there is still that sort of base human, the humanity, like we all feel and want the same things. That for me came across, I think, especially with the online versions, when we were doing it with people from different countries. It's like, yeah, we might all be really different and have different references and stuff, but at the end of the day, we're actually all quite similar.

**PC:** I guess what's good though…like it would be a shame if what it did was made us all feel like we're the same, like we're homogenous…like what's good is if you can connect and recognise or identify some similarities and also you don't erase your differences and you know you have space in it to maintain those, those differences and distinctions and kind of...

**JH:** I don't mean we're all the same as in, you know what I mean? On a kind of human level of *feeling*, that's what I mean. I know we're not all the same and we're, yeah, you know.

**RD:** But going back to the form of conversation – spontaneous conversation, unstructured conversation, between people who are together, either online or in person… Because we could, in terms of that thing about wanting to hear the stories and getting diverse stories, we could have done something a bit more like *Love Letters*, we could have got people to write in advance, or even in the moment, write their stories down. So, I'm just thinking about what you think is interesting about the conversational as a sort of form where, you know, people don't have pre-prepared scripts that they, you know, that we've written or they've written, and they're sort of improvising it. Because in my head, that was partly about, for that project, there was the whole thing around it coming…you know, we were entering the age of populism, weren't we? We made this explicit in both versions of the show, I think. It was the whole thing around Donald Trump and the post-truth thing and the rise of populism and we can't trust… one of the rationales for doing this is that we can't really trust the version of these times that's going to be told in the future because people are arguing black is white and all the rest of it... So, I'm wondering if there's something in that show about conversations being some sort of antidote to some of that, you know there being a sort of authenticity or a sort of honesty... It was about seeing the whole person and the honesty that comes with that. Beyond the spin, the PR.

**JH:** I guess it's not filtered...that makes sense now that you're saying it. Yeah, I guess it's in those personal stories you're going to get honest… you're not going to get sort of big headlines that someone's made up that's not relevant to anyone's life. I don't know. I don't know, what do you think? I don't know.

**PC:** Yeah, I think it... there was something in... I mean, you know, it sort of makes me think of how, like, at one point, and I don't really know whether this happened particularly, but that at one point we really liked the idea that you might get people together who had very different positions and, you know, maybe different... I mean, we did manage to get people together who were quite different generations, and that was certainly something that happened, so yeah, people who were different generations. But yeah, I think, you know, one of the intentions was also to… and it was one of the reasons for kind of taking it out to kind of village halls or to community centres, was that you might be able to get people together to share around kind of, you know, what they wanted to pass down, you know, who maybe had very different kind of political positions and that through that some kind of in-person understanding might develop, where people are meeting people in person, having a chat with people they wouldn't necessarily, aren't in their bubble and you wouldn't necessarily like have a conversation with or you wouldn't necessarily encounter in your kind of everyday life. I don't know, I think that happened a *bit*, but I think it was a good intention. And then I think yeah there is something to about that these dialogues weren't like pre-scripted or pre-prepared, maybe people had a little bit of a chance to think about the story they wanted to tell but it was fairly off-the-cuff and responsive and immediate and you know that that's very different from the way theatre tends to be, but also very different from you know authorised history.

**JH:** Yeah, it's making me think it's that thing about whose history, you know, whose versions of history is it? That the personal, the individual stories aren't really recorded or remembered or, you know, so like the big headline news is what's remembered or, you know, it's like who…how is history recorded? It's from big organisations but, you know, the individual personal stories of the everyday person, how much of their history is recorded for future generations? I'm remembering that, I think we did talk about that quite a lot, about sort of somehow giving the everyday person an opportunity to sort of record some of their… of what matters to them and their history and their stories, that it's another way of recording history.

**PC:** They are oral, oral histories that we're exchanging and they're ephemeral, they're not... We're also keeping some digital objects, but yeah I think you're right it was like,

let's try to shift things so that what we want to preserve or keep is not what's kept in the archive or the museum, but instead the stories that we might tell one another about our lives and our everyday lives and the people and things we care about.

**RD:** Do you think there's something in…I'm thinking about kind of polarising…because obviously we talk about populism, post-truth, and third P is polarisation, isn't it, and how, you know, we're…back then, still now, probably more so now, sort of living in an age of polarisation and sort of fixed, you know, fixed points of view. Definitely that's part of our culture, isn't it? About people kind of putting their stakes in the ground, and there's something about, you know, conversation which, not all the time, but the conversational can sort of lend itself to something that's not that, where, because you're speaking off the cuff, you have maybe not thought everything through in advance, so you will have… there'll be lots of ellipses, lots of bits that aren't…arguments that aren't totally watertight, or that need to be…you know what I mean? It has to be a sort of…it's an open, provisional sort of uncertain form…can be, can't it? Which is sort of, I don't know…

**JH:** That's also a great thing about a conversation, isn't it? It's that you do…it flows and you you're responding, you'll say something that will make me think of something that will take it somewhere else that will then affect, you know…and so things change and morph and develop and that wouldn't have happened, you know, it's like a sort of devising process where you start and where you finish is through that… it's unknown, but through that conversation and that collaboration, that's quite exciting, that's what makes it interesting.

**RD:** Yeah, and it's a form of collaboration, isn't it? I'm thinking about how, you know, so many of our projects are about sort of community-building in a sense aren't they? And it's a sort of form that lends itself, because you sort of work it out together don't you? You finish each other's sentences, you clarify each other's thoughts, you know what I mean?

**JH:** You figure stuff out, don't you? It's like solving a problem. You can't do that on your own, whereas you can do that by talking it through with somebody. You kind of get there by working it out together.

**RD:** Which was interesting in relation *To Those Born Later*, because there was always that idea wasn't there that – as well as these having these personal contributions of you know this thing from my grandad or whatever I want to put in there, or this personal view on the state of the world I want to put in there – there was always that (I don't know if we really pushed through with this) but that idea that it would also be the kind of views of the community as a community and their thoughts on what from their community they wanted to preserve, you know what I mean? So, the idea of it being an individual contribution but also a sort of representation of something, and I do think that the use of conversation sort of encouraged that, I suppose, that you sort of figure it out together a little bit, you know. In theory…

**PC:** I think what you're both saying is really important, that a conversation is a collaboration and an improvisation, you know, we're working things out as we go along and like you say we're making connections that we wouldn't have been able to think of individually and yeah wouldn't have come up for us without the exchange with the other, the other person or people. I think that's really important. I'm thinking the other thing that is important is like what we're all *doing*, which is like you know the voice and the words we're saying is only part of the conversation, and actually there's a whole set of gestures you know…you were doing this whole kind of choreography of conversation. Richard you had one too I think…You know we're also communicating with our, with our gestures, and there's lots of things that are kind of unsaid but still expressed.

**RD:** That is interesting isn't it, that idea of conversation…the version of conversation that happens when bodies are present to each other, whether that, you know… There are obviously differences between us three together in this room versus on zoom versus on Twitter but you know, kind of what that means in terms of the kind of quality of the conversation that happens.

**PC:** I mean we are recording just on the microphone, but for instance one of my PhD students at the moment is doing research around drag performance and they've been going to drag workshops and then interviewing people from the drag workshops about the impact that attending those and going through this process of developing their kind of drag personas, the impact that has on their perception of gender or performance of

gender in everyday life. And okay maybe they're doing it partly because they're exploring presentation of gender in everyday life, but they're videoing all of their interviews because they want to also write about people's gestures in the dialogue that they have, which is interesting.

**RD:** Yeah, interesting if we think about some of our use of conversation as a response to you know, what's going on with discourse more generally, political discourse on Twitter or wherever. There's something about, you know, being able to see the individual and to see, recognise them, as a human being. And there's something about seeing somebody's body and seeing their physical totality, isn't there? That just reminds you of their... there's something about complexity, for me anyway, that comes with that. Whereas in some forms of social media it's quite easy to atomise somebody or just see one… you know, to pigeonhole them, categorise them in a certain way, negatively or positively, but when you see someone, of course you still project onto them and you've still got your prejudices and all that, and your biases, but it's definitely, you're encouraged to think about, you know, more than one aspect of who they are and what they're saying, don't you think?

**JH:** You are probably more careful about what you say…that's you know the whole thing about social media isn't. It is that you can…people say whatever they want because they… there's that distance and they can't see them, whereas when you know you're right in front of somebody you're going to be, I think you're going to be, a lot more cautious about or more selective, more careful, about the words that you use.

**PC:** And you're not anonymous. There are consequences.

**JH:** There's an immediate response and reaction so you can see if someone's upset.

**PC:** That's back to some of what we were exploring with *Offline* and *Live Chat*. I mean you know *Live Chat* is…you know, we only did that a couple of times but actually as an example of exploring conversation and dialogue, it's quite an interesting example, you know, bearing in mind that was like a conversation that was sort of happening between online spaces or people in online spaces and also a dialogue being staged in a real social space that was precisely about exploring what happens when you embody these words written to be read online. And I think quite a lot of the projects do have that,

you know, they're like what happens if we embody these words or we speak these words when present with one another rather than mediated or online or read them in the newspapers.

**RD:** We should talk about *Give Me Back*, *Billennium* and *Future Places Toolkit*. I mean, there is a conversation section in all of those, isn't there?

**JH:** Yeah, yeah. At the end, yeah.

**PC:** Well, there's two conversation sections at the end of *Give Me Back*. There's conversations between the groups individually and then there's a sort of larger assembly, fictional planning meeting at the end.

**RD:** So yeah, what's the purpose of those, what's the sort of tone, what are you trying to get out of those?

**PC:** Well, one little thought quickly was just that in some ways it's almost like, actually it almost sort of brings together the early shows and the later ones.

**JH:** How?

**PC:** Well, because there is a research process in which we tend to have chats and conversations with like people in the municipality or the council or planners, and actually in advance there are, in the research process, we're having chats and conversations with people and, I don't know, like it hasn't always happened, but for instance in the Enterprise zone or in Guimaraes there was also like quite ad-hoc chats you know where we would be like dropping into shops and talking to, you know, people working in their like engineering company or people…in order to do the research, where we were kind of gathering people who lived and worked in the neighbourhood or were involved in decision-making around it. We were exploring with them what their kind of hopes were or what they felt had changed for the better or what had been lost in their neighbourhoods and that would feed into the science fiction stories that we would write. So actually, it had that part and so there's conversations that are happening in advance because it's kind of rewritten for each context, with and for a particular site and community or neighbourhood, and then there's conversations that

are happening within the work itself. But those earlier conversations probably set up some of the conversations that happen in the event itself.

**JH:** Yeah I think I think all of those shows, but especially *Future Places Toolkit* like it is all essentially about conversation, and the technology and the form is just a way to enable that conversation to happen and as the show has progressed it's become more and more about how can that conversation actually have some sort of impact or how can it change something for the better for these people's lives in a tangible way. In a way, *before* we were sort of, it was in the sort of theatrical framework of a show, but now it actually feels like this conversation could potentially, hopefully, have a real impact in their lives and so that, yeah, so I guess it's been a long, it's a long progression to get there, but...

