

## Backpages 20.2

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

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### Critical Disorientations: Intoxication, Engagement and Performance

*Fintan Walsh*

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The relationship between drugs and performance dates back to ancient Greece, with Dionysus, god of wine, also playing patron to the theatre. The

effect of drugs and the impact of performance found united purpose in Liberator Dionysus, in so far as both freed invested subjects from self-control, or what might be understood today as the ego and its super-ego. In the 1872 text *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Vintage, 1967 edition), Nietzsche considers the most intimately Dionysian element as 'intoxication', in a manner that emphasizes the mutual importance of the ecstatic – taken from *ekstasis*, 'standing outside oneself'; *existanai*, 'to displace'; and *existanai phrenon*, 'to drive out of one's mind' – to the experiences: 'Either under the influence of the narcotic draught, of which the songs of all primitive men and peoples speak, or with the potent coming of spring that penetrates all nature with joy, these Dionysian emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness' (p. 36).

How did it come about, then, that our engagements with performance are often such sobering experiences? Perhaps it is since Brecht's reaction to 'culinary theatre' that ingestion and spectatorship have become such unhappy bedfellows, and we have grown accustomed to the belief that the ideal relationship between audience and performance is 'stone cold'. Meanwhile, the inebriation that so many of us still (privately) crave from performance seems to be of decreasing (public) value. Yet so many important social practices, from celebrations to commiserations to sex, require some form of

lubrication to get things moving. ‘Narcotic draughts’ aside, there remains a debilitating steeliness to dominant participatory and critical approaches to performance, which can be understood, in part, by the drive to qualify disciplinary integrity. Considered in this context, sobriety functions to affirm the seriousness of our selves and the object of our critique. Perhaps we need to loosen things up a bit, if not by bringing drugs (legal or otherwise) back into the site of performance, then by engaging a bit more drunkenly, in a way that allows our contact to be more wanton, provisional, and ludic, in the true spirit of good play.

The intention of this critical engagement is not to elevate the consumption of drugs at disciplinary level. Neither does it strive to collapse the experience of chemical intoxication with other forms of affective encounter. Yet, allow me to suggest a connection between the unpopularity of drinking in many mainstream theatres, for example, and an ossifying respectability that demands graveness in engagement while policing other form of disorienting encounter. In the popular theatre of Carnival, as elaborated by Bakhtin and later by Michael Bristol, the playing space became an arena in which to rehearse modes of relationality that depended, to a large degree, upon first becoming undone. While similar urges might draw people to performance, composure is expected and usually enforced.

At the *Performance Studies International* conference in Copenhagen (2008), Gavin Butt gave a keynote lecture with the interrogative title ‘Should We Take Performance Seriously?’ Although the question might initially seem incendiary to those who have fought to mark performance studies as a subject not to be laughed at, the talk revealed how the compulsion to be serious is itself a discursive effect that rigorously patrols our disciplines, relationships, and lives. The ultimate outcome of these procedures is that non-serious (but no less ‘critical’) modes of engagement are prevented from developing through less inhibited approximations.

I have come to grapple with some of these questions through my overlapping roles as a theatre critic, a general audience member, and a lover of popular, dissident and ecstatic performance. While not exactly fitting into any of these categories, the last three theatre productions I attended in Dublin were virtually saturated in alcohol: Conor McPherson’s *The Seafarer* at the Abbey (May 2008); McPherson’s *The Weir* at the Gate (June 2008); and most recently Harold Pinter’s *No Man’s Land* also at the Gate (August 2008). While the consumption of alcohol in all of these plays is linked to

the inability of certain characters to communicate, it is precisely the intake of alcohol that allows for communication take place. Such was the point of David Hare’s *My Zinc Bed* (2000; adapted for BBC2 in 2008), where Paul can only experience intimacy through alcohol: ‘Alcohol is bound up in love . . . Elsa, I can love you and drink. Or I can not love you and not drink. That’s the choice’ (London: Faber & Faber, 2001). None of the pieces in question takes an especially damning position on alcohol, then, but they appeal to its phenomenology of intoxication for connections to take place.

In these instances, the excessive consumption of drugs is not simply a symptom – it also carries a crucial expressive, dramaturgical function. In these plays in particular, alcohol mobilizes narrative and action, begging the question as to whether or not the most fitting spectatorial gesture would be to have a drink oneself. Indeed, in Leslie Hill and Helen Paris’s *On the Scent* (2003), downing a shot of tequila is obligatory and arguably essential to the sensory experience. Yet, within mainstream theatres such as those mentioned above, a pre-ordered tippie at the interval is as far as this fancy might go. On the other hand, there are certain performance forms where chemical intensification, or its psychological corollary, is practically de rigeur among those present. Many fringe performances might fall into this category, but in particular, popular theatre, concerts, festivals, comedy shows, cabaret and a variety of queer performances do so. We may go so far as to suggest that at a certain level, drugs – or in neo-Deleuzian terminology, ‘becoming intoxicated’ – participate(s) in the dramaturgical economy of the work.

The bar as a meeting space and as a site of performance is especially central to alternative, gay or what we might term queer cultures more generally. While it is not unusual to find productions in pubs during the Edinburgh or Dublin fringe festivals, this history of occupation is more one of convenience than of radical re-appropriation. On the contrary, the bar as an elected venue promises a certain divestiture of the ego that proves so difficult for many identifying or marked queers in everyday life. The dark corners of such settings, the partial lighting, the astatic music, and potentially stupefying substances are central to what appeals to queers seeking to escape conspicuousness in normative culture. The high incidence of alcohol and drug abuse among young gay people in particular, routinely reported within the social sciences, does not simply speak to the nihilism of that culture, as so many people would like to suggest. Rather, this

limit point of intoxication also illuminates an impulse to break with normative ties while also allowing new attachments and alternative modes of relationality to flourish.

Whether it's a performance-oriented queer bar such as Barracuda in New York, Duckie in London, or Pantibar in Dublin, intoxication is often both a chemical and a performative affair. While much has already been said about the Wooster Group's experimentation with drugs, if some aspect of ingestion among the audience also appears to constitute the outermost frame of certain dramaturgies, it is worth exploring how this reframes notions of spectatorship and criticism. Occasionally, I have reflected on certain queer performances as being superb, while second-guessing that outside a particular context that includes the presence of friends, music and alcohol, the same show might appear less impressive. Does this mean that the performances are truly bad, or that my reader-response is valid, and that perhaps perceiving drunkenly is actually required? Often scholarship on performance such as drag, DIY queer events, or certain examples of live art turns a blind eye to the chemical landscape of these events. Those who have read about strands of explicit live art, for example, but have never attended an actual event might be surprised to learn that many of those gathered openly drink, smoke, and so on as the action unfolds, rather than just sit silently, in shock or awe. As I recall Ron Athey and Julia Snapper's *Judas Cradle* at the 291 Galley London in 2005, for example, what struck me most was not Athey's mounting of the medieval torture device, nor the audience's serious engagement with it, but the realization that multiple modes of intoxication were structuring if not facilitating this encounter. Is it not true, then, that sometimes what we call *jouissance* is just another name for being addled? This is not a criticism, but an acknowledgement of the fact that many queer practices actively cultivate this dynamic, whereas more normative performance modalities, such as plays exploring similar issues on the stage, keep the audience at a sober distance.

