

## **Chapter 6: Stan's Cafe**

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Since the early 1990s, the prolific Birmingham-based theatre group Stan's Cafe has built a reputation for artistic innovation that stretches beyond UK borders. Its projects range across theatre, film and live art, and have been presented in a wide range of spaces, with inventive and critical uses of scenography and technology. Whilst articulating a strong interest in global concerns, its work is often underpinned by a local remit; this dual focus on the local and the global chimes with its environmental ethic, visible in its practice and process. The group has also produced an extensive educational portfolio, working closely with children, adolescents and university students.

Stan's Cafe's 'brandless brand' (Yarker, 2008a) ethos resists the ways in which the theatre industry and the academy categorize artistic work, and this can partly account for the sporadic academic attention it has so far received. Through mapping the company's diverse working practices and aesthetics, this chapter aspires to bridge this gap, drawing attention to its uncompromised style and innovative methods, as well as its international reach. It will further examine how the company's stylistic experiments and uses of theatricality match an often explicit political engagement with contemporary reality, encompassing concerns about 'home' and the global.

### **History of the Company's Artistic Development and Methodology**

Stan's Cafe is a non-profit theatre company founded in 1991 by James Yarker and Graeme Rose (both graduates of Lancaster University), which operates under Yarker's artistic directorship. In 1995, Rose formed another theatre company, The

Resurrectionists, but has maintained his affiliation to Stan's Cafe as an associate artist and leader in education projects. Craig Stephens, the company's associate director, has also performed in most of their shows. The company employs a number of freelance staff, including actors, composers, photographers and technicians; long-term devisers and performers include Amanda Hadingue, Heather Burton, Gerald Bell, Bernadette Russell, Sarah Archdeacon and Jake Oldershaw. It also has a general manager, Charlotte Martin, and an advisory producer, Nick Sweeting,<sup>i</sup> as well as a Board of Directors chaired by Alan James.

Stan's Cafe (pronounced Caff) was named after a restaurant off Brick Lane: 'Stan's Cafe the place was somewhere people were welcome, but gave them things they needed like food and warmth at a low price and where they had a chance to dream a little' (Tushingam, n.d.). The company's press releases and theatre programmes always highlight the correct pronunciation of its name to mark the fact that Stan's Cafe aims at engaging wider – rather than elite – audiences: 'In Britain a Caff is a place workers go to drink big mugs of tea and eat unhealthy fried breakfasts of bacon, egg, sausage, tomato, etc. A Café, pronounced with the 'e', is a delicate and pretentious place, not somewhere we feel so comfortable' (Stan's Cafe, n.d.a., 6).

The decision to choose Birmingham as its base was primarily underpinned by practical reasons, such as the fact that it was 'cheap to live and easy to tour from', but also due to circumstance, as, at the time, the city was undergoing major restructuring that benefited the arts (Stan's Cafe, n.d.b.). Throughout the years, Stan's Cafe's work has been embraced by a number of enthusiastic supporters who have offered the company the opportunity to perform at local and international level. During its early stages of development, the group toured its small-scale productions *Perry Como's Christmas Cracker* (1991) and *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (1992) without any public

funding, while rehearsing in various spaces such as schools, community halls and mac birmingham (then Midlands Arts Centre). Its site-specific *Canute the King* (1993), presented in Moseley Baths, Birmingham, helped to raise the company's profile in the city (Yarker, 2007a). In 1994 Stan's Cafe received its first grant from the Arts Council of England (ACE) for *Bingo in the House of Babel*, while in 1996 it won the Barclays New Stages Award for *Ocean of Storms* which was performed at the Royal Court Upstairs.<sup>ii</sup> Since the mid-1990s, the group has been regularly supported by ACE and other organizations, and commissioned by international theatres, which has allowed it to constantly push its artistic portfolio in different directions and attract more audiences across the globe.

As a local arts company, Stan's Cafe has been closely associated with mac Birmingham (mac), one of the city's best known theatre venues for commissioning new work, and served as one of its resident companies between 1997 and 2001. Dorothy Wilson, mac's director of programming in the 1990s and later chair of the Board of Stan's Cafe, booked its first two pieces and later offered the company space to rehearse (Yarker, 2007b). Alan James, another early advocate of Stan's Cafe, also commissioned projects such as *The Black Maze* in his capacity as programme manager of Birmingham City Council's Forward Festival and programmer for mac.

By 1994, Stan's Cafe had secured its first international gig with *Bingo*, performed at Théâtre 95 in the outskirts of Paris (Cergy), yet its work only began to receive sustained international attention after 2000, when it started touring *It's Your Film* (2003). The piece was performed in a number of high profile venues and at international festivals under the auspices of the late Marie Zimmermann, the renowned German theatre producer and artistic director of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen). Zimmermann later commissioned the world version of *Of All*

*the People in All the World*, which premiered in Stuttgart in 2005, and *The Cleansing of Constance Brown* presented at the Vienna Festival in 2007. More commissions came from Frankfurt's Mousonturm Künstlerhaus for *Be Proud of Me* (2003), from Los Angeles' Skirball Cultural Centre for *Exodus Steps* (2013) and from Montpellier's Domaine d'O for *Apollo Steps* (2010) and *The Cardinals* (2011).<sup>iii</sup> *Of All the People* has so far been performed across more than fifty cities around the world, whilst other shows, such as *The Black Maze* and *The Cleansing*, have toured widely within and outside the UK. This international recognition has inspired a heightening of the company's national profile: in 2012, it received a commission for *Golden Steps*, presented as part of London's 2012 Cultural Olympiad. *Golden Steps* created a designated route for visitors travelling from Euston Station to St Pancras along prints that commemorate twelve golden International Olympic medals, and forms part of the company's *Steps Series* whereby audiences are invited to 'plot their own way around a set of vinyl footprints, handprints and script fragments' (Yarker, 2007a).