**PC:** It's interesting isn't it, there's other words for that conversation, like engagement, or consultation. Yeah. But it's a conversation. It's a discussion.

**JH:** Yeah, all it is a conversation you're having, but it's also sort of about having conversations with people who may not always have those sorts of conversations.

**PC:** Who might not be at the table or part of the conversation.

**JH:** Yeah. So there's an invitation to have those conversations that wouldn't otherwise happen.

**PC:** So now it's partly how could you… who are the groups you can have that conversation with? Who can you get round the table if it's not a table but it's actually happening in situ on the street in the very place that's being redeveloped, you know, it's not happening in a village hall or a community space like a community hall around some boards on the wall but...

**RD:** So, with *Future Places Toolkit*, do you do a tour of the area...? Talk me through it, particularly leading up to, talk me through the conversational aspect of it, how it fits into the...

**JH:** Well, it would normally happen where there's a development happening, so there's change happening already… so there's a planning for a new, or there's an idea for change, even if it's not determined yet.

**PC:** And it would also have that conversation in advance, usually, wouldn't it? Like we would have chatted to people about what's planned for…

**JH:** Yeah, so what Paul's talking about in terms of those initial conversations are with people who are working on that, who live there. It's more of a time of us trying to understand the context and understand the situation and understand the problems, understand the tensions. So that we go in sort of informed as to what's happening here.

**PC:** In preparation for holding…

**JH:** In preparation for holding the conversation with the community that this change is going to affect. And then I guess we invite residents, people who live there, work there, use that space, to come and have, I don't know, I mean it's an *activity*, you can call it an engagement activity, whatever. So, the way it's been working at the moment…I mean there are different, yeah, there are different versions…but one version is we give that group of people a bit of a history to where they are, to already get them to understand that change is happening all the time. Change is a constant, nothing stays the same. A hundred years ago this looked very different – this has changed, this has changed, this has changed, this has changed and here we are today. Change happens all the time. So, let's think about the next hundred years and all the changes that are going to happen. What are the changes that you want to happen? What do you want to see here?

**PC:** Or thirty years.

**JH:** Or thirty years. Might not be that long. It doesn't have to be a hundred years, ten years, fifty years, whatever it is. And then I guess there is a moment, a sort of theatrical moment, imaginative exercise where we ask them to think about, 'What are the people going to be wearing in ten years' time?' You know, 'What technology will have been invented in twenty years' time?' 'What will this...?' You know, so to sort of take them through as there's music playing. They get to sort of hopefully imagine how things are changing in the future. And then we...

**RD:** At this point they're not providing that information, you're just suggesting things.

**JH:** Yeah, we're just asking things – this could change or this could change.

**PC:** Although, the nicest times when we have done, when you've done the kind of history… because Jess will take us, you know, we'll come through time up to the present day, so we'll do a sort of history, and what's really nice is, because you're in a local neighbourhood, a lot of people do, like obviously they have historical information they'd like to share and so you'll talk about…you know, you'll be on Filwood Broadway in Knowle West and you know someone will…you'll be talking about the cinema that unfortunately is now going to be demolished, but when you're talking about the building of the cinema someone's like, 'My dad worked on the roof of that' or, 'I remember going to the cinema when I was a kid...' You know, so it's also like, and I think that's really good, like sometimes we've maybe not done enough of that […] having enough space [so] that people start to talk and start to contribute their own kind of memories or…because they are the experts you know, they're like they're the local experts, not us. So that sense that we're not in the position of being experts is quite useful because it means that actually they're the ones with more knowledge of the neighbourhood and more expertise, and giving people the space to contribute their memories and histories is good I think. And if they get talking then it sets that up as well.

**JH:** So that happens and then there's that transition into 'Let's think about the future' and then we go on a sort of small journey so just…I mean when I say journey I mean like it could be a two-minute walk. But it's a sense of moving through time – there's that kind of just sense of let's move forward, like we're going to move, so we're going to walk into the future.

**PC:** Walking through space and walking through time into the future. And it takes us sort of out of…the idea is just to use that metaphorically but also to kind of try and make a transition out of people's kind of immediate everyday concerns and into thinking a bit more imaginatively...

**RD:** But they're still inside at this point usually are they?

**JH:** No, we're outside. This is all outside. Yeah, it's all outside.

**PC:** I mean we could start inside, it doesn't really matter.

**JH:** Yeah, and then it's…and then we arrive and then it's like okay here are some devices, these are going to enable you to see into the future. In fact, do we give them devices at that point? We don't always. Anyway, and then it's like trying to imagine that we're in the future. 'Okay, so we're 30 years in the future, what can you see? What would you like to see here?' And there might be specific questions that we ask them that's related to what's going on in that context and that development.

**PC:** Well, we would have done some of that early on, if there are things...So in that conversation that's about history, we also set the context so you also tend to talk about some things that are planned, some changes that we know, redevelopments that are going to happen, things that are planned, so we understand the context and we all kind of share that. And then it depends what stage the planning is at because it might be that we're doing sort of very open kind of visioning, neighbourhood visioning, and at that point when you're looking through the device you wouldn't see anything apart from, well yeah, you wouldn't immediately, there wouldn't be anything already drawn. But if we're coming in a bit later, like when we last went to Filwood Broadway we had the whole new road system drawn in so when people raise their device they can see where the new roads will be and they'll see, oh okay, so the idea is there'll be this new kind of public realm space, there'll be this new public space that can be used for markets and the like. We can start to say, 'Well how would you use these new spaces?' But yeah it starts out very openly normally doesn't it with, 'Okay, so we're in the future you want for your neighbourhood in thirty years' time. What do you see here? Who's going to kick us off?' And you know normally it does work, normally people…someone has an idea and we build on that.

**JH:** There are interesting things about sort of like consensus and how do we sort of manage that and obviously people have different opinions and what somebody thinks is a good idea somebody else might not think is such a good idea, and so that that's also something that we need to think about a bit more because as we enter into this next phase of how we facilitate it, and the form of that conversation is kind of what we're going to go into next in terms of our development.

**PC:** I mean at the moment it's had that sort of quite open phase at the start hasn't it where we're sort of starting to try and build a world together, maybe you get a few

ideas from people and then you kind of go back to things and you try and develop them a bit. That's perhaps, you know… you sort of collect a few ideas maybe and then go back and develop something. But then […] because the focus is around kind of drawing, you know, we do need to try to encourage, well it's drawing and sound, so we do need to try and encourage people to talk about what it might sound like and to talk about some kind of you know physical objects or, you know, buildings or structures that could at least be drawn. But in a way those become…like they're sort of the starting point and what we're really most interested in probably is then getting at how people will behave or what are people doing here or what are the kind of activities that are happening here, or you know how will these spaces be kind of used? So that's where we're sort of heading a little bit, you know – how might people be behaving differently here, or what kind of activities does this space enable? And then kind of also asking…then we've got certain provocations, so you know we will want to kind of throw in things like, 'Okay, is there any work for people to do locally? Where are people working? What about young people? Is there anywhere for them to hang out? What are they doing? What about travel? How do people get here? How do people get to the centre of the city and back?' So we'll ask those… 'How are things powered?' So we'll try and chuck in some sort of provocations. And then I think the consensus thing is really interesting and you're right it's like on one hand I think like councils might want us to kind of try and work towards consensus, but I don't think that's all that interesting. I think to me what's more interesting, and you'll see some of the drawings are quite kind of like they don't really necessarily cohere and I think that's fine. Having this sort of, you know, quite sort of…yeah having these impossible things that…having like multiple ideas represented in the same sort of drawing where like actually what it represents is you know a range of different positions and ideas and suggestions that are like…I don't know maybe they represent a dissensus rather a consensus or they represent some of the antagonisms as well as the consensus thing. That's also okay – I think it's about kind of representing them and people being able to voice them.

**JH:** it's interesting as well, because it's outside. Trying to hold a conversation outside is a very different thing to holding a conversation inside, and so of course it's like anything can happen and so in terms of that sort of responsiveness and just having

to…You know, in a way sort of…like *Make Better Please* we didn't quite know what was going to happen, but at least it was in a kind of contained space, whereas you know outside it's like any old random can just walk up and go, 'What's going on here?' and so trying to hold something is quite hard. Teenagers will just rock up and go 'What are you doing?' and you're trying to be in the middle of trying to… you know then you have to include them and so that trying to be inclusive is really haw...

**PC:** My favourite was the guy in Birmingham – the Nature and Wellbeing Centre, Birmingham Settlement – who turned up and was just watching for a while. He was sort of meant to be looking after his kids, I think, so he came and watched for a while and then he spoke to me, I think, and I said, 'Look, you can come and have a look, come and have a look.' So, then he came and had a look, and within seconds he was like, 'Oh yeah, there's a balloon taking off over here!'

**JH:** He had an amazing experience, yeah.

**PC:** He just had this incredible imagination, like just within seconds, from like seeing what was happening, he was like, 'Oh, I get this. Okay, it's augmented reality. I've never seen that before, but I get what's happening. Like someone can, you know, they're able to draw what I come up with, so that's going to inspire me. And I'm going to wildly imagine, and I'm going to see these things appear, and that's great.'

**JH:** Yes, I think the difference and the challenge outside…and also it's like in terms of the responsibility of…like this really matters to people, people really you know this is going to affect…so there's a lot of passion and there's a lot of concern and there's a lot of worry that people have, because it's like some massive thing might be built at the end of their road or whatever. So yeah, it's quite it's quite an interesting conversation to hold.

**PC:** And the other thing we tried, because we were sort of testing it out a little bit when we were in Birmingham, was that thing of can we transition into also talking about what people might *do*. So, we've talked about this and this sort of…it relates to another project really but yeah, so 'This is the future you prefer, this is what we've imagined, this is 2087, or something. Okay if that's the future you prefer, what are the steps that we need to take? Let's back cast from there, what are the steps rather than

forecasting what are the steps we need to take to reach your preferred future? Are there some things we could do? What are the changes that could happen in the next few years? Are they things we have any agency in? Can we get involved in those things? What could we do?'

**RD:** In terms of the management of the conversation, you're saying it's a lot harder outdoors, that makes sense. In other projects, everybody gets a go, don't they? Do you do that with *Future Places Toolkit*, or is it just an open question and whoever chips in, chips in, and people stay silent if they want to stay silent?

**JH:** Yeah, so, like in any of these situations, there's always somebody with the loudest voice, or who has the confidence to speak, and there are people who are shy and feel a bit more... So, we have tried to say, 'What do you think?' if that person isn't speaking, and they may say something or may not. And the other thing we've done is, another sort of member of the team is within the group and may have a conversation with them separately, so one-on-one, and then they might report back. So, we've tried to do it in different ways to make sure that different voices get heard.

**PC:** And that happened, like in Bilbao, for instance, that happened quite a bit because of language, because people, you know, wanted, yeah, to speak in Spanish or in Basque.

**RD:** So going back to that thing about consensus versus dissensus and saying you don't want to force people into a consensus necessarily, if that's not there, if it's not a naturally occurring one. But it's a kind of applied project, isn't it, it's not a show. It's not a show. You're being asked to deliver certain outcomes by whoever's commissioning it. I'm sort of projecting into the future a little bit. And presumably they'll want something…I mean what are they looking for – are they just looking for another representation of the multiple views of that community or are they looking for some sense of, okay, this is probably the route we should go down, or what are they looking for in the outcome from that?