Consider two recent theoretical contributions that go some way to anchoring the model of intoxication being teased out here. In *Intimacies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips play out a conversation at the intersection of psychoanalysis and queer theory. Resisting the aggressive, forensic search for meaning in others that inevitably closes distance and produces violence and alienation, the writers argue for an 'impersonal intimacy' that respects the ineffable in the self and others. Their thesis prompts

further analysis of what kind of foreclosure takes place when we take performance too seriously. This query relates not to the matter of over-determined reading, but rather to morbidly sober forms of engagement and criticism. Instead of allowing performance and its various devices to intoxicate us, more often than not it is customary to lean in closer, from seats, to close the distance. A certain violence is at play when we strive to apprehend and understand everything, and also when we demand, especially at disciplinary level, that it does so much. What happens when we do not gaze straight ahead, but let our heads, eyes, and bodies roll about in search of other forms of excitation? In short, do we need more theatres of disorientation and intoxication?

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed appraises the disorienting experience of queer phenomenology, whereby the subject, under pressure to be directed in certain ways, follows a less straight line that might involve 'becoming an object' (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 159). Disorientation, she argues, is central to queer experience because 'bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach' (p. 160). Although Ahmed does not speak about alcohol, drugs, or their centrality to many queer cultures, her call for a 'disorientation [that] shatters our involvement in a world' (p. 177) mirrors not only the impersonal intimacy of chemical intoxication, but also the Dionysian ideal as elaborated by Nietzsche, and even Bersani's abiding interest in self-shattering sexuality. However, while Nietzsche writes about the out-of-body experience, Ahmed and Bersani work within a post-Cartesian structure of embodied subjectivity, seeking to understand the experience of disorientation and dissolution within that system as lived, while considering the value of that experience for queer world-making.

In summary, consider the following: (1) Often, certain alternative, gay or what we might think of as queer performances involve forms of chemical intoxication by the performers and the spectator/participants. This might create a feeling of impersonal intimacy that responds to the need for a certain unravelling of the ego that is part of the performative constitution of queer identities and communities. (2) While the disorienting effect of certain drugs is quite specific, to the point of being debilitating and not necessarily recommended, spectators and critics might do well to accede to the possibility of approaching performance in a spirit of disoriented and disorienting engagement in order to apprehend the event as a complex site

for the performance of sociality and relationality, where bonds are suspended and undone as well as forged. This might also be a concern for makers of performance. (3) Via ancient and contemporary practices and theories of intoxication, disoriented engagement emerges as a re-routed way of experiencing performance. More significantly, the term considers the possibility that our most intimate engagements may come not from the ostensible ‘act’ at all, but rather from some obscure, blurred or unlikely vantage point that we have not yet apprehended. Perhaps most important still, the notion restores the value of ‘letting go’ at a time when we increasingly expect performance to give us so much.



### ‘Don’t Spectate, Participate’: Immersive Theatre

*Nicholas McInerny*

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Every year a festival takes place in Nevada, USA. A hundred miles north of Reno and two hundred and fifty miles from San Francisco, there is a vast and remote playa, a dried-out lake bed. It is called Black Rock Desert.



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The festival begins on the last Monday in August and ends a week later on Labor Day, with over 50,000 people gathering in this place. Together they create Black Rock City. On Saturday the main event takes place from which the festival derives its name – Burning Man. A wood and neon effigy, packed with fireworks, slowly raises his hands to the stars and explodes in a million points of light before being burnt to the ground. The city erupts in celebration and lament.

Two days later nearly everyone has gone, left Black Rock City to return to the ‘default’ world. The playa is empty again. Within weeks even the last human traces will have disappeared, our presence totally eradicated, scorched away in the dust and heat. Burning Man is over for another year.

Once, whilst I was struggling over a play, a good friend gave me a piece of advice – ‘You have to work through the complexity to the simplicity beyond.’ Fighting my instant reaction to dismiss it – a value judgement, I convinced myself, was an aesthetic one – I of course missed what was most interesting: the nature of *my* reaction.

Only later did I realize that this reaction revealed more about my underlying assumptions about what good drama was about. These assumptions were bound up in a sense of its necessary complexity, difficulty – even a kind of willed obscurity. I saw drama as predominantly an intellectual pursuit that looked to express new ideas that were immersed in theories of representation or politics or philosophy, and somehow I believed that if it wasn’t hard to create then it wasn’t worth it. The complexity was what one aspired to. And the reason? It reinforced the sense that fundamentally I was a serious person.

Frustrated by this intellectual approach, I decided to shift the focus from my head into my body. I became more interested in exploring ideas



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of creativity that derived from lived rather than mediated experience, feeling rather than thought. And I became particularly interested in the role of pleasure.

Our relationship to pleasure is a deeply complicated one. Politically, both the Right and the Left distrust it – the conservative fearing its power to undermine institutions and the progressive its power to undermine the collective will. Yet we cannot deny its central role in any creative act of communication, an energetic exchange with an audience that is part of the shared experience. The early experimental drama of the Sixties – The Living Theatre of Judith Malina/Julian Beck or Jerzy Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory – seemed to capture this in their willed disruption of what it meant to be a performer or member of an audience. But political drama of the 1970s and 80s placed much less emphasis on the spontaneous, the random, the purely pleasurable as a kind of opposition – the carnival of the oppressed turned into a classroom.

Recently, however, that has begun to change. A new kind of theatre has emerged, popularly known as 'immersive theatre', where the audience has negotiated a new kind of relationship with performance. Techniques and concepts that had hitherto been confined to Performance Art were now infecting the mainstream. You could see it in the work of Forced Entertainment, Improbable and Punchdrunk, in the recent Shunt Festival in the Vaults at London Bridge station and the SPILL Festivals.

Whether you're experiencing it in the Barbican, with the mixture of visual art and puppetry of BITE09, or in the West End with a heady brew of cabaret, burlesque and circus at LA CLIQUE, there are fascinating similarities. All delight in a spirit of defiance in refusing to be constrained by boundaries, with an emphasis on playfulness that prioritizes the notion of pleasure through experiences that are shared with its audience: cinema, the graphic novel, clubbing, recreational drugs, the fetish world, the huge rise in summer festivals (over 400 in the UK at the last count), interactive video games and, crucially, the Internet with its opportunities for social networking and virtual worlds. Whilst we can argue over the true nature of the democratic access the Internet presents, there is no denying that it has tapped into a deep human desire for self-expression and self-actualization that is being explored throughout the arts. This, I believe, has helped to feed 'Immersive Theatre', which is now revealing itself in ways hitherto unimaginable.

Burning Man is one of those ways, and in my opinion it is the most complete and exciting expression currently available.

I have been three times now, in 2004, 2006 and 2008. With each return I become more and more aware of its role as a colossal piece of theatre. The reference points are obvious. Surf the official site and you are presented with both a Mission Statement and Ten Principles that read like a theatrical manifesto. Each year there is a different theme to which you are invited to respond creatively – the years I attended, it was Vault of Heaven, Hope and Fear, and The American Dream. Even the tickets give off a whiff of theatrical sulphur that is irresistible – 'By attending this event you are voluntarily risking serious injury and/or death.'

You begin your preparation for Burning Man by gathering not just what you need to survive a harsh and unforgiving desert environment, but what you need to transform it – elaborate furnishings for your camp, a range of costumes to wear, small gifts to exchange. Here you are, before you have even reached the playa, rehearsing for every entrance and exit you are likely to make. You might even decide to adopt a playa name for the duration of the week, shake off your old identity and become someone else – Shakti Princess, Easytiger, Iced T. What seemed ridiculous before you arrive makes perfect sense once you are *in situ* – as you come to embrace the notion of playfulness that lies at the heart of this experience.