Stan's Cafe's commitment to 'home' and the 'local' is mirrored in its support of Birmingham's arts scene; it has been nominated for, and won, a number of awards, such as the Creative City Award (Creative Industries Awards 2008) and the Invisible City Award (2010) in recognition of its ongoing contribution to the city's arts sector. In 2008, the company used a vacated space in the premises of A.E. Harris & Co (Birmingham) Ltd, located in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, to stage the UK premiere of the 'world version' of *Of All the People* and secured the space full-time between 2009–13.<sup>iv</sup> During this time, A.E. Harris became not only a home for Stan's Cafe's shows, but also a hub of creative activity for Birmingham and the West Midlands; it has been used as a rehearsal and performance space for artists and local

companies such as Kindle, Little Earthquake, ARK Theatre, The Happiness Patrol and Untied Artists. A.E. Harris has also hosted showcasing events such as Pilot Nights, and an early edition of China Plate's Bite Size festival.<sup>v</sup> Most significantly, the company was instrumental in founding and hosting the acclaimed annual BE Festival, a theatre festival that brings together emerging European artists with the aim of forging artistic networks, and increasing the exposure of Birmingham audiences to cutting-edge European work.

Stan's Cafe has developed highly original and versatile vocabularies that cut across a range of artistic techniques. Its body of work includes site-specific, immersive and durational performance, non-text-based and scripted projects, and the frequent use of music in place of text. By refusing to adhere to a predominant aesthetic, the company problematizes labels such as 'physical theatre' or 'visual performance' (Stan's Cafe, n.d.c.), and mixes different genres, such as puppet theatre (*The Cardinals*, 2011), docudrama (*Home of the Wiggler*, 2006), dark thriller (*Be Proud of Me*, 2001), sound installation (*Broadway Hertz*, 1993) and radio show (*Tuning Out with Radio Z*, 2010); on other occasions, it invents new styles such as in the case of *Lurid and Insane* (2001), presented in the form of a live concert and described as 'performance obituary'.

A common denominator in Stan's Cafe's artistic portfolio is the choice to eschew mimetic representation, and its attempt to 'convince someone about something which is blatantly untrue' (Yarker, 1996). This critique is mirrored in the group's DIY aesthetic, including simple costumes and sets made from recycled material, and an array of anti-mimetic and self-reflexive stylistic vocabularies also encountered in work produced by other theatre companies working in the 1990s, such as Forced Entertainment, Reckless Sleepers and Third Angel: fragmented

characterization and storytelling; heightened theatricality; critique of grand narratives and interrogation of the 'real'. Performers often embody a range of different characters within the same piece, commenting on the failure to 'represent' or to 'perform' by trying 'to get the story right'. This critique of representational practices can be read in the light of Sara J. Bailes's study of contemporary performance companies and, specifically, her notion of 'the poetics of failure' which seek to undermine 'the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality' and offer 'an opening into several ... other ways of doing that counter the authority of a singular or "correct" outcome' (Bailes, 2011, 2). For example, in Stan's Cafe's *Good and True* (2000), questions around common sense, representation and authority are explored in the form of self-reflexive exercises and misunderstandings rehearsed in the guise of a pseudo-interrogation scene and slapstick role-playing, where false or unreliable evidence is presented (for example, a child's drawing) to 'prove' the culpability of the person in the hot seat. *The Cardinals* (2011), where three cardinals seek to narrate the history of the world through the Bible, is also replete with slapstick moments of mismanagement and 'accidents' or 'misfires' on stage that undermine the 'authenticity' of the story being told. Moments such as a Handel piece played on an old-fashioned tape recorder being unexpectedly interrupted by Prodigy's 'Smack My Bitch Up', overwritten 'by mistake', disrupt the scene's flow and reverential tone.

Rupturing mimetic representation and the illusion of reality is further achieved by an emphasis on theatricality, often illustrated by revealing 'the act of acting' (Heddon and Milling, 2006, 209). This does not involve the adoption of performance personae such as in the case of Forced Entertainment; rather, Stan's Cafe tackles character largely through an exploration of Brechtian *Gestus* which, according to Patrice Pavis, 'radically cleaves the performance in two blocks: the shown (the said)

and the showing (the saying)' (1982, 45). In a number of their productions, the distinction between character and actor is rendered visible through devices that draw attention to the performer's physical effort as a commentary about the story being told (*Home, The Cardinals*), and by foregrounding the theatre frame (*The Just Price of Flowers*).

In the context of postmodern performance, scholars such as Philip Auslander (1997, 60) and Dee Heddon and Jane Milling (2006, 204) have located the 'political' in the ways in which contemporary theatre companies challenge representational frames and grand narratives that construct 'reality' and dictate singularity of meaning. Lehmann's 'politics of perception' (Lehmann, 2006, 175–87) in postdramatic theatre further draws attention to theatre's potentiality to invoke a 'response-ability' that might overcome the desensitization of audiences towards current political issues. Stan's Cafe's engagement with the political is manifest in different ways across the company's trajectory: while its earlier work was mostly interested in identity (Yarker, 2008b), it later shifted attention to the exploration of new relationships with the audience, and articulated a more explicit political commentary that is uncommon in much of the performance work that shares a comparable postmodern aesthetic. In its negotiation of the relationship between form and content, the group's millennial work asks crucial questions regarding local and global inequalities, (neoliberal) capitalism, ecology, power and the war on terror, and invites 'other' ways of seeing and imagining the world. Further, the company toys with the concepts of space and place by borrowing elements from the traditions of site-specific art and digital technologies to examine the impact of global realities and 'space and time compression' (Harvey, 1990, 284) on notions of identity, home and the 'local'.

Stan's Cafe devises collaboratively and stresses the importance of shared ownership, although Yarker maintains a leadership role within the group, initiating projects and doing most of the writing, directing and dramaturgy.

As artistic director I tend to bring the core ideas to the table for each new project. These may well have been influenced by discussions with other company members, they may arise out of previous shows we have worked on or common lines of thought, but I tend to set the agenda first off. (cited in Heddon and Milling, 2006, 213)

The devising process continues after the premiere, with Yarker swiftly responding to comments with further edits and improvements.

Stan's Cafe's starting points range from found objects (such as two cans of beer – *Voodoo City*), design concepts (*The Cleansing*), real people (Eric Satie – *Memoirs*) and events (the closure of the Longbridge Rover factory – *Home*), while further inspiration is drawn from the visual arts. Additional material derives from various sources such as biography, newspaper cuttings and phrasebooks.