**PC:** Probably depends on the stage that they're at. Because one of the outcomes they want is engagement. And it is as simple as that. They want to talk to people. They want to talk to people. They want something that will enable conversation. That's part of

what they want. They want to be able to say, 'We've talked to people, these people turned up and they got to express their opinions.' So on one hand, and that's not a bad thing, it's communication and they want people to know what's happening. They want to engage people. So that's the first stage. And then, yeah, I guess they want people's ideas. So, you know, they want people to be able to feed in their wants and needs.

**JH:** There are themes, aren't there, that emerge. So out of a conversation, you'll get, even if there's not complete consensus, you'll get this feeling that people want more open space or they want more green space or they want, you know, there's a sort of feeling, there's a sort of, you get the feeling of where people are going or what their wants are somehow, even if it's not as specific as, 'I want an oak tree there.'

**PC:** And the idea might be totally fantastical, like they might come up with a climbing wall up the wall of a building on the high street or, you know, some kind of death slide or something, but you can extrapolate from that, 'We're looking for some places, some spaces that teenagers can play and like, you know, some activities, you know.'

**RD:** After the conversation has happened, this has taken kind of visual form and audio form, in terms of then your sort of relationship with the client, is that then, that's the outcome? 'There you go, have a look at this', or what's the expectation then, that you kind of do a report based on all of that stuff, or you know what I mean, what's delivered, if anything, to them?

**JH:** So, at the moment what it has been is a visual, an annotated visual representation of the conversation. So, the main, there's themes, but also details that's in this drawing with annotations, sort of explaining it. But I think as we go forward, we need to think…that's partly what we need to develop a bit more…is what that is and how that works. And...

**PC:** Yeah, I think we don't totally know yet how that needs to be represented.

**JH:** That's to be figured out a little bit…that works for the client as such, but also then works for the community that you're having a conversation with.

**PC:** I mean that's the sort of applied kind of aspect. I suppose on another level, it's like, I mean, that's what I've just been writing about…Is this as a kind of way of sort of

collectively imagining. That the conversation is about trying to build people's capacity to *anticipate* for their neighbourhood, and also to engage and involve people in shaping the future of their place. But it's partly about actually getting people together to do some social imagining and imagining can happen collaboratively and socially and it's kind of through that that we develop maybe more constructive social imaginaries, like more constructive visions of what futures might kind of be possible, and actually that's the first step towards making those things possible. You know those futures are partly made by the stories we tell and by the conversations we have and by the imagining that we do together or the things we dream up together and we do that socially, we do that partly through conversation. So, it's important to get more representative people involved in doing that and more voices heard in that imagining and for us to kind of do some imagining that's not like completely constrained by policy or limited by like you know the councils or the government or big institutions and corporations like horizons which are usually quite limited. And you know we should have higher expectations and at least our own kind of alternative visions for what might be kind of possible or what we want, because you know we need to intervene in those. That's part of the... that's more conceptual.

**RD:** That makes sense, that's inspiring. Do you get a sense when you're doing it that that a lot of those people haven't had a... because you're providing a forum for people to do exactly that, to meet people who've got this thing in common which is the place that they live or work or whatever. But it's unusual to get together with people like that and talk about your place and your imaginings for its future and your hopes and your dreams and all of that. Is there a sense that that is a sort of unusual thing for people doing it? That's not a normal conversation to have, is it, with your neighbours, to get together and talk about…I mean I suppose it happens a little bit on WhatsApp groups maybe, but yeah.

**JH:** I think people are used to talking about their local place or having a moan about it or talking to their neighbours. You know, I think those sort of conversations aren't completely unfamiliar, but I think in the way that we're doing it, because even though it's not a show, I think what we're…you know, we're bringing that sort of theatre facilitating sort of aspect to it, so it does feel a little bit different, at least the beginning

feels a little bit different. So, there's a form to it. It's not just like, 'Oh, let's just all stand around here and have a chat.' So it's held differently, I think. Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** Because I was trying to write this thing, I was looking at some of the feedback, and people do say that. They're like, 'I was surprised that people were listening to my ideas.'

**JH:** Yeah, and that's really sad, isn't it? That's really shocking, yeah.

**PC:** And that's some of the people from Billennium actually, like people in Bilbao saying, 'We don't really have a say in what is planned for us. Those decisions are made by other people, not by me. And it was quite special to have people listen to my ideas and see them drawn.'

**JH:** I guess that's the thing, even if it doesn't come to fruition, at least there's that. At least there is that moment of listening and it being represented and being acknowledged and being imagined as a possibility, even if, you know, just that in itself is...

**PC:** And it sounds like it, you know, reading some of those, it does sound like people also think about *responsibility*. Like they said, 'It made me think more long-term about the future of the neighbourhood and about the people who will live there when I'm gone.' They were talking about responsibility, so they said in those comments… they say quite a lot about how it makes them think about their responsibilities to care about what happens in the future.

**RD:** That thing about visibility and people saying that they haven't felt seen or heard certainly on that subject, but maybe more generally, before is interesting, because I think in a good conversation when people are genuinely listening, rather than just talking and not listening to the response, then that is a sort of…you know, in order for the conversation to operate effectively, you need to be attentive, don't you? You need to give…and actually maybe what kind of art can do is create, you know, in a world which doesn't provide many spaces like that can provide a sort of focused space with some rules, some structures, to enable everybody to have a go and to encourage a kind of listening and everybody to have a moment in the spotlight. It does enable that to be quite revelatory I think for some people.

**PC:** I mean the other thing that's particular is it's *located* because it's a conversation that's happening *in* place and *about* place and people are referring to the place, and what's happening in the place is part of their conversation.

**JH:** It's very different, because then you're responding to what you're seeing and hearing and it's not like an abstract…

**RD:** I can see that it really matters. It's also…you're doing it in a place where there is going to be some development, it's going to change. That's a given, so it's really charged from that point of view.

**PC:** Yeah, and mostly it's a place that you have some sense of belonging to. Investment in.

**RD:** Just thinking about that whole through-line. Just thinking about what you said right at the beginning about conversation in a sense having been there right from the very first project, whether it's sort of pre-show or actually then later on *in* the show. Since that's become a thing, that's developed to the point of *Future Places Toolkit*, I suppose. Just thinking about…just try and take a helicopter view […] what's the nub of it, why are we drawn to that as a sort of device rather than thinking about all the other devices that we could use, all the other forms of engagement you might use? What is it about that that sort of persists? The idea of conversation, hearing other people speaking, or other people's words, because the conversation has happened prior and it's being somehow reflected in our texts…?

**JH:** Maybe it's something to do with that kind of exchange, or that, you know, if it's all about us it's kind of boring. So it's not just, you know…we are some individuals and we've got *some* interesting things to say, but there's a limit to that, and so it's actually about…and yes I think that's what we've done is we have always shared our own stuff to sort of make it an equal… so that there can be that, you know, if we're asking something of you we're going to give something of ourselves, so it's that kind of a mutual exchange and a collaboration and a sort of…I don't know, going back to that 'trying to figure something out together' thing…

**PC:** There was one little trajectory thing I wanted to do, because we were talking about the conversation happening as part of the research process for a show that would be a

show that took place in a theatre and was scripted, rehearsed, to conversations happening, generating the content in the theatre, to then the one that we slightly missed was *Give Me Back My Broken Night* and *Billennium*. Particularly in *Give Me Back My Broken Night*, conversations happen, but they're kind of fictional conversations so you know you're having a science fictional conversation, you're having a conversation about like further futures, like it's very speculative and imaginative and you know fabulous, like you're invited to…you know it's really in response to the place but it's not necessarily a place that you're especially invested in. And there's a theatrical framing. And then in that the groups come back together as you remember? I mean, here in Bristol, they came back together in Brunel's boardroom, which of course was really nice…that we could come together in a space where planning historically happened. But within that context, yeah, people then kind of shared the proposals they'd come up with. […] And they exchanged and there was conversation and discussion and disagreement even. But it was, like although we were saying, you know, in a sense we were saying 'This is okay, welcome to the planning meeting. Let's hear from the groups what their proposals are'…it was fictional and you know it's framed kind of fictionally, so I guess what's happened now is that fictional frame, I mean it's sort of still there but actually the conversation isn't fictional, it is applied, it is happening in the real world and the idea is that it does feed into actual decision-making processes. So you know the conversation is now being held, or the meeting is being held, in the world not in the theatre, even though it might use theatre as a kind of tool or an approach or a technique or a method. So that's one that was one observation and then I guess the other sort of general thing is quite close to what Jess was saying, which is that, you know, it probably all partly comes out of like a sort of, I mean it sounds a bit cheesy, like a sort of democratising of theatre and yeah wanting to, you know, I think we're interested in other people's stories and want to not be at the centre and instead to kind of make space or like structures in which other people can kind of be heard and voice their stories and hear other people's stories and, yeah, we might tell ours as well but they're not necessarily valued over the stories that other people contribute or the content that other people who come along offer.

**JH:** What do you think it is?

**RD:** I agree with all that**.** I think exactly what you say. I think there's a sort of, I mean I think this is an interesting sidenote, but there's something interesting in the fact that I think demographically the three of us are really quite similar, aren't we?

**PC:** Yeah, yeah.

**RD:** Ethnicity and class and you know, I mean there are differences, but you know broadly similar and in terms of our life experiences. So, I think maybe there's something that's related to that which is about sort of a recognition of…that we can only speak from this one point of view. And I think beyond that I think there is a sort of recognition of, even if we were more mixed, that you know it's always going to be partial and there is a sort of interest, an awareness of the world being a complex place and actually a, you know, quality that we like about the world is the multiplicity of it and kind of the idea of pluralism, I guess. That maybe in the times we've been living through that that's become something to sort of feel attached to, as an idea that no one point of view, you know…the kind of authorial voice should always be kind of problematised. So, I think that's partly it, isn't it?

**PC:** Yeah, it's an interest in wanting to hear or enjoying hearing different perspectives and also wanting to make space for those different perspectives and get out of the way a bit for all of those.

**RD:** It's interesting, you talked about bringing it back to theatre, because there is also, beyond the ideological interest, the ethical interest, in that, and that's clearly a thing, but there's a sort of aesthetic interest, I have anyway, and you probably do as well, which is that it just makes it, it brings in a level of uncertainty and complexity and of risk and different kind of textures to, you know, the way people speak in different ways and, you know, whether it's *Love Letters*…you know, that brings a kind of, just a theatrical frisson and a kind of aesthetic frisson that I kind of enjoy.

**PC:** Which is partly about the *way* people tell stories, the *way* people articulate themselves as well as the stories themselves. There's no way you'd be upset that we're not performing *Love Letters Straight from Your Heart* as much as we would like in the new year if that was a show in which you just performed your own stories, endlessly, like some kind of personal autobiographical *Mousetrap*.