This playfulness is everywhere at Burning Man creating a world that is hugely liberating but that throws back responsibility onto the individual. As you leap onto a fast-moving art car or clamber over an art structure or cycle out into the middle of the playa, the cry goes up – 'Safety Third!' You are making a decision that has to balance personal risk against duty to others. By making you more a master of your own destiny it increases your sense of real connection with others, first within your own camp, then to those immediately around you, and finally to the entire community.

To enhance that process, you find during every day at Burning Man that you are invited to take part in small pieces of theatre, whether it's to attend an interview to adopt a garden gnome or to go to a cocktail party at the Ashram Galactica, a fully furnished hotel, or to volunteer to deliver pizzas randomly for Pizza Sluts, or perhaps to watch two contestants battle it out in a fully recreated Thunder Dome or to join the Black Rock City ballet corps for a spontaneous performance before joining the White Parade, which leaves the city at dawn to process to the Temple of Remembrance. Once I was buying stamps at the post office (yes, it does exist) when I had an old 1970s copy of *Playboy* thrust into my hands and was told to go and

present it to a leather-clad dominatrix walking past. Overcoming my natural inhibition felt like a significant breakthrough, as well as embodying another Burning Man principle: Don't spectate; participate. So as you step out of your camp to explore Black Rock City, you genuinely have no idea what will happen or how or why. The challenge is to remain open to the possibilities.

At night, Black Rock City is transformed. It emerges like Atlantis from the depths of the ocean, one minute a Wild West frontier town re-imagined by Mad Max, then something out of Tim Burton, all Gothic deliciousness. Around the Esplanade clubs pump out their music as art cars sail over the playa lit up like distant liners. It's an adult playground equipped with Hollywood technology, all powered by a fascinating combination of American hedonism pursued with a puritan's zeal.

To suggest that those were the only adventures on offer is misleading – like most who attended, I only scratched the surface. However, Burning Man is an experience that can be accessed on any level – but crucial to all these interactions is an innate radicalism informed by a spirit of playfulness which seeks to maximize the pleasure of those involved. This turns every political act into a piece of theatre, and conversely gives a political twist to even the smallest gesture. So you have the feminist collective The Flaming Lotus Girls creating incredible incendiary sculptures that are interactive and the Cacophony Society, a San Francisco-based group of pranksters and situationists, who organise the annual Critical Tits parade where women cycle through Black Rock City with painted breasts.

Perhaps the most significant shift in the entire community is brought about by the second and third principles of Burning Man: Gifting and De-commodification. Gifting 'is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value'; whilst De-commodification 'seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions or advertising. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.' see [www.burningman.com](http://www.burningman.com)

It's difficult to overestimate quite how profoundly this changes the nature of personal relationships over the course of the week. Like any great work of art, it is transformative – we set out in our narrow roles of buyer/seller and have been shown something different, something greater, more challenging. So by the end of the week, as we look out onto a playa ablaze with fire, the fire that burns brightest is the one inside.

Whenever I return from Burning Man I do so inspired. Not only has it enabled me to look at the world differently, it has also provided a template for the kind of 'immersive' theatre I believe is becoming increasingly popular, responding to its audience's demands. Interactive, experiential, fragmented, deeply playful, it will create an environment that celebrates difference, randomness and pleasure. To quote the last principle, 'Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture (...) no idea can substitute for that immediacy.' (see [www.burningman.com](http://www.burningman.com))



## E Hate Death: Performance after Genesis P-Orridge

*Dominic Johnson*

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On 3 November 2009, I had the privilege of witnessing the last-ever performance by Psychic TV. At the Tabernacle in West London, they performed to a small but deeply appreciative crowd. They held the attention of an enraptured audience, performing pieces from recent albums, including stunning renditions of *Higher and Higher*, *Hookah Chalice* and *Papal Breakdance*, as well as a song by the late Syd Barrett. It was announced as Psychic TV's final appearance in the UK, and the performance formalized the centrality of endings and beginnings in the work of Genesis P-Orridge, now known by a new name and a new gender: Breyer P-Orridge. I have seen three performances by Psychic TV, in London and New York, and each time I have been struck by the sheer animal power of P-Orridge's work.

Since the late 1960s, a strange and compelling performer has enthralled and appalled audiences in the UK and internationally. This began with P-Orridge's performances with his group COUM Transmissions, culminating in *Prostitution* (1976), a notorious exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. Ever since, P-Orridge has been a spur to the most challenging developments in British



Psychic TV (Breyer P-Orridge) at the Tabernacle, London (2009). Photo: Dominic Johnson.



Psychic TV (Breyer P-Orridge) at the Tabernacle, London (2009). Photo: Dominic Johnson.

performance and visual culture. After the scandal of COUM's exhibition, for which Tory MP Nicholas Fairbairn labelled him and his cohort 'the wreckers of civilisation', P-Orridge became a household name. They fanned the flames of this notoriety by courting controversial topics in their art – and in their music, in the group they morphed into, Throbbing Gristle – including serial killers Gary Gilmore, Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, child abuse, and the American wartime usage of Agent Orange.

Throughout the 1970s, P-Orridge was an unlikely representative of British art and performance, presenting work at exhibitions, festivals and biennials in the United States and Europe. He pioneered industrial music with Throbbing Gristle, who gave their first performance at the opening of *Prostitution*, precipitating thirty years of musical experimentation (the mainstream industrial music of Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson would be unthinkable without their innovations). In 1978, Throbbing Gristle's mission was 'aborted', and

P-Orridge went on to form the trippy dance music group Psychic TV. In 1981, he and members of the queer occult bands Coil and Current 93 inaugurated an offshoot organization, Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY), a teen cult utilizing the teachings of Aleister Crowley and the sigil-drawing techniques of Austin Osman Spare. On account of TOPY's vast (and continuing) subcultural appeal, P-Orridge came under the scrutiny of the police, after a Channel 4 documentary implied that P-Orridge had been involved in Satanic ritual abuse, and the artist went into self-imposed exile in 1992. On the occasion of this departure for the United States, his friend and mentor William S. Burroughs presented a public lecture tour of the UK to educate audiences about the government's hounding of P-Orridge (audio recordings are held in the British Library Sound Archive).

Spanning performance art and body art, music, body modification, mail art, sculpture, installation and other media, the history of P-Orridge's art is arguably the crucial development that spawned Live Art in the UK. P-Orridge's work constitutes the prehistory that has enabled several generations of interdisciplinary practitioners in and beyond performance. Not least, the challenges posed by COUM Transmissions, Throbbing Gristle and Breyer P-Orridge reveal the disingenuousness of the bloated rhetoric of intimacy and risk, which is so often exploited ahistorically in recent critical writing on performance. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that P-Orridge is the hidden source of everything that is vital, interesting and challenging in contemporary British performance. Nevertheless, the oversight of P-Orridge's influence is one of the enduring scandals of the scholarly reception of performance in the UK. His work has, however, been afforded critical and subcultural acclaim, and heralded by subcultural icons, including Timothy Leary, Brion Gysin and Charles Manson.