Improvisation is key to the creation of the work and the consolidation of its aesthetic; the company's devising process is also bound to a set of 'rules' which either precede the development of a piece or are discovered throughout. For example, the silent *Simple Maths* (1997) was rooted in a structural principle resembling musical chairs, while *Be Proud of Me* was based on the idea of using slides and foreign language phrasebooks. Nevertheless, in some cases, those initial rules have been selectively broken: for *Tuning out with Radio Z*, another largely improvisatory theatre piece in the form of a radio show, the company had initially agreed that the radio station would be set somewhere specific (a hospital, the FBI headquarters), but in the end



decided against setting it in a fictional place, and presented it in the event of the performance (Yarker, 2013).

Two significant aspects of the group's working method are uses of set and technology. Scenography is integral in the conceptual framing of its pieces, such as in the case of *The Cleansing* where the use of a glass pane generated ideas for the shaping of the whole piece. Nevertheless, the company has not always collaborated with professional set designers:

With set design so often wrapped up in the conception of Stan's Cafe shows there often doesn't seem an obvious point at which [to] bring a designer in, especially as devising often advances in unpredictable leaps often away from rehearsals regardless of timetabled meetings. With the logic of performance bound up with the rules of the set this is a sensitive area to invite strangers into, so usually we don't. (Yarker, 2007c)

Both digital and more traditional technologies have contributed to the aesthetic and conceptual shaping of the company's projects, often borrowing from cinematic, radio and optical illusion techniques. Nevertheless, Yarker has been quite critical of what he terms 'the banal, push-button, Prozac primate stimulation' promoted by digital realms that stultify participation and connection with others (Yarker, 2008c). It is for this reason that Stan's Cafe avoids placing technology 'centre stage as the main attraction', or 'fetishising "the new" for the sake of its novelty' (Yarker, 2004), and often explores ways of using technical equipment that facilitates audience engagement. For example, *Tuning Out* is played live to two audiences, as it is broadcast digitally while also including direct audience participation in the live performance, inviting emails and texts from both audiences to be incorporated in the show. On the contrary, in *Home*, technical equipment draws attention to the impact of

wasting resources: stage lighting is generated by the performers with the aid of ‘[a]n exercise bike and twelve speed racer [which] have been customised with dynamos and switches to run seven lights, a kettle and a home-made turntable’ (Stan’s Cafe, 2006b).

Experimentation with ways to engage audiences is a chief concern, and viewing is regarded as a ‘participatory and creative act’ (Yarker, 2001a). As Yarker argues, one of their fundamental artistic principles is to treat audiences as ‘collaborators’, reflecting Howard Barker’s idea of ‘honouring’ the audience as ‘a partner’ (Yarker, 2001a). In this light, spectatorial engagement is facilitated by offering ‘provocative material to work with and space to do that work’, and inviting ‘the creation of personal poetic links between passages, motifs and ideas’ (Yarker, 2001a). This does not exclude more direct participation, as a number of projects invite various means of audience contribution; for example, *Lurid and Insane*, which adopted the form of a music gig, included live interaction with the audience in the form of mini-interviews.

The company’s interest in finding forms that match the content of its piece (Yarker, 2013) underpins its intention to ‘promot[e] the possibility of alternative ways of looking at the world and alternative value systems’ (Yarker, 2008b). This emphasis on the ‘alternative’ mirrors an opposition to the hegemony of the neoliberal market that permeates contemporary art. Yarker exemplified the company’s vision in the context of its Future Arts Symposia, a festival Stan’s Cafe organized in 2000 in collaboration with a range of individual artists and arts organizations, which sought to explore ‘New Art for the New Century’ and to build audiences for new work:

Our art is trying to promote the possibility of an alternative worldview: not a specific ideology but the possibility of something that is outside of the market,

outside sporting competition, outside conventional consumerism, an alternative way of thinking, a glimpse into some other world. (Yarker in Stan's Cafe, 2001, 28)

The above critique of consumerist ethos and commodified art is further made palpable not only in the questions that Stan's Cafe asks in the body of its work, but also through its diverse artistic approaches and resistance to branding, combined with belief in 'the freedom of not-theatre' (Yarker, 2007a). While allowing the group to experiment with style, space, set and performer/audience relationships and to engage with local and global communities, this freedom has produced certain challenges, working against basic business principles that would enable them to become more recognizable:

[g]ood business sense would be to knock out at frequent, predictable intervals, shows which, though different from each other, are consistent in their form and tone. Instead we pursue whatever ideas interest us in whatever directions they lead us, regardless of what art form they may wander into and whether they are "the kind of thing we do". (Yarker in Stan's Cafe, 2001, 28)

The lack of an apparently consistent identity in Stan's Cafe's portfolio requires that each piece is promoted from scratch, which renders the loyalty of venues hard to sustain, as promoters find it difficult to be confident of what they are booking and to frame it appropriately within their programme. This was the case for *Of All the People*, which was not initially accepted as part of the 2004 Edinburgh Showcase because the festival originally labelled it 'live art' rather than a piece of theatre (Arts Council England, 'Stan's Cafe', 13).

Another significant dimension of Stan's Cafe's work is its educational remit, which so far translates into more than thirty collaborations with schools and

university students on projects closely attached to its creative work and methods. These range from devised pieces, to video projects and installations following the ‘principles of individual expression, ensemble playing and active hands-on learning’ (Yarker, 2006). A salient example of such practice is *Plague Nation* (2004), created with schools in Birmingham, Bristol and Nottingham. The project stemmed from the rationale of *Of All the People* and aimed to explore statistics on epidemics such as AIDS and the history of vaccination. As Simon Parry notes, students that participated in the project ‘saw and reflected on how they were situated in relation to other people in the world’ (Parry, 2010, 328). Stan’s Cafe is adamant that its education work cannot be classified as TIE, but rather views it as ‘an important investment in audience development and the future prosperity of the theatrical form’ (Stan’s Cafe, n.d.c.), as well as a means of aiding participants to ‘gain the creative confidence and skills they will require to fend for themselves successfully in the future’ (Yarker, 2008b).

Stan’s Cafe continues to produce new work whilst touring other repertory shows across the UK and abroad; in 2013, they presented their adaptation of Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* at Warwick Arts Centre and the Birmingham REP, and *The Cardinals* at London’s Mime Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. *Of All the People* reached Perth, Australia and was later brought back to Birmingham, celebrating the show’s tenth anniversary.