**JH:** There was also something about what you were just saying about the longevity of Uninvited Guests and the sort of unsaid form of communication and trust that has developed over the years that sort of has enabled everything to happen…I think is also just worth acknowledging because…that's just time and I think that's something that is sort of quite special and you know all that sort of risk-taking or whatever, you can't do that unless you understand…there's an understanding about how you communicate and work together and trust each other.

**RD:** You mean we've developed our bravery over time.

**PC:** You are right it is a risk-taking, because, you know, of course it's risk-taking to strip to your underpants and spin around pouring a bottle of beer over your head, that's like a physical risk-taking. But it's also risk-taking to turn up with only a structure and no content, or to, you know, turn up and try and host a conversation.

**JH:** I mean, there are so many situations that I can think of where we're literally flying by the seat of our pants and the only reason we get through that is because we've worked together for so long and so somehow we're able to deal with a situation that you wouldn't deal with if you didn't know someone very well.

**RD:** But it does also play to the… going back to the aesthetics, it's the kind of liveness thing isn't it? In a cultural environment where we've got so much on offer on the telly, so much can be streamed, I suppose the use of conversation or other devices like that, which are about handing over agency, embracing that sort of risk that comes with improvisation and spontaneity, is about, you know, finding something that's unique to live performance, isn't it? A live event.

**PC:** Which is true of the things we've done online as well, which are also live, just live online.

**JH:** Also, I've been thinking recently, this is a bit of a tangent, but you know, especially with sort of all the stuff that's going on in the Middle East and Palestine and Israel, and I keep hearing people on the news saying everybody just needs to have a conversation, they just need to have a conversation. It's like Northern Ireland, it's like that kind of like, if they could just sit down and have a conversation then things might be all right you know and it's like this all this craziness is happening and actually it's like what

needs to happen is they just need to sit down talk to each other, you know. It's like the simple act of doing that, you know, it's sort of a bit mind-boggling that all this is going on in the world and...

**RD:** They all need to just come to an Uninvited Guests show!

**JH:** Absolutely not, but I'm just thinking about conversation as a thing and the power of that in its simple form.

**PC:** Well diplomacy is like another kind of conversation I suppose. But yeah, certainly some of the accusations being made about one march or the other march. The people on those marches should probably have a conversation, they should probably meet one another, but not in the context of a march, where they're completely diametrically opposed in their opinion. And yeah, I mean the stuff on Twitter is... Yeah, do you know, I can't actually, I mean... It's best to come off.

**JH:** I don't go on Twitter anymore, because...

**RD:** I'm thinking of deleting it, I mean it's now just incredibly...

**JH:** But also, it's incredibly like, is what I'm watching real? That whole conversation of like, what's real and what isn't? I don't even want to engage with it. It's just like...

**PC:** It's impossible now to tell.

**JH:** Yeah, and for that reason, that reason, do not engage. Turn it off.

**RD:** Yeah, and we're definitely… it's interesting in terms of conversation, because we're definitely being fed, you know, the sort of polarisation thing that we were sort of referencing has become, certainly on Twitter, so much more... it's, you know, it is so clearly built into those algorithms, isn't it? So, it's just impossible for any sort of conversation like those that we're talking about to happen because people are so... It's just so one side or the other.

**PC:** What do the algorithms do? Amplify division. It used to do something different. It used to be like…there's a shift because it was it was like confirmation bias. It was like, it would just feed you things that you like. It's just your own echo chamber, your own sort of community of interest and that's what you would see. That's not what's happening

now. It's shifted to like, 'No, actually what they're showing you is polarising points of view' which I'm sure Elon Musk probably thinks is good for free speech and diverse opinions. The reality is it's presumably just amplifying division and hatred.

**RD:** And there was a question about how all that relates to capitalism I suppose as well and neoliberalism and whether that, I don't know, whether, because it's a marketplace of opinions isn't it, and whether that can amplify the differences and create two camps? It's like watching a boxing match or something, isn't it? It's like pay to view in a way. It's like being in the Colosseum or something, isn't it? It's that sense that this... Obviously, it sounds like in the short term, it's not working on those terms because advertisers are pulling out, aren't they? But presumably that's part of the strategy, that you sort of set up a model which is about constant drama, constant combat, constant conflict. Because that's good narrative, you know what I mean? That keeps you watching. Keeps you hyped all the time.

**Appendix 8. Sam Butler and David Harradine (Fevered Sleep): Interview by Richard Dufty on Zoom, 29 November 2023**

**RD:** So, I was looking at your website and noticed…I like the way that part of what you do on there is you organise things according to subject and that 'conversation' is one of the many kinds of threads, the many subjects, there. And so I clicked on that. And there were three projects that came up: *This Grief Thing*, *Sheep Pig Goat* and *The Sky is Filled with Thunder*. So, I've been looking at all those three again today, I looked at them previously, but refreshing my memory. I just wondered – there are those projects, but there might be others that you want to refer to – but I just wondered if one or both of you could give me a bit of an overview of your practice in terms of conversation, and how you feel your approach to conversation in your practice has kind of emerged over the years that you've been making art. Is that okay?

**SB:** Emerged is a good, it's a very good word.

**[…]**

**DH:** Well, this is interesting because I think there's always been something about there being two of us. I don't, I don't think a single Fevered Sleep project has ever been created that has not started with a conversation between me and Sam. So that's something really fundamental, which, you know, obviously is not unusual, for a company to have more than one artistic director or for artists to collaborate with other artists on a long-term basis. But we've been in a creative conversation together for thirty-two years, which is *madness* – since the first year of our undergraduate degree until now, been pretty much unbroken. Yeah, I think there's something about that, and actually about how different we are. We have quite different feelings and opinions about things, which has always felt really important and useful. And I think that probably the thing that first really catapulted us into wanting to open up our conversation into a conversation with other people, probably, was when we first started thinking about making work for children. Because we suddenly got really interested in, I suppose, difference and the difference between us as adult artists and children […] Yeah, us as people, us as adults, we were really interested in making work, with and for people who were really different from us in terms of their experience of

the world. And so as soon as we started making that work for children, which was around 2002 at BAC at Sarah Quelch's invitation, you know the first thing we wanted to do was get in a room with some children and talk with them about an idea and to kind of develop an idea and then develop a project through that conversation, which sometimes was literally sitting and talking about something, or like more of a creative conversation that wasn't necessarily reliant on words, but certainly involved just talking. And then I think, you know, for a number of years, we were really focused on children and work for children. And so that became really normal to us. Like, 'Oh, we've got a new idea. What do we need to do with this idea now?' The first thing we need to know go and talk with some children about this idea – what happens, the subject matter, or this possibility or whatever. Never like to ask them if they thought it was a good idea, but always to ask them what they thought about the things that we were thinking about, and to open that up. And then I think that what happened, because our work became so much better through that kind of period of thinking about children so much and because talking with them became such a fundamental part of our creative process around that work, I think that just then sort of expanded into becoming something that's really fundamental in terms of our creative process across all of our projects, not just the ones that are for children. But still I suppose really centred on our interest in difference, like different lived experiences, different points of view, different kinds of knowledge, different kinds of expertise. And yeah, one thing just to meet as many people as possible to talk about things, ultimately to help feeding…to feed into our thinking and our conversation about those things, but also to help us think and imagine and ultimately create things that we could never have done without the input of all of these different people that we've spoken with…that's part of it. And I think, I also think that we were always searching for something that felt really like normal and practical as a way of making art. And there's something so normal and practical and straightforward about just going to some people, 'Do you want to come for a cup of tea and talk about something?' But that as a *creative* process. But also, that just as *sitting with some interesting people with a cup of tea and talking*…you know, like, the complete inseparability of just making art as an artist but also just living your life as a human being with some other people. That felt really important, kind of politically and ethically as well in terms of us wanting to find a way of working as artists where we

weren't somehow supposed to be special or different or like, you know, there wasn't anything rarefied about it, it was just quite practical. So, I think that that was a thing as well that that made it a really attractive and successful way of working. So, I think that probably is a starting point. I could talk for two hours in response to that question.

**RD:** Yeah. Sam, do you have anything to add to what David's just said?

**SB:** Well, no, apart from, yeah, if I follow back the timeline, because I actually hadn't thought that, David, about the fact that, yeah, that happened way back when we started making work for children. And then, like you say, from there, every project we approached in the same way, we would just talk to people. And then I thought about when we did *On Ageing*, in which we invited a lot of people of different ages, but lots of people who were much older than us, into, yeah… for a cup of tea at the Young Vic. Tea and cake. To talk about getting older or ageing or being younger than us, or being old, you know, all that whole thing. And then at some point, that became, those conversations became part, very much...not just part of the project, they weren't just the R&D. So, they kind of morphed into, well, yeah, this is the work. This is it now. This is what we do. And we make stuff, there's a product, but this is also part of it. So it became as important. I guess for some people and for us definitely, there would have been a hierarchy around, well, this is just the stuff we're looking at and exploring, and we're going to talk to some people, but then when that, when those conversations began to feel really profound or enriching for us or enriching for the people who spoke to us, as far as we could see from feedback, well, that was the work. And our work is about making stuff that feels important or feels like it can affect change or just affect one human being in some way, and there doesn't seem to be anything stronger than, or more powerful than, a conversation, or inviting someone to a conversation, and them accepting that space with you. Yeah, so that's, that's our work. That's what we do.

**DH:** That shift happened around *This Grief Thing*, I think, the kind of shift that Sam was describing […]. I guess in what I was describing, conversation was part of the process of developing something, like there was conversation as part of a research process and then we would make the work and then what Sam described is when conversation became the work and that happened through *This Grief Thing* because as always at the

start of that project we were trying to convene meetings of people, meetings with people – then sit around, tea and cake, have a chat – in which we wanted to talk with people about grief and I think maybe even after the first one of those conversations, but definitely very, very early, you know, if not the first then the second or third…at the end of those conversations, we were getting feedback from people saying that was a really incredible, important conversation because I don't know anywhere else when I can sit in a room with strangers and talk about grief. And then as Sam said at that point, we were like, 'Ah, okay, yeah, right. That's a really valuable, beautiful thing that can just *be* the project.' That, probably more than anything now…conversation is the central form of *This Grief Thing* and you know in lots and lots of different ways that we can talk more about if that's useful but yeah…And then I think the conversations in *Sheep Pig Goat*, which were also really like fundamental to what that project was, came on the back of that experience with *This Grief Thing.* So yeah, there was a shift that happened…

**RD:** […] I just wanted to pick up on a couple of things. David, you were talking about difference and that being…kind of an interest in difference being one of the things that led you to conversation as kind of research, as part of your research process initially. But then also maybe an interest in differences persisted and that's just brought…that's also part of what's brought conversation to the centre of the actual artworks. So, I just wondered if you could just expand on that a little bit and explain that, what that interest in difference is, where that comes from and why you're sort of…yeah, well, why that's central. I did notice in advance of this, I noticed there's that blog that you've written, isn't there, about how to hold conversations? I think it's on your website or somewhere. And that's one of the things that's referred to in that…that's a sort of list, isn't it of how to… how you like to approach having conversations? […] But one of the things that you talk about is, you know, one of the lines is about difference. And yeah, I can't remember what the verb is that you put with it. But, you know, it's not 'respecting difference' it's more interesting than that. But you know, it's, yeah…So I just wondered if you could, yeah, what your thoughts are on that? And why kind of…where that sort of interest in difference…or why you think that's important?