P-Orridge's most recent experiments in 'cultural engineering' have involved extensive cosmetic surgery, in collaboration with his partner, the late Lady Jaye Breyer. Over a series of operations spanning nearly a decade, P-Orridge has transformed himself into the 'p-androgyne', deploying cosmetic surgery and body modification towards a corporeal translation of the cut-up technique of Burroughs and Gysin. In a project called *Breaking Sex* (1999–2007), P-Orridge and Breyer underwent a series of surgical procedures towards the goal of visually mirroring their bodies, including breast implants, chin, cheek and eye augmentation, dental operations and facial tattooing. The project

was halted when Breyer died, suddenly, of heart failure in October 2007. *Breaking Sex* was an attempt to physically manifest ‘the third mind’, a concept that Burroughs and Gysin invented in the 1960s to invoke the possibilities that arise from a blurring of subjective limits via the technical approximation of collage through writing. As Gérard Georges-Lemaire writes in a major collection of Burroughs and Gysin’s cut-up experiments (Gérard Georges-Lemaire, ‘23 Stitches Taken’, in *The Third Mind*, ed. by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin [London: John Calder, 1979], pp. 9–24 [p. 18]):

*The Third Mind* is not the history of a literary collaboration, but rather the complete fusion in a praxis of two subjectivities [...] that metamorphose into a third; it is from this collusion that a new author emerges, an absent third person invisibly and beyond grasp, decoding the silence.

Breyer P-Orridge has followed, to the letter, this merging of subjectivities at the expense of a single authorial voice, producing the ‘pandrogyné’ (or ‘p-androgyné’), a fleshy incarnation of the ‘third mind’. They provocatively enacted Burroughs and Gysin’s abandonment of inviolate works and artistic ownership, ‘a magical or divine creativity that could only result from the unconditional integration of two sources’ – in this case, the forcible dissolution of distinctions between two bodies (see Breyer P-Orridge, ‘Excerpts from a Dialogue with Dominic Johnson’, in *Everything You Know about Sex is Wrong: Extremes of Human Sexuality (and Everything in Between)*, ed. by Russ Kick [New York: Disinformation Press, 2005], pp. 345–8 [p. 345]). Breyer P-Orridge’s p-androgyny project is a loving address to the principles of the cut-up, which manifests Gysin and Burroughs’ imperative to overwhelm the frontier between theory and practice. ‘Cut-ups are for everyone,’ William Burroughs wrote (in ‘The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin’, in *The Third Mind*, pp. 29–37 [p. 31]): ‘Anyone can make cut-ups. It is experimental in the sense of being *something to do* [...] Not something to argue about.’

To be sure, P-Orridge cuts a striking figure. Transformed through cosmetic surgery, he sports large, full breasts and pronounced facial features, accenting these augmentations with a vast array of other body modifications, from tattoos and piercings to a sparkling set of solid gold teeth. *Breaking Sex*, Breyer P-Orridge continues, becomes a project

of forging ‘a twenty-first century myth of creation’, a mode of ‘genetic terrorism’ that figures a convergence of sustained assaults upon perceived ideals about the body, its pleasures and pains, and its desires. ‘When you consider transsexuality, cross-dressing, cosmetic surgery, piercing, and tattooing, they are all calculated impulses – a systematic groping towards the next phase’ (see ‘Excerpts from a Dialogue’, pp. 346–7). Here, technology is implemented to strip the subject of the safeties inferred by the logics of biology, destiny and singularity, as two formerly distinct bodies pursue corporeal integration towards a conceptually distinct (though inevitably disastrous) third whole.

Such ‘myths of creation’ have been the driving force of P-Orridge’s work across three decades of subcultural and artistic practice. As part and parcel of such ‘groping[s] towards the next phase’, P-Orridge has continually ‘terminated’ projects and collaborations in order to begin new ones. During Psychic TV’s live performance at the Tabernacle, a video projection of the words ‘E Hate Death’ rose up onto the screen behind the group, spinning out above P-Orridge’s ecstatic body. The phrase refers to P-Orridge’s trademark linguistic quirks – ‘E’ for ‘I’, ‘ov’ for ‘of’, ‘thee’ for ‘the’ and so on, with which all of the early writings were constructed. His idiosyncratic use of language and his powerful and complex ‘body play’ experiments each contribute to a singular commitment to rethinking the culture into which Breyer P-Orridge inserts innovations. As P-Orridge noted, in a short manifesto written in 1980 (Genesis P-Orridge, ‘The Lion in a Cage’, in *William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Throbbing Gristle*, ed. by V. Vale [San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1982], p. 87):

We live in limbo and thirst for freedom. Freedom from all forms of movement. To escape from existence in a world focused on perpetuating self-doubt and self-limitation. A dance of life is a dance of death. A body its cage. Time and mortality its bars. Deviate and escape.

Perhaps the most challenging innovation is P-Orridge’s concerted effort to overcome death itself, by forging on with a collaborative venture with his late wife, who now persists as a mirrored image in his sculpted flesh. The overcoming of death requires a fascination with endings, and a concerted effort to produce new beginnings. In *Breaking Sex*, the plot to deviate from and wishfully escape the trap of mortality – to overcome the moral priority of biological birth and death – requires

collusion, collaboration, and monstrous forms of reciprocity. With the announcement of the termination of *Psychic TV*, Breyer P-Orridge proclaims a hatred of death, and a commitment to new possibilities. One only wonders what new projects lie in wait. With the death of *Psychic TV*, and the birth of Breyer P-Orridge, he is her and she is here, and new beginnings threaten to spill outwards into the scene of historical possibility.



## A Reflection on *Internal*

*Duška Radosavljević*

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I write this a week after I ‘did’ *Internal* – a piece by the Belgian company Ontroerend Goed presented at the Traverse Theatre as part of the Edinburgh Fringe 2009. In the case of this particular show, it doesn’t seem appropriate to say ‘saw’ or ‘attended’ – the way one would say about most other theatre. For a week I have endlessly discussed it – first with my fellow ‘attendees’/audience members outside of the venue following the show; then informally with colleagues from the *Stage* newspaper; then again with my fellow audience members when we bumped into each other in a different show’s queue and with all other friends who have done it. I then discussed it formally with *Stage* colleagues again as part of the Stage Awards for Acting Excellence adjudication meeting (Ontroerend Goed was nominated in the Best Ensemble category), and even eventually with some company members too. I have heard many different reactions to it – vaguely divided into ‘loved it’, ‘hated it’, ‘intrigued by it’ and ‘afraid of it’ (the latter by those who chose not to do it). I have also seen one of my friends receive a cold shoulder as he over-enthusiastically ran up to his *Internal* partner when he saw her on the street. But most interestingly, just as I thought I’d left it behind the moment I left Edinburgh, I continue to witness my own and other people’s struggles with this particular piece of theatre.

It is difficult to say much about *Internal* without revealing the piece’s basic conceit and possibly spoiling future audiences’ enjoyment of the experience and its potential interpretations. Suffice it to

say that the work bills itself as ‘Five characters looking for a date’ and is performed for five audience members at a time.

Theatre critics, who a week after the end of the Fringe continued to write about the piece in their blogs and personal pages, seem particularly plagued by the piece’s inherent challenge to their professional objectivity. How do you maintain the critical distance required by your job in relation to someone who is flirting with you, showing you naked pictures of themselves, or even worse just touching you seductively without saying a word? The natural – and possibly quite unfortunate – outcome of that effort seems to be a kind of cynicism. In an attempt to keep hold of our critical faculties and stay on duty, we tend to perhaps over-emphasize the fact that this is a construct, an illusion, a piece of theatre which, despite seeming as though it features a great deal of ‘reality’, cannot ultimately be trusted. We think about it in line with other one-to-one or immersive pieces of theatre proliferating this year, as does Lyn Gardner’s *Guardian* write-up on the show (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/aug/11/intimate-theatre-edinburgh> [Accessed 5 February 2010]), and quite a few older colleagues are dismissing even the idea of it on the grounds of ‘been there, done that’ in the 1970s.