## **Funding**

Originally self-funded, Stan’s Cafe started receiving small project grants (up to £5,000) from West Midlands Arts, the Arts Council of England (between 1994–2002), Birmingham City Council (until 2010), and mac (Stan’s Cafe, n.d.c.). The company benefited from the New Labour government’s support for the arts; in the

wake of the 1999 Theatre Review that looked to invest additional money across the theatre sector, it was included in the ACE's portfolio of independent, regularly funded West Midlands theatre companies, together with Coventry-based Talking Birds and Theatre Absolute. It secured Key Regional Organization status (KRO) in 2002 before switching to Regularly Funded Organization status (RFO) in 2007 (Gagen, 2013). This first stable funding was crucial for its further development, as it was used 'to supplement an income generated through performances, education projects, speaking engagements and the hire of high end video gear ... acquired through a capital arts lottery bid in 1996' (Stan's Cafe, n.d.d.). It further supported Stan's Cafe's investment in 1,000 kg of rice for its performance installation, *Of All the People*, a risk worth taking as this project single-handedly increased the group's public funding sufficiently to enable it to appoint a full-time administrator and a production manager, and to gain greater access to 'European funding streams' (Arts Council England, 'Stan's Cafe', 15). The growth of its turnover was positively acknowledged by ACE as evidence that Stan's Cafe offered 'excellent value' which, in turn, helped to increase its funding throughout the years, reaching £100,000 in 2008/9 (Stan's Cafe, n.d.c.). At the time of writing, Stan's Cafe is included in the ACE's National Portfolio scheme, which from April 2012 replaced the previous regular funding programmes, having secured £461,192 funding for the period 2012–15 and £470,594 for 2015–18.

According to Alison Gagen, Arts Council Relationship Manager for Theatre in the Midlands and a long-time advocate for the company, the success of Stan's Cafe's application is largely due to its strong international profile, educational remit and digital engagement, which fulfil key objectives set by ACE's National Portfolio funding programme (Gagen, 2013). ACE has also recognized the company's generosity in sharing A.E. Harris with emerging and more well-known artists and

companies; in 2010 it was awarded a two-year £60,000 subsidy (2010–12) under the ACE's 'Grants for the Arts' scheme, to support the running of the venue as a space for creative activity in the region.

The company has received further support from the British Council to showcase *It's Your Film*, *Of All the People*, *The Cleansing*, *The Cardinals* and *Home* in international festivals and venues in cities such as Edinburgh, Tokyo, Bucharest, Buenos Aires and Beijing. In 2004, it also secured a grant from the Wellcome Trust's Pulse scheme for *Plague Nation*. Another regular funding supporter has been Birmingham City Council, which has acknowledged Stan's Cafe's work with the community and contribution to the city's cultural life (Blackaby, 2008; Woolman, 2010). Due to cuts made by the government to Birmingham City Council's budgets in 2010, Stan's Cafe has now lost this source of revenue, yet Yarker admits that the company is in 'a fairly strong position' as a result of the income generated from its international touring: '[b]eing independent, we can be flexible, innovative and light on our feet. So hopefully that means we will be able to absorb most of the blows. Saying that, these are still very scary times' (cited in Jackson, 2010).

## **Key Work Produced in this Period and its Impact**

### ***It's Your Film* (1998)**

*It's Your Film* is the most widely performed Stan's Cafe's project (4,500 shows) to date; it is a silent, four-minute piece, with a film noir aesthetic, performed to one audience member. It was originally commissioned by Birmingham's Bond Gallery in 1998, which liberated Stan's Cafe 'not just from the conventional finances and architecture of a theatrical institution, but ... from all the baggage that a theatre show made for a theatre has placed upon it' (Yarker, 2007a). The company here experiments with illusion and presence using a cinematic vocabulary of 'long shots,

close ups, exteriors, interiors, cuts' (Stan's Cafe, n.d.a., 2) and simple technological devices (video projector, lighting and a glass pane to produce a Pepper's Ghost effect) that merge film and theatre in innovative ways.

'By pretending to be a film and then doing a thing film cannot do but theatre can' (Stan's Cafe, n.d.a.,7), *It's Your Film* toys with notions of witnessing and action, illusion and the real, producing, in Liz Tomlin's words, 'a self-aware experiment in simulation' (Tomlin, 2004, 509). Audience members enter a photo booth alone and, through a small rectangle glass that serves as screen, they watch the actions of two characters (a private eye and someone in search of his lover) whose images fade into each other.<sup>vi</sup> Action is performed live behind the booth, thus the cinematic illusion is often ruptured by the sound produced by the performers' bodies and their direct eye contact with the spectator (Yarker, 2013). The reflexive merging of cinematic and theatrical devices then collapses the distinction between the two media, while opening up a space in-between. The displacement of both artistic boundaries has a further impact on practices of viewing and perceiving. In the final scene, the spectator becomes the lead protagonist in the story as he or she ends up 'looking at [his/her] own reflection, travelling by car through a city at night' (Stan's Cafe, n.d.a., 4). This symbolic 'entrance' in the cinematic frame foregrounds his/her involvement as 'witness and protagonist in their own live action film' (Yarker, 2008b). At the same time, in his/her effort to experience the different layers that the piece offers, the spectator 'undergoes', as Sarah Gorman observes, 'a kind of physiological disorientation' (Gorman, 2010, 273) that chimes with the experience of displacement brought by 'space and time compressions' (Harvey, 1990, 284).

Despite its short duration, *It's Your Film* has enjoyed wide success in its international tour; it is one of the earliest examples of one-to-one performance, well

before the rapid growth of the genre in the mid/late 2000s, and also significantly differs in approach from many subsequent models: instead of placing emphasis on the physical presence and proximity between performer and audience, their connection is mediated through the use of different technological devices and framing.