**DH:** Yeah, I think there's a bunch of different reasons. I think, I suppose, thinking about that creatively, I think it's true to say that Sam and I don't have any particularly highly developed skill in everything, in anything. But what we're really good at is making connections between really different things, or learning enough about something to be able to hook it up with something else that we know a little a bit about. And so I think part of our creative process has always been about wanting to gather lots and lots of different things together, to then try and see patterns or connections or similarities that could give us like, if it was a performance piece, that could give us like a dramaturgical entry point into the work, or there might be a repeated image that we can go…okay, this image, like with *On Ageing*, this image of *accumulation* kept coming up through conversations with different people. So like, oh, that's an interesting concept. How would you make a piece through this lens of accumulation? So, there's like, the creative thing is about simply the very different things that people know about anything, depending on who they are and their lived experience, and wanting as many different perspectives on a single question or a subject matter as we can possibly gather in the amount of time that we've got to give us lots and lots and lots of kind of stimulus for our part of the process. And through that, and I guess alongside that, over the years that we've done that, it's become really clear to us that we have quite strong opinions about what expertise means, a really strong resistance to the notion of professional expertise being proper expertise, and even me, like, using the language about lived experience, because that… it's like, there's expertise or there's lived experience. Well, it's all expertise. Like the expertise in being alive, or continuing to…surviving. So, the knowledge or the opinion or perspective of a professional artist or an academic or a scientist, like a professional thinker and knower, like that kind of knowledge that can come to a conversation being no less or more important than the knowledge of a child or the knowledge of anybody in response to any subject matter. So, it's partly been about just wanting to be stimulated or inspired or helped by lots of different perspectives, but also by doing that to kind of insist that all of those perspectives are equal and equally valuable. That's a different thing, about who we want in those conversations ultimately and not kind of having a hierarchy about who we want to talk to. Then there's more of a, I suppose, a political answer about who we are.

**SB:** Yeah, well, because we have a…we have a feeling around sense of duty and responsibility to ensure that we're not just speaking to people who look and sound like us, and other things that are like us. We can't be making work that's for everybody if we're not speaking to everybody as much as we possibly can and really properly doing the work that is involved in bringing people together to represent, to show, to give different perspectives about being alive in this world. Actually, one of the, probably one of the, maybe one of the easiest ways of doing that, maybe what I'm about to say might be wrong – depends where you make work. Yeah. In many of the spaces that we make work… historically have done… there's too much of a certain type of person who has access to our work and therefore has the ability to talk back to us or give us feedback on whatever form it is. You know, just mirroring back at us what we've already…what we already know and what we already see or what we perceive or understand about the world. If you invite people, and truly invite, people into conversation, that's when you really get an understanding of how other people walk. And that's important to the work, but also important for us as humans, especially as we have better understanding and education about being who we are in the world and as artists as well. White artists, white middle-aged now, aren't we? White, middle-aged artists who have the privilege of receiving funding, you know. It's a responsibility and a duty and a pleasure to share power, and power can be listening to other people and inviting them into a space.

**RD:** And do you think, because there are other ways that you could do that, and you could embrace difference, and difference could be part of your work, and there probably have been other devices you've used other than conversation in projects to sort of elicit that difference, but do you think there's any particular thing about conversation which sort of helps with that approach to difference? Or anything in a good conversation, because you don't always get good conversations do you?

**DH:** Yeah, it's a really good question. Because I don't think we're ever like seeking agreement or wanting conversations to have a nice shape, that we're somehow in control of or guiding. It's okay for them to be messy and unfinished and open-ended and contradictory. So they can accommodate difference of all sorts, different points of

view, different experiences. I'm thinking there was something else about that question, which was like a third thing, but I've forgotten what it was.

**RD:** There's something, I mean, there's something that occurs to me around…I mean, you know, I think it goes back to something you said earlier, David, about the everyday, I suppose, and the…or maybe it was you, Sam, can't remember…but about the sort of, you know, familiarity of sitting down with a cup of tea and chatting, I suppose, which if you create the… you know, if you are careful about the environment you create and you are able to sort of replicate some of that familiarity, then you can make people feel comfortable, you know, they can bring themselves to a conversation in a way that maybe they wouldn't if there's some sort of level of unfamiliarity to the way you're asking them to interact, you know what I mean? Most of us do have conversations most days, don't we, in everyday life. So, I suppose we're all, to some degree…I mean, there are still kind of, you know, all sorts of privileges at play and…but we're to some degree, familiar with that form, aren't we?

**SB:** Yeah, well, I mean, that's exactly how we got to *This Grief Thing*, or the form *forms* which it comes as, becomes, is that we wanted to make a project about grief that was as far as possible accessible to most people. And the starting point for that is, well, *most* people will go into a shop, will cross the threshold to go into a shop. People understand that setting and are comfortable in it, which is why we made pop-up shops. But within the pop-up shop, then we also understand that within shops, not everywhere, if you create the right environment, then people will also feel able to talk. And that's where the conversation happens. So, you know, across a counter, or discussing the different sizes of a garment that's got text on it, or, you know…just that kind of, way that that you greet people when they come in and make them feel okay to be in a space and that again, like David was saying, it's not that kind of holy place of theatre or dance or art, which enables those conversations. So yeah, I mean, that's *This Grief Thing* in a nutshell. Alongside that, obviously we have the more…the structured conversations that we that we hold as well. But there are many, many, many conversations that happen in a *This Grief Thing* shop between one of us and another person or two of us and two other people or perching on a sofa or leaning on a counter or whatever, or outside the shop, because somebody stopped. And you know, you

notice…you can read the signs of…they kind of want to come in, but they're a bit…obviously worried about walking into a shop that says *This Grief Thing*. The conversation starts so…

**RD:** Can you talk me through that? Let's talk about *This Grief Thing* a little bit then. Can you talk to me about… so yeah, it sounds like there were different, lots of different aspects to that project. But with the kind of shop-based elements, how did that… how did that work practically? Did you just let these conversations just emerge organically, and if they happened, they happened, if they didn't, they didn't? Or did you sort of try more actively to provoke the conversation? Or, how did that work?

**DH:** There was a number of different ways. So, Sam said, just, you know, going right to the basic kind of format of that project, and in the form of a shop, certainly in the first versions of it…it kind of changed, it's been a journey…but to begin with, this kind of temporary shop that would open up. And the kind of the…the objects that we produced, like the collection of clothing and accessories and badges and postcards, and, you know, they all have words on which proposed different way of thinking or talking about grief. 'Grief is Like the Weather' 'Grief Equals Love,' or statements like, 'Don't Panic if I Cry, or 'Hold Me', or whatever. So, everything in the shop has got some kind of statement or proposition on it. It also, there's a vinyl on the window that says that it's a project that invites people to learn, think and talk about grief. And so there's a number of things that can happen in, in that space. One, as Sam said, is that people come into it because it's a shop, and there's things that they can pay what they want and buy, if they want. But, you know, literally, somebody might start to just look at all the different words that are on the different objects and then they will either start to talk with other people in the shop or often like come to the counter and start to talk with us about those words that are on the different items in the collection. So that's really deliberate, like those words are there to be used as starting points for conversation or as ways for thinking. As Sam said again, we got really good during that project at being able to tell when somebody wanted to talk but they didn't know how to start. And so we really quickly learned that all we had to say, if somebody was at the counter and they bought a t-shirt and then they were like still at the counter after they bought the t-shirt, like, 'Okay, you clearly want to talk.' So, you know, we would just say

to them, ‘What brought you here today?’ And very, very often, very often, we’d say, ‘What brought you here today?’ or ‘How did you hear about the project?’ And they would say, ‘My daughter died last year,’ or ‘My parents both died twenty years ago, and I think about them every day,’ or just like massive statements about this invisible grief that just came because someone said, ‘What brought you here today?’ Those conversations that are just completely ad hoc and completely responsive to who comes in, just flow really organically and they’re possible because people come and because people come and they want to talk. And some people need a little bit of encouragement and some people don’t. Like I remember when we took over one of the shops at the Whitworth in Manchester and that woman that came in…she literally came in, she walked to the counter and she said, ‘I feel like this, is that normal?’ I was like, ‘Yeah, that’s definitely normal because that’s how you’re feeling. However you’re feeling is exactly what you should be feeling.’ And she was like, ‘Okay, thank you’ and she walked out. Some people hear about the project and just want to come and use it, almost like a… it’s not therapy, we don’t do therapies, we don’t do counselling, but sometimes, like therapy and counselling, people just want to talk about stuff that’s hard to talk about in their usual sort of daily lives, for whatever reason. But there’s all of that happens. And the best version of that is when there might be a couple of people in the shop, and one’s talking to us at the counter, and then somebody else who’s just in the shop comes and joins the conversation. And again, that’s totally ad hoc, we don’t…we never encourage people to join it. And we never direct people or tell people, ‘Oh, why don’t you talk to them?’ We just let it happen as it does. And then the other thing that happens is that we have, we have structured conversations that are advertised, and people sign up to…which originally happened in the shop after closing time and they’re called *Grief Gatherings*. And they were the thing that, when we first started doing the R&D for that project, and we were just like, ‘Hey, come and talk to us about grief’ and people said, ‘This is a really important conversation. You should keep doing this.’ That is what a grief gathering is. It’s still just like ten or so people who sit in a circle with a drink and talk about grief for an hour and a half, which is exactly what the R&D conversation looked like. So, they’re much more formalised with an invitation and some like info in advance…that people can come to. That was like the original

version of that project where we were opening these temporary shops. I mean, since then, the *Grief Gatherings* have gone on a real journey, which we can talk more about.

**RD:** The shop idea was…what you said, Sam, it was about it being something that could land in all sorts of locations where you wouldn't normally expect to have a conversation about grief, because it's a shop and it can be in a shopping centre or on a high street or whatever. And it's a space that, yeah, like we said, it's a familiar space that…people know what the rules are to some extent, so that they're sort of comfortable with what you do in a shop and therefore that element of it... and then they can go to another…if they're at least comfortable and understand that level of engagement, then they can…there's a possibility for them making the next step and talking about the subject you're interested in them talking about.

**SB:** Yeah, yeah. And those people… some of the people who come to *Grief Gatherings* have never been in the shop. You know, we hold *Grief Gatherings* in other places, or some people come into the shop and buy a thing and never speak to… Yeah, we always, with all our projects, we're trying to offer a way in at different points for different people and different needs. So, yeah, that's always our way. How can we get them?

**RD:** With that project, with *This Grief Thing* in all its forms, it's about grief, but it also seems to be about talking about grief, it's about how we talk about grief, or how we don't talk about grief. Is that right? And so it's, that's how…why conversation came…rather than being just part of the process came to be the thing, the actual artwork, because the issue you were addressing was about how you have conversations about grief.