My question is: why are we so afraid of this piece of theatre? In everything that I have read about it – and I have read almost everything I could find on the Internet – most reviews seem to be (quite rightly) reflecting on the ‘experience’ of the show, raising issues of ethical dubiousness against it, but rarely getting to the point of reflecting on the content of the piece. This surprises me.

But before I get to my own interpretation of the content, I would like to offer a few thoughts about the form too. Yes, it is true that even though its one-to-one format appears innovative, there is nothing new about this show. However, this is not solely because it is reminiscent of the 1970s avant-garde. No, this is a typical three-act Aristotelian piece of theatre which even features the Hegelian dialectical structure of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. (For those who have seen the piece – I am referring to the one-to-one segment as the first act or the Hegelian thesis, the group session as the second act or antithesis, and the final dance as the third act or the synthesis.) What gives it a contemporary edge is an attempt at privileging the ‘experiential’ and the ‘kinesthetic’ in the process of performance over the ‘verbal’ and the ‘critical-intellectual’ in a way not dissimilar to the interventions proposed by the Performance Studies

advocate Dwight Conquergood. However, this piece of performance is firmly in the domain of theatre, and consciously presented as such; for example, the piece begins with a curtain lifting between us and the performers, and it finishes with the curtain falling again. Yes, it does unsettle a western viewer – particularly a theatre critic whose main means of expression is verbal – to just be asked to stare into somebody's eyes or submit oneself to an entirely tactile communication and consider this to be a meaningful theatre event. But then again, many a western theatre practitioner would say that theatre has everything to do with the instinctive and the intuitive and less so with the solely verbal. And as Conquergood's own ethnographic research has shown us, this emphasis on the non-verbal and experiential over the verbal potentially represents much more of a challenge in an anglophone context.

However, what about the perceived manipulation involved in the seduction ritual that the audience member is hereby subjected to by the performer within the deliberately ambiguous terms of a theatre situation? Everything seems real (including the said seduction, with the point being here that the audience members are being seduced individually and directly), yet everything is illusory by virtue of being a theatre event. The rules are not redefined for this particular situation, so we assume that we are expected to respond as we usually do in theatre in order to obtain pleasure from the event – that is, 'suspend our disbelief', go with the flow and suspend judgment until afterwards. Yet, how does one go with the flow in an event such as this one which might well end up in a transgression of physical boundaries (and, like Andrew Haydon has suggested in his blog 'Postcards from the Gods', in the question of romantic 'in/fidelity' if the audience member happens to be attached). The ambiguity is enhanced by the fact that even after we leave the theatre space, not only do we continue thinking about it and discussing it, we also receive a letter from our date at our home address some days later. Should we reply to it? Or should we expect once again to be shown that the situation should not be trusted (as we are shown in what I would call Act Two of the piece, and which several reviewers have cited as a 'reversal' of sorts).

Yes, the piece definitely raises ethical questions, as my colleague William McEvoy's blog for the *Stage* points out (<http://blogs.thestage.co.uk/edinburgh/2009/2009/08/theatre-the-art-of-seduction/>), but I would not like to dismiss it on those grounds. In fact, my question would be: how is this experience any less ethical than any real-life romantic interaction which ends badly or where one party is let

down by the other? Of course, the question of theatre and ethics is huge, and there is definitely a flip side to the disruption of boundaries in a theatre event – as illustrated very clearly by last year's production *The Factory* by Badac Theatre, where the audience was cast into the role of Holocaust victims on their way to a gas chamber, and the company members infamously took their work outside of the theatre by continuing to intimidate two critics, Ian Shuttleworth and Chris Wilkinson, who refused to participate in the 'script', all of which eventually led to the involvement of the police in the matter. It is hard to claim this with any certainty, but it seems to me that the Belgian company Ontroerend Goed's intentions were a bit more noble than those of Badac Theatre (even though they too, according to Nick Awde's *Stage* review, turn the audience into 'actors' – albeit actors without a script).

On one occasion, during an informal chat about *Internal* on the streets of Edinburgh, the *Financial Times* critic and editor of *Theatre Record* Ian Shuttleworth has said that 'you get from it what you put in'. I agree with this entirely. Even in the 'treacherous' Act Two of the piece, despite feeling uncomfortable with the situation, I never felt judged by my partner; all I got back was exactly 'verbatim' what I'd put in! Whether deliberate or not, this particular choice is also another way of situating *Internal* in the contemporary theatre context, allowing Ontroerend Goed to make an ironic implicit reference to the verbatim theatre trend that dominated the Edinburgh Fringe for most of the 2000s.

So, finally, a word about the content. What *Internal* offers us within the show's total running time of 25 minutes is a take on contemporary relationships. What starts off as a quick (perhaps even a speed-dating-generated) relationship ends up in a group-therapy session. We don't know how to deal with each other any more or how to gain real and meaningful intimacy capable of helping us resolve our problems between ourselves. Far too often (in the culture which fetishises reality TV and celebrity lifestyle), our dirty laundry gets aired in public. At a time when women are deemed to have got more political and professional freedoms than ever before, I believe that the loss of mating dances, courtship and pre-matrimonial rituals – however restrictive, sexist and backward they might have seemed – is a significant loss for women. While I do not mean to devalue and dismiss the struggles and hard-won victories of feminism, I would resort to Slavoj Žižek-style dialectical logic to highlight the absence of romance from the life of a contemporary – 'sexually liberated' – woman.

So the reason I loved *Internal*, despite everything, is because it was an incisive but optimistic social comment, ending with a romantic dance and a handwritten letter. There is hope for us if we are all able to look into ourselves and see where our own romantic boundaries, desires, expectations and needs are, and *Internal* provokes us to do exactly that.



## Notes on Eros and Performance in Contemporary American Drama

George Hunka

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Erotic desire, which began to play a significant role in modern drama in the plays of Büchner, Ibsen and Strindberg, has formed one of the central dynamics of European theatre. On the English-language stage alone, desire courses through the dramatic work of Pinter, and through Kane, Barker and Crimp. In their plays, erotic desire, like a river, limns structure, plot and character. Beckett seems an exception, but only because sexual desire in his plays lies somewhat beneath the surface of its explicit metaphysical concerns, though even in *Play* the desiring and desirous body pulses through the course of the work.

With the exception of Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee, American dramatists have foregone this content to an impressive degree. While sexual identity has in more recent years formed a significant concern of dramatists like Tony Kushner, this identity has seemed less fluid, and the issues such self-definition raises remain entangled within more politically ideological projects. The threat posed to identity and self through sexuality is a political and cultural threat, and is often inextricably bound with fear: a fear for one's safety (*The Laramie Project*), one's livelihood or one's cultural status (*Angels in America*). It is rarely considered a topic for spiritual concern, whatever ersatz angels may comically crash through the ceilings.

In Martin Crimp's 2008 play *The City*, an upper-middle-class couple find themselves torn and disrupted among threats to their peace by the

husband's unemployment, news of far-off wars, and the destabilizing presence of a single mother (and her daughter, both of whom in the last scene become erotically charged), and this disruption finds expression not least in the jeopardy of the couple's erotic life; sexual games become hurtful, and the wife's new-found success has a powerful sexual element. The play remains open-ended, with no erotic (or for that matter political) end-game played out. Similarly, Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*, the last of her plays to be produced before her death, explores the mutability of erotics and sensuality within a totally administered society. Whether self-identified as gay or straight, man or woman, the characters find sensual possibilities within and against the strictures of ideological administration. There, too, the conclusion of the play is ambivalent. Neither Crimp nor Kane have an interest in the use of this sensuality as an instrument for political dissent or upheaval. Quite the opposite – that is, political dissent and upheaval as instruments of sexual self-discovery – is the case.