### ***Of All the People in All the World (2003)***

*Of All the People* or 'The Rice Show' is Stan's Cafe's most renowned project to date. The piece is a performance installation that opened at Warwick Arts Centre, and was later showcased in the context of the inaugural Informal European Theatre Meeting (IETM) held in Birmingham for the first time in 2003 (Arts Council England, n.d., 11). This paved the way for the first international commission of the piece's world version by Theater der Welt in Stuttgart and the Edinburgh Fringe in 2005, prior to its numerous productions across Europe, the US, Canada, Asia and Australia.<sup>vii</sup>

As the company admits, their various travels across different cities created a sense of 'being on the lip of a vast landmass' which they wished to probe further (Yarker, 2005). The project grew out of the need to explore how we experience place and the world at large and to understand the number of people we share the planet with. *Of All the People* scales down the world, and creates new global geographies, using rice as a metonymy for human life. Rice was chosen due to its durability, texture, size, cheap price and its 'humanoid' shape (Stan's Cafe, 2003). Upon entry, each member of the audience is given a single grain to represent him/herself. Piles of rice of variable sizes are placed across the space, labelled and grouped together to suggest a particular narrative; the number of grains on each pile is determined by statistical data that represent facts about populations of the city and/or country in which the show is being performed, sourced by the company and in consultation with audiences. Performers, dressed in plain factory clothes, weigh rice quantities using



scales, conduct research, print labels and reshape the installation landscape by adding more piles as the show progresses.

The company applies a reflexive dramaturgy to represent space, place and asymmetrical power structures through statistics, and promotes a critical spectatorial engagement. According to Nicola Shaughnessy, the piece invites ‘an embodied perceptual experience in which we are both critically and creatively engaged. Our affective understanding is created through embodied spectatorship (and we might argue critical empathy)’ (Shaughnessy, 2012, 127). The spatial arrangements of the piles carry poignant political significations, unpacking, among other ideas, issues about life, death, health, mobility and precarity. The piles also include contrasting statistics such as the Twitter followers of Kylie Minogue or the people who watched the Eurovision Song Contest. The organic continuity across the project’s different incarnations is evidenced by each show’s engagement with the local community: statistics relevant to the place where the piece is staged (historical facts, population data) are included, some of which are carried through in subsequent showings. Comparisons are often drawn across the global and the local, facilitating a clearer understanding of the evidence; for example, in the exhibition held in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, for the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival (part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad), the number of people who left their homes due to the violence in Syria was compared with the population of Birmingham. Other shows comment on the implications of the uneven distribution of wealth globally and in the planet’s overpopulated areas. In Perth, Australia, the company used statistics that commented on food waste: for example, a huge pile represented the amount of food wasted in China each day, while each grain stood for a person who could live on that food. The performative power of such a dramaturgy further rests, as Parry

suggests, in ‘the spectacular visual impact of the size of the piles and the totality of the installation’ (Parry, 2010, 326), which reverses the alienating impact of numbers.

As Yarker observes:

It’s quite difficult to understand what it means when you hear that two million children will die this year from diseases for which a vaccination exists but when you see two million grains of rice and a piece of paper, suddenly that becomes a very shocking, powerful statistic. (Yarker, cited in Parry, 2010, 325)

In reconfiguring the world, and engaging the participants in an ‘embodied perceptual experience’, this work forges new readings of world ecologies, interconnectedness and social responsibility towards local/global cultures of waste. The piece’s political ecology is further illustrated by the ways in which Stan’s Cafe disposes of the rice: the company owns one ton of rice which is reused for UK shows, while elsewhere promoters are responsible for supplying and disposing of it either by returning it to the supplier for washing and resale, or by donating it to charity or for animal feed (Parry, 2010, 325).

The world version commissioned by Theater der Welt’s Marie Zimmermann in Stuttgart attracted the attention of international promoters to the company’s other work, and resulted in more commissions from venues in Europe and beyond, such as Toronto (2009), Tokyo (2010) and Washington, D.C. (2010). The piece was used as a springboard to create educational projects in schools, such as *Plague Nation* (2004) and its subsequent incarnation *Smartie Mission* (2009), led by Year 5 Birmingham students who were asked to represent different facts, from the world’s tallest buildings to the victims in Gaza, using food material (Stan’s Cafe, 2009d).

***Home of the Wiggler (2006)***

*Home* is another project that encapsulates Stan's Cafe's ongoing ecological concerns, and their commitment to finding forms that match the political content of their work. Funded by Birmingham City Council's Arts Programme, it opened at mac in 2006 and subsequently at A.E. Harris in 2009, followed by a regional tour and a British Council showcase in Beijing. The show stems from two opposing stimuli: the threatening of Birmingham's car industry, and global warming. It is set in an underground shelter in the year 3006 where four performers (Heather Burton, Amanda Hadingue, Bernadette Russell and Craig Stephens) take turns in narrating stories of people who used to live in Birmingham between the 1960s and the early 2000s.

Due to its setting, DIY aesthetic and factual content, the piece is described as 'lo-fi sci-fi docudrama' (Stan's Cafe, 2006a), inspired by the threatened closure of the Rover car plant in Longbridge, Birmingham, the world's largest car manufacturer in the 1960s, which finally shut down in 2005. Based on a collage of fragments from 'interviews, anecdotes, personal experiences and documents about living, working, growing-up, falling in love, making/buying/selling/driving/sitting in cars in Birmingham' (Stan's Cafe, 2006a), the piece is not a documentary about the factory; rather, it traces connections across the stories of the people who were remotely or intimately connected to it. As Yarker points out, *Home* is not intended to talk solely about the factory workers, but 'the whole community: the people behind the motor industry and finding out who made the sandwiches, cleaned the clothes, cut the hair and taught the kids of those who shaped the parts, that made the cars, that filled the Midlands' roads' (Yarker, 2010a). The narration of the stories is non-linear, while sources have been 'mixed, mashed and re-imagined so that any resemblance to any characters living or dead should be considered un/happy chance' (Stan's Cafe,

2006a). Stan's Cafe utilizes a 'reporting' and 'presentational modality' common in documentary theatre, through the third-person narration that puts on display its 'means of persuasion' (Paget, 2009, 228), creating a distance between performer and character. Ultimately, the piece becomes a collage of individual voices that progressively forms a large imagined community of people who are connected to each other.