**SB:** Definitely, definitely.

**RD:** And where did that…all that sort of thinking and feeling process for you as a company come from? How did that emerge?

**DH:** That was just really…I was just about to say, because it was very, it was very practical and really personal, actually, in a way that our work is not normally so directly coming from us. But after my sister died, you know, like, I work in the arts, so I've got loads of really articulate, empathic friends who were really great at, like, speaking

about my grief and her death and that went on. It was really wonderful for a few months, until everyone stopped. Yeah. When I wasn't ready to stop, because one never is, of course, and I, yeah, I just said to Sam, 'I want to make a t-shirt that says, "I'm still grieving, why have you stopped talking to me about it?"' And Sam said, well, that's a great idea, we should make a project. Literally that. It is so straightforward and direct. And it was literally about the conversations that I need, as a bereaved person, have stopped. So, what can we do that enables those conversations to start again? Ultimately not for me, for anybody who is yearning for that and not able to find it. So yeah, it's probably unique in that regard as a project – that it was the absence of a necessary conversation that motivated it in the first place.

**SB:** Yeah, just also this kind of the…what's the word, the kind of… the shock for us that that was a massive part of being a human that we as artists had kind of not even covered or touched upon or even thought about, and we're like, 'Oh no, we're not leaving this. No way.' Yeah.

**RD:** Presumably through that personal experience of grief and then through starting to develop a project, an art project around that, you became aware of just what was going on culturally with the discourse around grief or the lack of discourse…You became aware of… Because it's interesting, I was, earlier on today, I began to watch one of your…one of the videos that's on your website of the, I think you call them 'grief experts,' the dialogues between the grief experts. And it was George and, is it Amanda? Is that right? Who were having, it was really…I mean, I only was able to watch about fifteen, twenty minutes. I'll watch the rest of it at another time…But it was really compelling, I thought, really interesting…George, well, both of them actually, were talking about the relationship between kind of attitudes towards death and grieving in Western culture versus other cultures, African culture and Sri Lankan culture, I think it was, was referenced. So I was just interested in sort of how that all played in…a sort of awareness of how as a culture, beyond our own kind of personal experience, we sort of approach the conversation around grief and how that sort of, you know, informed what you were doing.

**DH:** Yeah. I mean, it was very directly…We're really aware that this notion of…you know, we'll talk about like the lack of opportunities to talk about grief or why grief is

kind of culturally and socially suppressed and hidden and ignored. Why are we afraid of it? You know, we're really aware, of course, in saying any of that stuff, we're talking from a very particular perspective. But there are plenty of people for whom that is not the case. That's a cultural difference and sometimes a religious difference…not always. And that happens within our communities and within our country as different kinds of Britishness. But at the same time, in the specific context in which Sam and I live, I guess – white, British, non-religious context – there are a set of things that we can recognise as problems around…in terms of conversations around grief, and the project really deliberately speaks very directly to them. And you know, the idea of clothing did come from that kind of passing joke that I made about wanting a t-shirt, but also there's a whole cultural history of clothing being used to indicate that somebody is grieving, not necessarily to start a conversation, I mean, that's what's different about this project, like, the clothing is there to externalise some things so that it can become a starting point for a conversation, rather than, like, I think the different colours of mourning dress in Victorian times, more about, frankly, telling people whether or not a woman was available to be remarried. It's a different thing. But yeah, yeah, you're right, it's a project about talking about grief.

**RD:** Yeah. And I don't know if it was Sam or you, when we kicked off, was talking about, you know, in all your work you're looking to make some sort of change happen. So I guess, I mean, that sort of seems to be quite clear with this project that one of the changes you were looking to make happen was, in a small way, maybe make a change to how we talk about grieving and death.

**DH:** Yeah, I mean definitely. I think we probably always want to make a project where we think there is some sort of problem, a problem that we have feelings about. You know, the problem with men being in the presence of children, the problem of grief being silenced, or the problem of humans failing to understand that non-human animals feel, or whatever. So yeah, definitely with *This Grief Thing* we perceived a problem around the possibility of conversations on grief that harmed people, and we wanted to do something positive that could address that, and that might be useful as well as beautiful and kind of profound. And we're always trying to get this balance between things that feel really ordinary but also still do what great art does which is

something you know extraordinary and profound and transformative and a bit unfathomable. I don't know if there are photos on the website, so you might not be aware of it, but another aspect of *This Grief Thing* that we've done right from the beginning is there's always some kind of billboard and or poster campaign that happens, like originally in the places where the shops were, but more recently we've just done those as independent things that can just happen. And so the original billboard said, 'Why can't we talk about grief?' I mean, literally about the absence of the conversation. And it was just a big black…white billboard with black text that said, 'Why can't we talk about grief?'

**RD:** Which probably got people talking about grief, ironically… that was the intention.

**DH:** Yeah, even if it was, 'Why the hell is there a big question that says, "why can't we talk about grief?"' […] I don't know how gentle that is, probably quite forceful from some people's points of view, but just using that as a little…I don't know what it is, whether it's a provocation or an intervention or an invitation, all of those things at different times, or a suggestion. Yeah, that's interesting, actually, all the ways that in any conversation, not just the kind of conversations that we're talking about, but just in any conversation, how do they start? How do you start a conversation? Because we often start a conversation by trying to make a really good invitation to some people to come together, but also with *This Grief Thing* we tried to start conversations by suggesting ways of thinking about grief, by provoking a probably quite strong response, by putting a massive statement in a public space, different kinds of approaches.

**RD:** And it's also about having a good question, isn't it? I think sometimes conversations are about unpicking the question, aren't they? Like, you know what I mean? If it's a question like that, like you had on your billboard, 'Why don't we talk about [grief]?', there's so many things to sort of unpack there to ask yourself: 'Is that true? Do we not talk about grief?' To think about that on a personal level, 'Why don't *I* talk about grief?' 'Why don't *we*, culturally,…' you know…I don't know, there's lots to, there's lots of threads to unpick in a question.

**DH:** Yeah, and that also made me think of like improvisation, which I've not thought before. If you've asked a good question, or you've made a good statement, or

something has started a conversation…because the aims of the conversations that we have, as we've said before, you know, it's never to reach a point of agreement, it's never to find an answer, it's never to arrive at a conclusion. They're always open-ended, they usually have a time limit, but they could just actually go on forever. And there's something else about *This Grief Thing* that we should say about that, about a very, very long conversation that we're planning…a new thing that happens in the project. So, I feel like also we've developed skills around keeping a conversation going, which can feel quite similar to like improvisation in a devising context, maybe.

**SB:** Yeah, but we've also developed skills around letting a conversation stop or pause, which is another aspect of conversation. That when people are not talking, has the conversation stopped and is it okay? You know, what are the perceived rules around that? Well, for us culturally, you know, we don't really like pauses or silences. Silences are considered like a discomfort and an unease, a dis-ease. And interestingly as hosts…are we hosts? Facilitators? I don't know what we are. We're just people sat there… But you know, our instincts…also as, we're also workshop leaders and directors, and we know about energy, and our instinct is to change direction and keep it, keep the conversation alive. But when it's grief, I suppose not just grief, but in particular grief, you need those spaces. Like these are massive words coming out of people's mouths. They are deeply affecting. They're things that may never have left their body. And so not allowing those spaces to breathe and for people to let things sink in and also to allow them the possibility of starting again the conversation or starting to speak for the first time… We try to hold those, we talk about holding space, we try to hold those spaces really carefully as well. And one of our rules at the beginning of a conversation is, try not to be scared of the silences, it's okay. You don't have to worry about it, worry about the silences, just let them be. People find that really, really hard. I do too. But that's a really interesting thing. Also, because we've also started now… because we can't hold all the hundreds of conversations in all the places that people want us to…It's a wonderful thing, right? We get so many invitations or approaches [with] people saying, 'Can you please come and hold the grief gatherings?' David and I can't do it all. There are other associate artists who are doing them as well, but we started training up other artists to hold *Grief Gatherings* in the way that we do them. And

trying to get people to understand about the importance of silence is probably one of the hardest things in those. Especially artists they…from a theatre background…do not like it, you know, it's uncomfortable.

**RD:** For you, what's happening in those…I mean a whole bunch of things might be happening in those silences…why do you encourage them or why are you…yeah, happy to have, you know…what's that all about?

**SB:** I mean, there are so many ways in which people can be with other people. There are so many characters that bring themselves to conversations. There are so many personality types. There are so many people that are hurting or feeling things in different ways. And there are people who want to fill space and want to talk forever. And there are people who might just want to listen, or say…they've just come to say *one* thing, or ask a question of the other people there. And if you're not careful about holding those spaces, you know, there will be people who will fill space, we know that. That's kind of a skill. There's kind of an art in balancing all the different needs of, say, up to twelve people in a circle, and everything that they're holding. Yeah, I just think that it's really important, because I know that the person who's not said anything for forty-five minutes may have just been waiting to go [exhale] or to find the right thing that they feel able to respond to. Because if you don't leave those spaces for people to feel things in the moment, that space will get filled by someone else moving on to something else. There's so much to say about grief. There are, you know… people are desperate to speak and to share understanding. Yeah, yeah, it's, it's got to be careful. It's care. Those spaces are care. That's all.

**RD:** Yeah. And coming back, coming back to, you know, *conversation* as opposed to other forms of communication. I mean, you could have made a project, I guess, where people still gathered, came into the shop, or, you know, maybe didn't… it wouldn't take the form of a shop, but, you know, they might communicate through writing things down or have kind of pre-prepared statements about how they felt about grief, or, I don't know, whatever. And you sort of already pointed to some of the things that come with conversation that are sort of maybe useful in this context around, yeah, people feeling familiar with it. And I suppose for there to be that you know… I suppose you've just been talking about it Sam, the idea in a conversation that you can be, you can be

silent, there can be gaps, you can…I suppose a conversation is talking, listening and thinking isn't it and all those things are happening and sometimes you're thinking as you're talking, sometimes you're thinking as other people are talking, sometimes you need silence to think and process and, I don't know, but yeah just wondering what the…in the context of *This Grief Thing*, what kind of, what the kind of qualities of conversation that are useful you know…that lend [themselves] to the subject matter, or what you're trying to do.

**DH:** Because there's also…because what did you just say? You said conversation is talking, thinking…

**RD:** Listening…

**DH:** Listening…

**RD:** Might be a lot of other things as well!

**DH:** Yeah, no, I mean, that's great. But I think in *This Grief Thing*, also an immense part of the conversation is about *feeling*. Almost the conversation…Hmm, what am I trying to say? The conversation…hmm. Am I trying to say the conversation is just a mechanism, rather than the thing that...? What am I trying to say? I had it in my head, and that's twice now! It's really interesting having a conversation about conversations when you're trying to leave space for each other, not jump in when a thought pops into your head… The power in those conversations sometimes of hearing somebody say something that speaks so absolutely to your own experience, which doesn't need verbal, vocalised, spoken response, but it might produce an immense amount of feeling. I think that's also what you're talking about Sam, like the space in which those feelings can have time to breathe, and to pass, or to be acknowledged…or whatever the feeling might be, and whatever the response to it might be. The silences sometimes are the bits where the most profound work happens, because the act of talking is not the point, the act of talking is a mechanism. Yeah.