Both *The City* and *Cleansed* opened on the main stage of the Royal Court Theatre, and they are but two examples of a large body of sensually highly charged dramas that came in the wake of Pinter, Bond and Brenton. It is instructive, perhaps, that neither of these plays has yet received, to my knowledge, a New York production, either on a non-profit main stage or in an alternative space (though of course hundreds of other British plays have). While sexuality is a component of dramas by young American writers, the basic assumptions of the multiple functions that sensuality plays within an urban community are almost diametrically opposed to the similar cultural assumptions of the British theatre.

One of the explanations for this dissociation may lie in the progressive ideologies that lie beneath theatre-making in America. Neither the Crimp nor the Kane play makes any attempt at political instrumentalism; the plays resist both closure and propaganda. They are vertically oriented: up and down through the self, rather than across other individuals within a political community. When sexual identity and gender politics appear on the main stages of American theatre, such as in David Mamet's *Oleanna*, they are infused with cultural and political significance, but rarely, very rarely, with sensual or spiritual significance. Sexual and erotic imagination does not pose a threat to culture or ideology, when it's present at all.

And yet, as the British plays I've been discussing demonstrate (beginning with Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* in the mid-1960s), sexual and

sensual imagination themselves have far-reaching consequences for ideology and administration. The American progressive ideology assumes sexual identity and imagination as static: there is rare crossover from gender to gender, identity to identity, that protean quality of Eros and love that drives the dynamic of the British plays under examination here. Change and love resist ideologies, even progressive ideologies, which may themselves lead to repressive administrative societies (such as the university setting of Kane's *Cleansed*: so much, then, for academic freedom and the status of individual autonomy and exploration in the classroom).

In contemporary American drama, political ideology precedes the senses of the body; in the contemporary British drama, this protean sensuousness is itself a threat to rational political discourse, for the discourse can't contain the extraordinary power of the erotic body in transit from sense to sense. It is hard not to consider the possibility that American theatremakers fear to place this imagination on the stage (it would be presumptuous to say that they fear this imagination in themselves, and so don't care to explore it in their work). In part, it may be because this imagination would undermine the progressively political aesthetic project of these theatremakers. This is a tragic realization for the art, for it places progressive utopian politics before the imagination of the speaking human body: it values cultural abstraction above physical experience in one of the most physical of all artforms. It dissolves a speculative art into utilitarian ideology.

This is not to say that the realization of sexual and erotic imagination is entirely absent from the American stage. This imagination is at the centre of a great deal of dance-theatre, and some solo performance wrestles profoundly with this imagination, as do the plays of a few young American dramatists. But in traditional scripted American drama it remains at the margins. Liz Duffy Adams' current *Or* (on the playwright Aphra Behn), Tarrell McCraney's *Wig Out* and Thomas Bradshaw's *Dawn* are among recent American plays with explicit sexual content, but none of these had their premieres in larger American non-profit houses such as the Public Theater or the New York Theatre Workshop, New York's approximations of the Royal Court, though Sarah Ruhl's provocatively titled *In the Next Room (the vibrator play)* recently opened at the Lincoln Center Theatre. The extent to which these are provocations rather than explorations, celebrations rather than meditations, however, will be a central issue in deliberating whether or not

these plays open and incisively explore the sexual imagination rather than titillate or exploit.

Perhaps it is a question of the role of language itself in the American theatre: instrumental not exploratory, prosaic not poetic, utilitarian not speculative. The challenge, then, to the American dramatist is to write the sexual and erotically exploratory body, to make the first inroads into an American dramaturgy that can finally contain this body and present it to American audiences, to urge the exploration of the possibilities inherent in their own sexualities and bodies. This, too, has profound political and cultural consequences. If there is at least one project for American drama in the early twenty-first century that remains to be energetically explored, it may well be this.



## New Adventures in Live Art Publishing and Distribution

*Lois Keidan*

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### 1. 'Because Live Art is "difficult" to write about' – the context for Live Art publishing

... it is because Live Art is 'difficult' to write about that critical writing is so important as document and as profile. This means that critical writing on Live Art is prompted by artists and by publishers to step away from tradition, and into the path of the work itself. (Mary Paterson, *In Time* [London: Live Art UK, Live Art Development Agency, 2009])

Given that Live Art is an itinerant and interdisciplinary area of practice that often seems to neither fit nor belong within received cultural frameworks,

it is not surprising that it has always had a somewhat challenging relationship with both critical writing and publishing.

For many years Live Art has, on the one hand, figured as the subject of scholarly study and discourse, and on the other as an object of derision by more mainstream artform-bound critics. Of course there have always been exceptional exceptions to these extremes, but it is only in the last decade or so that Live Art has found a broader recognition, that different kinds of critical dialogues about and around Live Art practices have emerged, and that Live Art publishing and distribution has come into its own.

In a recent case study on the relationship between Live Art and critical writing commissioned by Live Art UK ([www.liveartuk.org](http://www.liveartuk.org)), Mary Paterson writes that 'it is perhaps because there is no long history of critical writing ... that live artists and writers can think outside the normal constraints of a critical text'. It is this kind of thinking, alongside the advent of online platforms and new technologies, new forms of funding support, the development of new curatorial approaches, the interdisciplinary and fluid nature of many artists' practices, and the proliferation of performance studies and its investigations into the relationship between practice and discourse, that has revolutionized the possibilities of Live Art writing, publishing and distribution.

The interrelated publishing and distribution initiatives of the Live Art Development Agency have broadly responded to, and hopefully enhanced, this burgeoning field of activities.

## 2. 'We could do it ourselves' – the Live Art Development Agency's approach to publishing and distribution

The Live Art Development Agency was founded in 1999 to support the explosion of Live Art practices and critical discourses in the UK. The agency has responded to the innovative, challenging and diverse nature of Live Art by developing a portfolio of resources, professional development initiatives and projects. In recent years the agency has been focusing on critical writing, documentation, publishing and distribution. This has included setting up Unbound, a carefully curated online shop for Live Art books, DVDs and limited edition artworks, and developing new ways of increasing popular and critical awareness of Live Art through a diverse range of publishing projects. The agency's publishing policy involves partnering major publishers on key critical titles;

publishing our own books and DVDs; and co-publishing artists' books and DVDs, including works on-demand.

Take Unbound. That Unbound exists at all is testament to recent revolutions in Live Art publishing and distribution, whilst a quick look at its titles reinforces this. Stocking set texts like RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (Thames & Hudson) and Tim Etchells' *Certain Fragments* (Routledge), through to Wrights and Sites' *A Misguide to Anywhere*, Heike Roms' *What's Welsh for Performance?* and Live Art UK's *The Live Art Almanac*, Unbound acts as a mechanism to draw a critical relationship between the texts published by major publishing houses and hard-to-find, independently published practitioners' works. But it is with these latter kinds of materials that Unbound comes into its own and reflects the dynamism of Live Art publishing.