*Home* was also inspired by the imminent birth of Yarker's daughter, who was described as 'wriggling' in the womb (Yarker, 2010a); as Yarker admits, this transfused the piece with a deep concern over the planet the young generation would inherit (Yarker, 2010a). In *Home*, baby Chloe's birth is placed against the backdrop of precarious environmental and other conditions that disrupt traffic, cause damage and deaths: 'a huge wave hit thousands of miles of coastline', 'an earthquake shook the East', '80,000 people died. No reason was given' (Stan's Cafe, 2006b, 33). The focus on global warming is further enhanced by the bleak perspective from which the performers narrate those stories. In this post-apocalyptic setting, cast members generate the power required for lighting the set using minimal technical equipment.<sup>viii</sup> This choice draws attention to the performer's physical labour, foregrounding the mechanization of factory work, whilst also punctuating the piece's anti-mimetic registers. It also exemplifies the company's ethical stance towards environmental issues, as all material was taken from 'recycled/scavenged waste sites' (Yarker, 2010b). As Yarker admits, the process shaped the company's environmental awareness of energy waste (such as trying to boil a kettle using pedal power) (Yarker, 2010a). The significance of ecology was further enhanced by an emphasis on interconnectedness, also evident in the set's backdrop, a diagram picturing part of a car's engine that illustrates how all parts fit together. Here, these parts have been

replaced by names of characters used in the piece to trace connections across the diegetic community that represents the whole of humanity.

### ***The Cleansing of Constance Brown (2007)***

This seventy-minute piece, co-commissioned by Wiener Festwochen and the West Midlands' Fierce! Festival, premiered at Warwick Arts Centre. It was included in the British Council's 2007 showcase in Edinburgh and has since received a number of international productions. It was performed to a limited audience by seven cast members who play over sixty-eight characters, and was 'set-driven', the main original stimulus being to scale up the set of *It's Your Film*:

Whilst performing *It's Your Film* we started speculating on what its sequel might look like. The obvious approach was to scale up the Pepper's Ghost mechanism so a larger audience could watch. Imagining the largest piece of glass you could sensibly tour with, led us to consider a set just two meters wide but very deep. (Yarker, 2007c)

The set was then shaped as a long corridor which generated further ideas and became a metaphor for 'what lies outside the frame'. The concept of 'corridors of power' became central in thinking about 'the difference between who is and is not allowed in the room', and 'whether the negotiations would happen in the room or in the corridor' (Yarker, 2013), which further led Yarker to consider a way of narrating what has happened offstage (Yarker, 2013). This process also determined the acting style adopted. As Yarker explains:

From the first day on a mock-up set it was clear the shape of the playing space would heavily influence the performers' acting style, how the show was blocked and how focus would be moved around. As expected, the corridor set led us to throw focus off stage. Actions on stage were contrived so as to

generate readings as to what was happening in fictional spaces immediately off stage. (Yarker, 2007c)

Despite the detail in costume and props, the piece limits any potentially empathetic response to character, and its focus lies rather on visual and aural aspects, such as the use of a loud music soundscape to substitute text.

*The Cleansing* toys with the doubleness of ‘cleansing’, which, for Yarker, is one of the most loaded words, encompassing contradictory ideas such as purification and genocide (Yarker, 2013). The piece’s voyeuristic frame is placed against the backdrop of women and power, prompted by Yarker’s personal interest in feminism and the position of women in society (Yarker, 2008b). *The Cleansing* offers glimpses of a fragmented and fleeting image of a controversial woman ‘who appears to have lived in all ages, both here and around the globe’ (Stan’s Cafe, 2007), and the audience has to work hard to puzzle the pieces together, and to imagine the action that has taken place inside the rooms. The piece both celebrates and problematizes (female) power through numerous references to iconic figures, from Elizabeth I and Florence Nightingale to Lyndie England, the US soldier convicted for abusing Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison, who are all portrayed through evocative tableaux and a range of improvised stories.

Scenes intercut and blend into each other making connections across time and space; the only text used (‘I can see you’) deflects the audience’s gaze, shattering the illusion of empowerment evoked through our peeping from the end of a corridor into the characters’ personal lives. After the end of each performance, spectators were invited to leave their own individual symbolic trace by walking down the corridor to examine the off-stage spaces; the quantity of costumes as well as the detailed

instruction boards marking all entrances and exits drew attention to the performers' physical and mental labour, revealing the theatre-making process.

***The Just Price of Flowers (2009)***

*The Just Price of Flowers*, also known as Stan's Cafe's 'austerity production', premiered at A.E. Harris in 2009 and is the company's most explicitly political piece to date. Placed against the backdrop of the Netherlands of the seventeenth century and the first 'financial bubble', it urgently engages with its historical and political context, the 2008 financial breakdown, examining its causes and implications. As explained by the company, 'tulipomania' was caused by a growing passion for tulips imported from the East that led to a rise in their price and 'the possibility of making profit through speculative buying. For a brief time certain tulip bulbs were sold for prices equivalent to those of a house, or three years of a craftsman's wage' (Stan's Cafe, 2009b).

By pointing to the differences between human needs and commodity fetishism, and through interrogating notions of injustice and responsibility in a capitalist system, the piece proffers a clear position towards the economic recession. This commentary is conveyed through a simple yet resonant story of a young lower-middle-class farming couple, the Van Leasings, who are rapidly drawn to the fashion of collecting tulips, resulting in a substantial amount of debt, the mortgaging of their property and, ultimately, the loss of everything. Central characters in the plotline are Van Eek (the old money/the bond credit rating), Van Hire (the banker), Van Tage (the financier) and Van Drive (the servant who loses his pension despite his refusal to invest in tulips), who appear in short vignettes signposted by titles written on pieces of paper that foreshadow the financial devices discussed (for example, 'Credit', 'Credit Default Swap', 'Short Selling'). The piece also involves a narrator who introduces each scene by playing the accordion and offering brief references to

fictional and factual stories from the present (for example, ‘Sean gets his car repossessed and can no longer get to work’, ‘Ralph Cioffi and Matthew Tannin are put on trial for insider trading and later acquitted’).

*The Just Price* is an explicit homage to Brecht, as the use of various *Verfremdungseffekt* devices of historicization, songs (written by Craig Stephens), episodic structure and the use of placards clearly suggests. Form is inextricably linked to content, further pronouncing the company’s ethics, ecological processes and material conditions of production. It was written and rehearsed in eleven days, and performed by local actors who worked on reduced wages and shared box-office and bar sales (Stan’s Cafe, 2009c). It also included recycled materials used in previous shows which further reinforced its ‘austerity’ aesthetic. Objects of value, such as tulips and a peacock, as well as bits of costume, were made of paper to serve as an index for the disproportionate relationship between an object’s exchange and use value. The company incorporated the origami skills of its music director Brian Duffy who created the props, and the suggestion of Hadingue (who also co-directed with Stephens and Yarker) to adopt a Rembrandt aesthetic which became manifest in the series of tableaux created (Yarker, 2013).