**RD:** Do you think it though has implicit in it…having a conversation, a good conversation…there's…you do it *together*, you sort of, unlike, you know, if you…if I was coming with my pre-prepared statement about how I feel about grief, which might be really heartfelt and personal, you know…could be very, you know, moving for

everybody. But it would be *my* thing, and you might listen to it, but we wouldn't sort of work it through together in the way that you do with a conversation, you know? In a sort of conversation that's a natural sort of…normal conversation, you sort of, it's full of half ideas, isn't it? And things that you start and other people finish and you must have seen that in the shop, I guess, and in the *Grief Gatherings* where people will…and also I suppose it gives space for conversations because it's not a sort of, it's not, you're not writing an essay, which has got to be sort of coherent and consistent in some ways. You can sort of…you can say one thing and then retract it, or, you know, qualify it, or even completely, you know, you can contradict yourself and say, I feel this, but I also feel the complete opposite, or… I don't know, it can be messy. It's all of that sort of messiness, isn't it? I guess, which sounds like it might be useful in terms of, you know, a big, complicated, messy subject which makes you feel all sorts of things, like grief. And that is a personal thing, very personal to you, but it's also a thing that people *can*… you know, it's a human thing, people have got a way into that, everybody has got a way into that, because we're all mortal…a way into that idea, yeah.

**DH:** There's something about what you just said…it's two, made me think two things. Like, you know those people, you know, *those people* that, like, will stay around for an after show Q&A type of thing or any other equivalent kind of setting where there's an opportunity to talk, and you quickly realise that that person is only here because they want to talk, they just want to say something, they're not actually there to have a conversation, they just want to make some statements, and they knew before they even got there what the statements were going to be that they were going to make, because they're not present in the conversation. That does happen in *This Grief Thing*. But I think we've got quite good at maybe encouraging a space in which that doesn't happen so much.

But that's not really my point. I was just thinking what you were saying, Richard, made me think about…it's been really clear that those conversations are not therapeutic, they're not therapy, they're not counselling, we're not therapists or counsellors. And so because they're not therapeutic, they're not trying to do anything, and ultimately they're not trying to fix anything. They're not trying to tell people how to feel, how to manage their feelings or what they maybe should be feeling or thinking about their

feelings. There's no end point or purpose to the conversation other than having the conversation. And so then because of that, because then we're not trying to do anything through them, I think one of the consequences of that, which is incredibly powerful, is that the conversation becomes a process between people. You were talking about the interpersonal aspect of it, like they have to happen between people. And that process…I think one of the things that people experience is that they're being really powerfully witnessed by other people, like being seen, and their grief is seen, they're seen, their feelings are seen. And it's not, it's not because…and what I'm trying to say is that isn't because I've said something about my grief and you've nodded in agreement and you understand what I've just said, it's something much more profound than that. It's like through the act of talking alongside each other in a space, we're kind of bearing witness to each other's lives and existences and trying to see each other in the fullness of who we are with, like, great care and empathy. But they're such incredible, beautiful spaces to be in. And again, that's why I think sometimes it feels really appropriate for the conversation just to ebb away for a bit. Because it's not about the talking, it's about the being together. And conversation just is a really good thing that humans have evolved as a way of being together. Yeah, I don't know if that made any sense.

**RD:** It made loads of sense.

**DH:** I think the witnessing part of it is really, really good with that project. Yeah.

**RD:** And it's interesting, quite a lot of the artists I've talked to about the role of conversation in their projects, or conversation with or between audience-participants, has referenced being seen…that phrase, 'to be seen and to be heard', you know, that idea of exactly that, to be witnessing other human beings…and that sort of feeling, I suppose… of that being a rare opportunity, for whatever reason in our lives, in our culture, maybe, that that's…I mean, obviously, that's different for different people, but generally that feeling…like maybe it's harder to come by than it should be.

**SB:** I was just going to say that…because in day-to-day life, like even amongst close friends, you rarely get to the point of…of *depth* of conversation, you know, in the same way that you do say in a *Grief Gathering* or other conversation we've set up. You know

what you're there to talk about, you don't need any of the other stuff, the peripheral…you know, the way that we communicate with people and put people at ease, you know…that's all kind of swept away, right? As soon as you start the conversation, you know that you can get right into grief immediately. I was responding to what you're saying, you know, it's a rare thing to be able to come across…really rare. When do we ever get into that space? We avoid it, don't we?

**RD:** Yeah, yeah.

**SB:** Unless we're given permission…

**RD:** Yeah.

**SB: …**just to go there.

**DH:** I think, yeah, the thing that I was just about to say was another…and this is not…I'm not trying to steer this conversation in a new direction, but I just, I feel like it's important, talking about our practice, like the conversations that we have…I was talking about our work with children being like the moment when we started to want to have conversations as part of our creative process. And then it's almost come full circle, like most of our work at the moment is co-created with children and young people in a different kind of way. And a lot of that work is about the voices of children and young people, because it's also very rare…I'm responding to what you just said Sam, about the rarity of going like deep into a conversation. Another thing which is very rare is for adults to enter into genuine, mutually respectful and balanced conversations with children and young people. It's usually either a conversation that isn't *really* a conversation, is all one directional, or it's a conversation in which the adult is not really listening or it's a conversation in which too quickly children's words are dismissed or silenced or whatever. So much of our work at the moment is about inviting young people and children to speak and inviting adults to listen to them, not necessarily in a conversational way in terms of the work that we're making, but there is something about that, there's something about the absence of a cultural, social, political conversation with children and young people that we're definitely trying to speak to.

**RD:** Tell me more about…because I listened, you've got a…it's *The Sky is Filled with Thunder,* isn't it? The project that happens with children in playgrounds. How does

that…because the recording on the website is really powerful. What's the process for developing that then? Presumably you were having conversations with those young people, those children, is that right?

**SB:** We, yeah, we gathered children together in different places. And yeah, we did do quite a lot of facilitating, because, you know, in different settings and particularly for going into schools…like this connects what David was saying…is that rarely are children given the opportunity to say what they feel or really say, you know, what their life has been like or what their life is like. I mean, not really, because most of the time, well, all humans, but particularly children, are just trying to, are just trying to get on and get through school and have friends and feel loved, you know. And those things are difficult enough without bringing all the other things that they're carrying around in their heads…they don't often unpack them and get them out so often…like in all our work with children and young people the most amount of time we spend is getting them to understand that we're not in the teacher role that we, you know, we genuinely want to connect with them, we want to hear what they think and what they want to tell us, and that's hard, that's hard to crack for all the other, you know, the rules around how to be in a space with adults and with other children, you know. So yeah, we're facilitating different ways in which we can get to those things and try, you know…a lot of trial and error, depending on the situation – how do we really get them to tell us those things? What are they…what are they…? Often children…a generalisation…but it does happen a lot. Often children will tell us things that they think we want to hear, like, 'Oh, what…why are they asking that question? What's the right answer?' You know, of course, that's the opposite of what we want. But that's very hard. That's an unlearning. That's a cultural unlearning of how children feel in relation to adults and, yeah, what their role and status is, so…

**DH:** Yeah, a really interesting outcome on that particular project...which we've only done once…we've got plans to do it again in some different places coming up. But so far, we've just done it once in Greenwich and Docklands Festival, working with some children in Thamesmead. And if I'm really honest, it was a really, really difficult process and the partnership was really, really challenging. And we went into it as kind of… I think, as you said Sam, like, we had quite conventional idea of how we might

generate… invite the children to generate words that could be recorded. So, lots of like creative workshops, imaginative exercises, invitations to go home and speak with their parents or whoever and bring back stories or songs or whatever. And that was interesting and fairly bog-standard…you know, adult artists doing some devising with some children kind of stuff. And it was kind of boring. And definitely what you just said Sam, definitely happened. Like, we were hearing something that didn't feel authentic. It felt like what a child thinks they're supposed to say in a workshop like that, working with some adults in a school setting.

**SB:** What a good child is…

**DH:** And so, by the end…and in particular, I think in that recording from Thamesmead, there's one girl's voice who is particularly present all the way through. And she, for various reasons that were largely practical, but also to do with her and how extraordinary she was, and how desperate she was to speak with me and Sam…But with her and with a lot of other children, we kind of got rid of all of that creative stuff. And we just met them in different places and talked with them. And we recorded the conversation that was going on. And that's mostly what that is made from, so it was completely improvised and completely normal in terms of a…you know, a way…just like two people talking together about something and that conversation going off in all of the different directions any conversation goes on when the two people are interested in talking together, which is what felt really unusual. Like these adults who didn't know these children, and who genuinely wanted to just have a conversation with them about who they were and what they thought about the world and the future and whatever. So, in that project, like just very, very ordinary conversation, absolutely replaced all of the sort of creative devising strategies that people like us might bring to a project. And that's really amazing and liberating in terms of how we think about it for the future. Sometimes artists overcomplicate things because we're so worried about *making* something.

**RD:** But as you say, the idea of just having a conversation, a sort of equitable conversation with a child or a young person is…that's…it's sort of unusual, isn't it? it's sort of, as a form, having a conversation [is familiar]…but having [one], you know, between an adult and a child, particularly when they're strangers, I suppose, that's an

odd, unusual thing and something that our culture is not very, sort of, comfortable with, I guess, or doesn't…you know, it's just not very present in our culture, is it?

**DH:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I mean, like with our project *We Are Not Finished*, which we made with older children, more like teenagers (whereas *The Sky is Filled with Thunder* is younger ones, primary age ones)…like, throughout the development of *We Are Not Finished* and other projects, like, the number of times that young people have said to us, like… I don't need anyone to express any kind of gratitude, but they have expressed with gratitude their feelings about the fact that somebody wanted to listen to them, and that it was an unusual experience for them to be in a space where there were adults who wanted to listen to what they had to say, and that they could feel that we genuinely wanted to listen to what they had to say. Like, it's shocking that a child might then go, 'That was amazing because no one's ever listened to me before.' Like, what the fuck, you're eighteen! But it's happened over and over again.

**RD:** Do you have any sort of theories or thoughts on why that is, that that's like that, you know, lack of natural, easy conversation between children isn't…?

**SB:** We're scared of children. We still hold that, you know, the Victorian values imposed on children, they still exist. I mean, that's how our education system is structured. It's still in that way. And an education is there to teach them very certain things with very certain outcomes. And doesn't doesn't allow for conversation, doesn't allow for opinion or ideas, creativity of thought and real expression. It's just not there's… there's no space. I keep saying 'space'. There's no room.

**RD:** Yeah. Do you feel more generally that we're…thinking about conversation in your practice…I'm interested in how it might be, maybe not on a conscious level, but how it might be sort of responding to a more general…beyond the sort of relationship with children and young people…but a more general issue with how we kind of communicate with each other as people…I don't know. I'm just very conscious of the fact that, you know, if you look at social media at the moment, I mean, it's just impossible, isn't it? To have a conversation, a public conversation with any kind of nuance or empathy. Well, it's very hard to have those conversations now. It seems increasingly hard. I mean, our politics seems to have gotten more and more polarised

and that… I just, I don't know, it feels to me like, artists like you are offering some sort of alternative approach to how we communicate with each other, which is...