Amongst the many independent book titles on Unbound (33% of titles are independently published) are the agency's own co-publications with Joshua Sofaer, Aaron Williamson, Oreet Ashery, Marcia Farquhar, Live Art UK and others – titles that have been made possible by new sources of funding, new approaches to practices, new forms of writing, and new possibilities in publishing and distribution. And the kinds of independently published titles represented on Unbound are not only selling well, but are also influencing practice, research and discourse. As the writer Deborah Levy said of Marcia Farquhar's *12 Shooters*:

Entertaining and scholarly, *12 Shooters* dismantles the form of most publications that document a distinguished artist's practice and elucidates the ways in which a once only conceptual performance might haunt and possess an entirely new body of work. In this sense *12 Shooters* is also a conceptual biography, an intimate conversation between the artist and those who have been invited to reimagine the secrets and pleasures of her performing persona. Most dazzling of all, *12 Shooters* succeeds in being a critically engaging archive that is on side with the stray thoughts and unexpected philosophical conundrums of every day lived experience that have always been Marcia Farquhar's subject.

Live Art UK's *The Live Art Almanac* (2008) is one of Unbound's top sellers and illustrates many of the recent developments in Live Art writing and

publishing. The *Almanac* is a collection of ‘found writing’ compiled and edited from an international open call for recommendations. Composed of articles, interviews, blogs, emails, letters, and obituaries from 2006 to 2008, the *Almanac* reflects an incredibly broad range of writing by artists, journalists, scholars, curators and thinkers about and around Live Art, and was designed, printed and distributed on a cheap and cheerful on-demand basis. Because of the massive technological advances of recent years, the *Almanac* was cheap to produce and print, and is cheap to buy. It’s an easy-to-purchase resource for those artists and students on low incomes, enabling them to investigate new approaches to practice, research and discourse.

It’s a similar story at the other end of the production scale. *Documenting Live* is an agency-published resource reflecting the work of key UK based artists working in the 1990s and 2000s, and placing Live Art practices that are informed by questions of cultural identity within critical and historical frameworks. With carefully commissioned content and high-quality production values, *Documenting Live* is made up of a booklet with an essay by David A Bailey; a series of artists’ cards; and a DVD featuring artists’ commentaries, excerpts from key works, and documentation of a series of round-table discussions. For all kinds of commercial and cultural reasons, the concept and form of *Documenting Live* wouldn’t have been given a first, let alone second, look by any commercial or academic publisher or by any ‘department’ of any museum, library or archive: a complicated fold-out pack with booklets, cards and DVDs featuring not just ‘art’ but people talking in depth about serious and complex things, it just didn’t fit in any traditional context or mode of production. But with the new technologies and resources now available, this was no longer a barrier but simply a hurdle – we could do it ourselves. The print run and distribution of *Documenting Live* may be small scale relative to many commercial publishing initiatives, but at least this vital archival and critical document that maps a history and marks a territory is out there, meeting an important set of current and future needs.

It is clear we have to write our own history, draft our own map and document projects in our own terms. This epic documentation project functions as a very comprehensive map detailing the practice of UK-based experimental artists whose cultural roots span several continents and artistic languages [...]. Ultimately, the compilation provides the

reader/viewer an incredible insight into one of the most vibrant Live Art scenes in the world. (Guillermo Gomez-Peña on *Documenting Live*, available at [http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/RRR/Doc\\_Live\\_Pub.html](http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/RRR/Doc_Live_Pub.html))

### 3. ‘Cheap to produce and cheap to buy’ – technological developments and future possibilities

Technological advances have also ushered in a mini revolution in the publication and distribution of Live Art on camera – including both performance documentation and screen-based practices. A few decades ago, artists could only dream of making a performance for camera for Channel 4’s *Afterimage* or being featured on BBC2’s *Late Review* for their non-‘live’ work to be seen by the public anywhere other than in the backroom of a gallery on a wet Wednesday night. I’m exaggerating, but only slightly. Innovations such as Arts Council/BBC2’s *Expanding Pictures*, Illuminations’ *FX* and the commissioning of performance to camera by Film & Video Umbrella, amongst others, raised the profile of Live Art on camera in meaningful ways, and, more importantly, artists’ experiments with the camera were easily accommodated within the expanding field of video art in the 1980s and 1990s. But it wasn’t until more recently, and the advent of new technologies, that artists were no longer dependent on the permission or resources of others but were able to, if necessary, act independently to document, display and distribute their work.

Now, if they don’t care much about quality, any artist can capture their work on a mobile phone and instantaneously publish it on YouTube (and YouTube has opened up countless new audiences for countless artists who use it wisely). When they do care about quality and context, most artists can easily access high-quality recording and editing facilities, print their own DVDs and distribute them online. As well as print on-demand, for the last few years the Live Art Development Agency has also been co-publishing DVDs on-demand with artists, where the artists author a DVD of documents of their work in their own style and approach, and the agency prints and dispatches them to order through Unbound. Cheap to produce and cheap to buy, titles by Howard Matthew and Richard Dedomenici have again flown off the shelves.

Artists, thinkers, writers and producers working with Live Art are pioneering new ways to critically

engage with artistic practice and developing new platforms to disseminate such thinking and writing. The critical dialogues surrounding Live Art are provoking exciting questions about the nature and role of cultural commentary and critical discourse, and online platforms and the capacity to produce on-demand are freeing up all kinds of curators and artists from the old, often exclusive and expensive models of publishing and distribution.



## Assessing Clare McIntyre

David Edgar

*David Edgar is a playwright and fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Among his many distinguished plays are Pentecost, Playing with Fire, and Testing the Echo. He is also the author of The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times (1988) and editor of The State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting (2000).*

In their decade round-ups at the end of the 1980s, some theatre critics bemoaned the decline of the kind of political plays that had been such a feature of the 1970s. This argument seems to imply that it's compulsory for committed playwrights to be called Howard, David or John. Admit that they might be called things like Sharman, Charlotte and Bryony and the picture changes dramatically.

In 1979, there were really only two nationally known women currently writing in the British theatre (Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems). Ten years later, there were two to three dozen, most of whom were pursuing a self-consciously feminist agenda. In the top rank of these was Clare McIntyre, who died of multiple sclerosis, aged 57, on 27 November last year.

Like many British playwrights, McIntyre began her career as an actor, at first in theatre-in-education at Nottingham, and then as a performer and deviser with the pioneering feminist Women's Theatre Group. Her experience as a jobbing actor in rep and on film (playing small parts in *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Hotel du Lac* and *A Fish Called Wanda*) led her to change career and join the growing number of women writers who addressed the issues raised by the feminist movement in plays with majority or entirely female casts.

Her first play, *I've Been Running* (directed by Terry Johnson at the Old Red Lion in 1986), was a study of a young woman and her complicated

relationships, in the present and the past, with boyfriend, mother and brother. Her next two plays, *Low Level Panic* in 1988 and *My Heart's a Suitcase* in 1990, were both presented at the Royal Court, and are the plays on which her reputation principally rests. Her final two stage plays were *The Thickness of Skin* (again at the Court, in 1993) and *The Maths Tutor*, a Birmingham Rep-Hampstead co-production in 2003. Although she wrote a little for television (her credits including an episode of *EastEnders*), McIntyre's main non-theatrical writing was for radio.

Most of the women playwrights of the 1970s and 80s moved on from overtly feminist writing to something else: Timberlake Wertenbaker to explorations of history, Caryl Churchill to formal experimentation. Some moved on to other media: Sue Townsend to the Adrian Mole novels and Heidi Thomas to television (most recently, with *Cranford*). Even those, like Bryony Lavery and Sarah Daniels, who retained an overtly feminist agenda expanded their style and subject matter.