### ***The Cardinals* (2011)**

*The Cardinals* was commissioned by Domaine d’O (where it also premiered) and Warwick Arts Centre. Similar to *The Cleansing*, the piece is primarily non-text based (with the exception of a little text in Latin) and furthers the company’s experimentation with storytelling and form. Three cardinals dressed in crimson robes (Rose, Stephens and Gerard Bell), and their female Muslim stage manager (Rochi Rampal), attempt to narrate a biblical version of the story of the world through a series of vignettes presented in the form of a puppet show. Set design consists of a



puppet stage with scenery resembling a modern diorama manipulated by the actors; surrounded by a paraphernalia of props, costumes, ladders and a light console, the actors also perform as (oversized) puppets.

By drawing attention to what is happening within and outside the frame of the cardinals' performance, the meta-theatrical function of the puppet stage teases out some crucial questions regarding artifice and reality in the context of the narration of history and the ideology of religion, but also of theatre itself. The frantic atmosphere 'offstage', with performers bumping into each other while struggling (and often failing) to swiftly handle the numerous pieces of props and set, is juxtaposed with the reverential music and tableaux representing various key moments from the Old Testament to the Crusades, finally reaching the dawn of the twentieth-first century to end with the apocalypse.

Such techniques, which dismantle the theatrical apparatus, chime with the overarching theme of belief which, according to Yarker, is pertinent in both religion and the theatre: '[t]he Cardinals ask us to "believe" whilst classically the theatre asks us to "suspend our disbelief"' (Stan's Cafe, 2009b). In its attempt to 'clumsily' represent the history of the world with reference to the cornerstone of western civilization, *The Cardinals* articulates a political commentary about the power relationships endemic between the West and the East, Christianity and Islam. This is accentuated by an additional ironic narrative thread about the clash between different faiths and genders, which is illustrated by the struggles deployed 'offstage': one of the cardinals objects to the fact that their stage manager is a Muslim female and continuously criticizes her work; however, the cardinals' control over the final performance product is put at risk when she takes a short break for prayer, leaving them clueless as to how to operate the technology.

The piece was originally meant to be focused on the Crusades, but this ultimately formed only one section of the show. Nevertheless, the reference to the Crusades holds a central position in the piece's politics, drawing a link with the violence inflicted in contemporary Palestine. This is further supported by numerous devices (the diorama stage design, reprises of images with different costume and scenery) that sketch Jerusalem as a palimpsest of different civilizations, histories and architectures and, as such, a space subject to the repetition of violent historical cycles.

### **Critical Reception**

Stan's Cafe has been positively received by the press; although the majority of national newspapers have had little to say about its work, the *Guardian's* Lyn Gardner has expressed her support for the company since discovering it through *Of All the People* in 2008, proclaiming it the 'most interesting company working in the UK today' (Gardner, 2009). The regional daily newspaper the *Birmingham Post* has also acted as Stan's Cafe's advocate often featuring articles on the company's achievements and sometimes serving as a platform to express their views, such as on the ideological underpinning of the arts cuts (Jackson, 2010) and the need for 'a return to creativity' (Yarker, 2008c).

In brief, the productions receiving most positive coverage so far are *Of All the People*, *The Cardinals* and *The Cleansing*, which have all gained more visibility due to their international tours and London productions. The *Telegraph's* Dominic Cavendish described *Of All the People* as 'ingenious' (Cavendish, 2008), whilst other international reviews have also commended the company for the ideas behind its work. Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* praised *Of All the People* for the wealth of the 'astonishing knowledge' it contains (cited in Stan's Cafe, 2003), and *Der Zeit* praised its inspiring symbolism (Kümmel, 2005), while France's *Les Trois Coups* found *The*

*Cleansing* to be a fascinating ‘tour de force’ with a particularly British composure and sense of irony (*flegme*) (Harant, 2009).

A common note of praise encountered in reviews by critics and industry professionals concerns innovation. David Tushingam, dramaturg and curator for the Salzburg Festival and the Duesseldorfer Schauspielhaus, celebrates the group’s ability to create original experimental work: ‘[i]n a world where all artists have to claim they are innovative, Stan's Cafe are the real thing’ (Tushingam, n.d.). Similarly, Gardner found *The Cleansing* to be a ‘fascinating and exhilarating piece of work from a company of real artistic innovators who always have new things to say and new ways of saying them’ (Gardner, 2011). Apart from possessing an originality of style, Stan’s Cafe’s projects have also been acknowledged as thought-provoking and moving. *Of All the People*’s tour has generated a wealth of comments from audiences that demonstrate an impact on a personal level.<sup>ix</sup> Negative responses have overall been sporadic and focused on two pieces: *The Cardinals* and *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Gardner conceived the former mostly as ‘an exercise in style rather than a provocative examination of the nature of faith’ (Gardner, 2013a), whilst Cavendish read it as ‘a case not so much of breaking boundaries as dragging us across the threshold of patience into new realms of tedium’ (2013). Similarly, Gardner critiqued *The Anatomy* for being ‘illustrative, repetitive, dusty and dry’ (Gardner, 2013b).

Despite the growing body of publications on contemporary performance practice, academic notice with regard to Stan’s Cafe’s body of work has so far been limited. Extant work revolves around examples such as *Of All the People* (Parry, 2010; Shaughnessy, 2012), *It’s Your Film* (Gorman, 2010; Tomlin, 2004) and the revival of Impact Theatre’s *The Carrier Frequency* (Babbage, 2000; Jürs-Munby, 2006; Tomlin, 2004) while others mention these in passing. Parry (2009) and

Shaughnessy (2012) both offer a more detailed account of the process underpinning *Plague Nation* and *Of All the People*, placing them within a rigorous discussion.

While Heddon and Milling (2006) refer briefly to Yarker's role as artistic director and dramaturg, Adam Ledger (2013) considers Stan's Cafe's ensemble ethos more closely, with reference to *Good and True*, *The Cleansing*, *No Walls Just Doors* and *Adult Child/Dead Child*. With the exception of Ledger, no other existing publication has yet paid close attention to the company's material contexts of production, and there is no study, prior to this one, that examines the company's diverse aesthetic approaches, international reach and politics.