**SB:** Because social media is dehumanising, and the ways in which people are, have learned or are allowed to communicate with strangers…you are required to dehumanise people, otherwise, because you wouldn't speak to someone in this way or in the same room as you in that way, you just wouldn't do that. And I think that we, I'm guessing, that we are craving the ability to get back into those positions where we can actually relate to each other with kindness and care and respect.

**RD:** I guess it goes back to that difference idea, doesn't it, you know, whether you meet difference with hostility, see differences, and this resonates with what you said about adults relating to children, you know, whether you see children, other people, as a threat, or as a sort of opportunity for learning and understanding and empathy.

**DH:** Yeah, because I was thinking…it's really interesting, isn't it, because what social media claims, or has claimed, to do, or what it was maybe originally intended to do, was to open up the possibility of connection. We can feel more connected, we can keep in touch, we can talk together, even though we're not physically together, all of those things that are absolutely to do with like a conversation with others through these formats. What characterises all of them now is people's…all the different ways that people want to *silence* other people in those conversations. So trolling, or, you know…and more broadly, off social media, like the whole thing around cancel culture, and no platforming, and 'You can't say, that you can't say that anymore.' Like, you know, for our generation, I think about Juno, you know, and some stuff that she said to me, or that you've said that she said, like, you know, young people, saying to people of our age, 'You can't say that anymore.' Rather than, and this is not a criticism of those young people, but there's something in what I'm trying to say, which is about being afraid of discomfort and being afraid of disagreement and being afraid of difference. And weirdly, sometimes the closing down of discomfort and difference gets done in the name of difference. You can't say that anymore because there are more trans people now than there used to be. And so you need to be super, super ultra-sensitive around, know, whatever it might be. And it's really weird. And I think there is something generally and culturally around like a really intense aversion to discomfort and

difficulty. And whether that's the discomfort around grief, the discomfort around talking to children, because you have to remember you have to talk in a way that you're not used to because children are different from you, or whatever. I suppose one of the things that artists maybe do better than many people, potentially, is find it easier to sit with the discomfort and hold it and not run away from it, but to stay with it, because it will produce something ultimately. I think that's what we do. And it's really interesting what conversation means in this current context where dialogue can sometimes feel like a threat.

**RD:** Yeah, it's interesting what somebody said to me the other day, just using Twitter as an example, how it used to be that the criticism of it was that, you know, it was all sort of everybody was in their own little echo chamber, so all you were hearing was, you know, repeated back to you your own, sort of, points of view more or less. But now it's gone the other way and with kind of…certainly since Elon Musk took over…that all the algorithms are ensuring that you're, you know, everybody's, you know… it's the opposite of that, but rather than meeting that difference, with interest and empathy and attempts to understand, it's all about, you know, sitting in your…you know, sitting in your camp and going, 'I'm not like that.' So, it's, yeah, it's interesting, isn't it what that's done to the kind of the conversations that we have in our culture.

How do you…just thinking about sort of disagreement and conflict and so on in *This Grief Thing* but maybe other projects, how do you…because I mean my impression just thinking about those projects was that you know they were very…you know, people were very supported in the conversations and looked after, and there's a…I mean, maybe 'consensus' isn't the right word, but there's some sense of common purpose or something…I don't know. I'm just wondering if you ever met kind of something that was a bit more conflictual, or that was where people didn't get on, or where there was real disagreement and how that played out?

**SB:** I can't actually remember a time when there has been a disagreement. I don't know, there's something about making a conversation where people know that you're meeting with respect. Like you're saying, it's a common purpose. Which is the difference between that and social media, isn't it? Because social media, you're there to go, 'Argh.' But coming, or agreeing, to a conversation, you know there's a certain

amount of, yeah, shared care and empathy, like you're saying. And, you know, I think we, for *This Grief Thing*, we've picked up a few things around sensitivities around grief and cultural sensitivity around different aspects of grief, or different types of people dying. So, you know, we will set out a few things so that people understand that, you know…one of the things is, for instance, there's no hierarchy around grief because, I mean, there *is*. The death of a child is considered probably, you know, right at the top, the most important one, which means that when people come to a conversation and there's a person there who says, 'Oh, my child died,' generally what happens is that everyone else in the conversation goes, 'I can't speak', you know, 'You've trumped me, you win', and they don't want to speak. So that obviously doesn't make for good conversation. So, we try to level it out before people begin so that they know that they have the right to speak or to exist within that conversation with whatever grief they're bringing.

**RD:** What do you say to do that? How do you frame it so that you acknowledge that? Right at the start.

**SB:** Yeah, right at the beginning when we say, yeah, well, 'In a minute we'll begin. Just a few things before we start. Don't worry about the silences. You leave the room if you want to, leave forever if you want to', you know, things like that. And that there's no, we say, 'There's no hierarchy around grief, not in this space. You can talk about whoever you want to talk about,' you know. 'You don't have to talk about anybody if you don't want to, you can talk in the abstract.' So we just set out all those things which people may be feeling or holding on to when they're entering that conversation, like, ah, you know, 'What if I can't do that?' They're sort of, 'What if I've said the wrong thing?' So, I think we've pretty much evened out all the possible tensions that might exist before people feel that they're able to be in that conversation with other people, yeah. Yeah, and also one of them being also that […] the other thing is around feelings, going back to feelings that we're talking about, because, you know, culturally emotion, any big emotion, is not… is still taboo. It's not, you know, 'You don't need to bring it, you know, you don't need to, you don't need to start crying.' Everyone starts panicking. That's one of our phrases, 'Don't panic if I cry,' you know, because like, 'I've upset someone.' So, if someone cries, that's immediately a problem. Well, we've tried to say,

'It's not a problem. If you want to cry, we don't care.' Also, 'If you want to be really angry…' There's a lot, there's a lot of anger around grief, and that's also *not allowed*, but it *is* in our conversations. 'You want to be angry? Swear? It doesn't matter what. Do what you want. Bring any feeling.' So, yeah.

**RD:** And do you put any kind of rules around how people should respond to other people? I mean, you encourage them to listen, or maybe that just happens naturally.

**SB:** It happens. We really don't need to say very much. In fact, we say very little, that's an important thing as well – David and I try not to speak, unless people are really stumbling, you know, really trying hard, we don't have to.

**RD:** The people, what are the sort of patterns, do people…just in terms of responses, do people tend to say, you know…if somebody's spoken for a minute or two about their grief, and maybe they've talked about the individual that, an individual that's died, do they…? I mean, you get a whole range of responses presumably. Sometimes it just sits in the silence. Other times a lot of times people say, 'Oh, I'm so sorry. That sounds…' you know, 'I feel for you'… All of that?

**DH:** Yeah, yeah. To start the conversation, we don't ask people…we start the conversation by asking people, 'How would you describe grief to somebody who had never experienced it?' Yeah. Rather than, 'Why are you here?' or 'Are you grieving? Who are you grieving for?' But more of a like a conceptual, really open question, and then some people respond to that very directly by referring immediately to their personal experience, but a lot of people don't, and it kind of goes from that. Somebody will say something, whoever wants to propose a response to that question will propose it, and then usually what happens is that then someone goes, 'Oh yeah, like you said…' and that kind of, there's a layer of that that builds up, the kind of responsiveness, and then probably around that point we start to get the kind of big, like, personal disclosures that then yeah…

**RD:** So those *Grief Gatherings*, do you… is it one of the conditions that you need to have… need to feel like you have been through.

**SB:** No.

**DH:** This is the bit where we tell you about our experience, me and Sam.

**SB:** Yeah, I mean, very quickly, the other thing about our personal experience is that David has been through extreme grief and I, at the age of fifty-two, have still not ever experienced that. And so, in a way, I think that's helpful in these conversations. Because if one of the problems around grief is that people don't know how to respond, or don't know what to say, or find difficulty talking about it, it's the people who've not experienced it who really need to know that, so that they can, you know, have a conversation with someone about their grief. And it's extremely helpful for me to sit there, hand up, and say, 'Not been through this.' And also that, therefore, anyone is invited to that conversation.

**RD:** Okay. Yeah. I was talking to somebody the other day about what they called 'anticipatory grief' or something like that, which really struck me because I'm basically like you, Sam, I've been close to people that have gone through really traumatic grieving processes. But never personally lost anybody that's been so close to me that *I've* been through that. But really related to the idea [of anticipatory grief]… often think about with, you know, elderly parents and other…you know, and just people that I love, whatever age they are. As soon as you love somebody, you know, that there's the possibility of that happening, whatever age they are, yeah. So, you can sort of…I'm sure it's not like the actual process of losing somebody and grieving, but it's a sort of interesting thing to, emotionally and intellectually, to sort of work through, isn't it? To sort of think, you know, feeling like you're in some sense in the waiting room for that. You know, unless you go yourself before that happens, then it you know, it will come down the track. Yeah, which is a different...Yeah, it's a sort of, there's a sort of anxiety attached…for me anyway, an anxiety attached to that, like a fear of how I will feel, you know, a sort of, 'Will I be able to cope?' type feeling, I suppose. Yeah, will I…? Yeah, and probably those things that you were sort of dealing with in that project, 'Will I feel the right things?' Or, you know, not that there are right things to feel, but you know, you think that even if you then think, 'Oh, don't be silly, that's not…' you know, 'Feel what you feel'…

**DH:** I think like in this in *This Grief Thing*, I don't know, like, you're saying that about anticipatory grief and why that why that happens, why people start to feel those

intense negative feelings before they even need to. And it's evolved for a reason, like it's…it serves a function, which is something to do with survival and preparing for something transformative, whatever it might be. But then whilst you were talking and I was thinking that thought about survival, I was then thinking about survival more broadly and going, 'Why did conversation evolve in the first place, like for us as a species?' I don't know why, I'm not an anthropologist, but the image that came to my mind is that moment when one ancient human picked up a rock and was about to murder the other one. The other one went, 'Wait, I want to say something.' [They] started talking and then that death didn't happen. It's like, maybe it's simple, maybe it is… maybe we talk because it helps us survive. And on a project like *This Grief Thing* where the conversation is so, gets so deep, deep down under the skin and the surface and it becomes a conversation about something so fundamental about life and what it is to be human, I do think it's about survival. And that's really different from the other conversations that we have, which are about developing a project or whatever but… We don't talk because it's fun. We talk because it helps keep us alive.

**RD:** I sometimes think 'negotiation' is a good word. Because even in the sort of humdrum conversations you might have in the shop every day, or the work conversations about, you know…with one or more other people, you're trying to negotiate an answer or a way forward. You're trying to agree something that isn't… that is, you know, complicated enough that you need to have a conversation. You're not just handing something over and somebody's…, you need to figure something out. 'I want one of those please. Is that okay?' You know, 'How much is that?' you know. But then then also, the sort of deeper conversation, you might have is… you're still, it's still that sort of negotiation, isn't it? Still trying to work something through, working something out with other people, that maybe doesn't have such a neat end point, but you know, it's still that sense of working through.

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