Similarly, it's possible to see Clare McIntyre's work as a game of two halves. In this reading, *I've Been Running* is a prologue to *Low Level Panic* and *My Heart's a Suitcase*, all three of which are about young women whose lives are blighted by the core injustices identified by 1970s feminism: pornography, male violence, economic disparity and an undermined sense of self. By contrast, the post-*Suitcase* work belongs to an older tradition of delicately observed, subtly balanced family dramas, set in a recognizable, post-ideological, urban middle-class world. This model of McIntyre's work is supported by her radio writing, all of which post-dates *Suitcase*. The 1993 *Walls of Silence* is about the daughter of a broken marriage (played by the young Kate Winslet) who takes her distress at her father's death out on her mother. *The Art of Sitting* is about a relationship between a divorced couple and their son (with flashbacks to the mother's youthful involvement in the women's movement). *Shelf Life* is about a contemporary consciousness-raising group (described mordantly by one of its members as the 'it's all his fault club'), and *Noisy Bodies* about a hypochondriac man and his long-sufferingly supportive wife, eventually betrayed by the revelation that, between doctor's appointments, he has put their house on the market. Indeed, houses and their buying and selling filter through all of McIntyre's later work, seemingly confirming that the polemicist of the 1980s had changed into a different kind of writer.

One value of this model is that it draws attention to McIntyre's rounded, unsentimental and undi-

dactic view of her characters: there are bad, limited, selfish and thoughtless men (onstage or offstage), but McIntyre is well aware that women can be all of those things too, in relation to their menfolk, to their parents and their children. Indeed, one of the big themes of McIntyre's later writing is its complex and insightful view of the parent-child – often, the mother-son – relationship. In *The Art of Sitting* (the title punning on the Alexander technique), episodes in which mother Sam tries to organize her 10-year-old son and ex-husband to take a realistic view of the son's trip to see his father in Edinburgh ('when you are supervising children it's Hands On All The Time') are among the most well-observed, poignant and painful scenes McIntyre wrote.

But seeing *My Heart's a Suitcase* as the end of one story and *The Thickness of Skin* as the start of another ignores a fascinating progression in McIntyre's stage work, a journey in which *Suitcase* is not a climax but a bridge. Reading the stage plays in order reveals them all to be about the invasion of the known, private world of its characters by a threatening and unknown outside. If *I've Been Running* portrays a young woman recognizing and confronting a crisis in her self-image (the first line is 'I usually run in the mornings, but sometimes my head is so full of stuff that I don't go till later, and sometimes I don't go at all'), then *Low Level Panic* posits an explanation. A deft and funny all-women three-hander set in a bathroom, the set description reassures designers and performers that 'nobody goes to the toilet in the play so there's no need to have a toilet in the set'. The panic of the title is provoked by Mary finding a pornographic magazine dumped in her dustbin, which reminds her of a sexual assault she suffered when riding home from work on her bicycle. ('Why did he have to choose our bin?' Mary demands. 'I mean, why don't people leave me alone! Why do they have to include me in their horrible, messy lives?')

Similarly, *My Heart's a Suitcase* includes a parade of invasions of Chris and her partner Hannah's Brighton weekend in their friend Colin's flat overlooking the sea: their ease is threatened by the television news (a girl has been murdered by a stranger; in an echo of *Low Level Panic*, she was riding a bicycle), by the incursion of Elliot (a middle-aged squatter down on his luck), by Colin's imperious wife Tunis, and by two expressionist figures who enter through the walls – Luggage ('the patron saint of heavy burdens') and Pest, a young man who assaulted Chris in the past. In both plays, the psychological disorientation of the central character provoked by these invasions is underlined by a third female character – Celia in *Panic*, Tunis in *Suitcase* – who

is well sorted and at ease with both private and public worlds. Patriarchy's method is to invade women's space from the outside, forcing women into an unhappy and unresolved relationship with themselves.

As Chris puts it, in a line which sums up McIntyre's early plays, 'I'm frightened of the unspeakable peril in the day-to-day.' Except that it isn't quite like that. In *Low Level Panic*, the incursions (pornography, sexual assault) are unambiguously malign, even though Mary's flatmate Jo has her own fantasies (from drinking pink champagne in cocktail bars to having sex with two men in the back of a lorry). In *Suitcase*, Chris needs to see off her Pest and dump her Luggage. But surely we're not invited to admire her reaction to news of the murdered girl: 'I don't want to be thinking of a girl's body lying in a shallow grave when I'm trying to remember how to make mince pies or I'm out spending money on myself.'

It's outside threats of this kind which are at the core of the next two plays. *The Thickness of Skin* is about two invasions: one of Roanna and Michael's comfortable house by a disturbed woman from next door (invited in by their son); the other, by homeless Eddie, who moves into Roanna's sister Laura's flat. The subsequent love affair ends with bitterness, resentment and smashed windows (lots of windows in McIntyre's plays), but for all its difficulties, we're not invited to share the 'sorted' Roanna's conviction that the most important thing in life is to be charge of one's own four walls. Difficult, dubiously motivated and doomed as Laura's attempt to help Eddie may be, *The Thickness of Skin* does not ask us to pull up the drawbridge against those beyond our gates. It is a very fine play, and a great sadness that, after its initial run at the Theatre Upstairs, it was never revived in Britain (though it recently received its premiere off-off-Broadway).

By *The Maths Tutor* (2003), the wheel has come full circle. The well-ordered, seemingly well-married Jane and her bohemian, formerly promiscuous friend Anna decide jointly to hire a maths tutor for their sons. This completely innocent incursion provokes a crisis when Anna's son accuses the (gay) tutor of sexual assault, revealing the supposedly liberated Anna's homophobia. The play's most interesting dramatic decision is to extend the play beyond the revelation that the allegation is false, into four more scenes, in which the parents and their children are forced to confront what the incident has exposed about themselves. The two adult relationships are shown to be empty, and crack apart: the conclusion of the play is a toast to 'being oneself', which clearly requires knowing oneself. Invasion of the private by the public, of

family by society, is no longer a disorienting threat, but leads the characters to a proper understanding of the reality of their lives.

Clare McIntyre's early plays express the sense of disorientation and the lack of self-worth which led women like her into feminism, more feelingly (and funnily) than any other playwright. They may have been based on her own experience, but her later plays were not. McIntyre was never a mother (though she wanted to be); she began her happy and fulfilled relationship with actor Sean Baker – who nursed her through her long illness – in 1990. Apart from the radio play *Noisy Bodies*, and an as-yet-unperformed adaptation of Stefan Zweig's novel *Beware of Pity* (about a woman incapacitated by an incurable disease, in pre-World War I Germany), there is remarkably little reference to disease in her work, though Hannah in *My Heart's a Suitcase* reveals that she's been diagnosed with a mild form of multiple sclerosis, at a point when McIntyre's was in remission. I got to know her well as a tutor on the playwriting course I founded at the University of Birmingham. During her period, her students included Clare Bayley and Steve Waters, as well as Sarah Kane, whose dislike of some – well, most – aspects of the course didn't

prevent her from writing *Blasted* during her time at Birmingham. The work that McIntyre was writing at the time showed a mature understanding of dramatic form and of the subtleties and contradictions of both sexes, which stood all of her students in good stead.

To define McIntyre's later work as post-feminist is not to deny but to underline her convictions. None of her characters would be like they are – would be written like they are – without the women's liberation movement. The wild anger almost all her women express at some point is a feminist anger. *Low Level Panic* and *My Heart's a Suitcase* have been performed all over the English-speaking world, and will form her main legacy. But understanding of those plays is deepened by seeing them through the prism of her career as a whole, particularly as it was cut so tragically short.



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