As shown, Stan's Cafe's portfolio, impressive in its range, eclecticism and mix of performance forms, suggests a commitment to innovative artistic practice. The company experimented with styles such as one-to-one and immersive performance before these became common topos in other performance work. Stan's Cafe's interest in exploring ways of attracting new audiences to innovative art is inextricably linked to its commitment to the local Birmingham arts scene; this dual perspective is mirrored in the company's numerous involvements in the West Midlands community, by invitation or through its own initiative under different capacities. Stan's Cafe's absence from most theatre studies curricula, and the difficulties incurred in promoting its work can be attributed to the lack of a consistent and recognizable style, which resists the academy's and industry's tendency to pigeonhole artistic work according to specific theoretical and stylistic vocabularies. However, none of this has compromised the company's artistic and business ethic: it still maintains a DIY aesthetic, ecological remit, low ticket prices and an ongoing dedication to the creation of thought-provoking and oppositional work in both form and content.

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## **List of Key Productions by the Company**

### ***Canute the King*** (site-specific)

Premiered: Birmingham (Moseley Baths, 1993)

Tour (second version) included: London (I.C.A.), Lancaster (Nuffield Studio)

### ***Bingo in the House of Babel***

Premiered: Birmingham (mac, 1994)

Tour included: London (BAC), Liverpool (BlueCoat Arts Centre), Cergy-Pontoise (Theatre 95)

### ***Ocean of Storms***

Premiered: Birmingham (mac, 1996)

Tour included: London (Royal Court Upstairs), Bradford (Theatre in the Mill), Southsea (Portsmouth Arts Theatre)

### ***Simple Maths***

Premiered: Coventry (Belgrade Theatre Studio, 1997)

Tour included: Manchester (The Green Room), Birmingham (mac), Oxford (Pegasus)

### ***It's Your Film***

Premiered: Birmingham (Bond Gallery, 1998)

Tour included: Manchester (The Green Room), Hannover (Theatre Formen Festival), Galway (Galway International Arts Festival), Rio de Janeiro (Rio Cena Contemporanea), Leipzig, Germany (Euroscene)

### ***The Carrier Frequency***

Premiered: Birmingham (Crescent, 1999)

### ***Good and True***

Premiered: Birmingham (mac, 2000)

Tour included: Leeds (Studio Theatre), London (Royal Opera House and Lyric Hammersmith)

### ***The Black Maze*** (sensory art installation)

Premiered: Nottingham (Freefall and Now Festival, 2000)

Tour included: Sheffield (Site Gallery), London (National Theatre). International tour included: Noisel (La Ferme du Buisson), Montpellier (Domaine d'O), Thessaloniki (Edinburgh in Thessaloniki Festival)

### ***Be Proud Of Me***

Premiered: Frankfurt (Mousunturm, 2001)

Tour included: Birmingham (mac), Belfast (The Old Museum Arts Centre), Warwick (Warwick Arts Centre), London (Lyric Theatre Studio), Cergy-Pontoise (Theatre 95)

***Lurid and Insane***

Premiered: Lancaster (a barn near Nuffield Theatre, 2001)

Toured in: Leeds (a cellar bar), Birmingham (a gig venue), Edinburgh (Bongo Club, Edinburgh Fringe)

***Of All the People in the All the World*** (installation)

Premiered: Warwick (Warwick Arts Centre, 2003)

Tour included: Birmingham (A.E. Harris), Mainz (No Strings Attached Festival), Perth (Perth International Arts Festival), Buenos Aires (Palais de Glace), Tokyo (Setagaya Public Theatre)

***Home of the Wiggler***

Premiered: Birmingham (mac, 2006)

Tour included: London (BAC), Beijing (Theatre 9)

***The Cleansing of Constance Brown***

Premiered: Warwick (Warwick Arts Centre, 2007)

Tour included: Vienna (Wiener Festwochen), Edinburgh (British Council Showcase), Toronto (Harbourfront Centre), Montpellier (Domaine d'O), Bucharest (Festivalul National de Teatru).

***The Just Price of Flowers***

Premiered: Birmingham (A.E. Harris, 2010)

Toured in: Warwick (Warwick Arts Centre), Southwold (Latitude)

***Tuning out with Radio Z***

Premiered: Birmingham (mac, 2010)

Tour included: Bristol (Tobacco factory), Chichester (Studio Theatre), Oxford (Oxford Playhouse)

***The Cardinals***

Premiered: Montpellier (Domaine d'O, 2011)

Tour included: Plymouth (The Drum, Theatre Royal), London (Roundhouse, International Mime Festival), Edinburgh Fringe 2013

***The Anatomy of Melancholy***

Premiered: Warwick (Warwick Arts Centre, 2013)

Tour included: Birmingham (Birmingham REP), London (Ovalhouse)

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<sup>i</sup> Sweeting is one of the founding members of Improbable theatre and Told by an Idiot.

<sup>ii</sup> Barclays New Stages was an annual programme of funding of independent theatre companies, culminating in a three-week season at the Royal Court Theatre that lasted for ten years.

<sup>iii</sup> In 2009, Stan's Cafe formed a three-year partnership with Domaine d'O, where they also presented *Of All the People: France* (2009), *The Cleansing* (2009) and *The Black Maze* (2010).

<sup>iv</sup> The company A.E. Harris and Co. produces metal pressings and laser cuttings and have often made set pieces for Stan's Cafe. In October 2013, they took back most of the performance spaces. Stan's Cafe kept the fifty-seat space Australia, and announced their intention to focus on more intimate work.

<sup>v</sup> China Plate is a partnership between producers Ed Collier and Paul Warwick, who offer opportunities to local artists in the West Midlands.

<sup>vi</sup> The company acknowledges the influence of Pete Brooks's Insomniac Productions *L'Ascensore* (1992) and *Clair de Luz* (1993), which used cinematic framings to play with the audience's gaze. Amanda Hadingue and Craig Stephens had previously collaborated with Insomniac.

<sup>vii</sup> So far, the piece has been presented in three different versions: small [city-specific], medium [continent-specific] and large [world-specific]. Each time, the number of people being represented determines the scale and therefore the quantities of rice being used. For their first world version, the company used 104 tons of rice.

<sup>viii</sup> This decision was inspired by Konstantin Lopushansky's film *Film Letters From a Dead Man* (Yarker, 2010b).

<sup>ix</sup> See, for instance, Stan's Cafe 2012; Stan's Cafe 2009a.