

Building the room:

Remembering Third Angel's *Presumption*

A provocation by Michael Pinchbeck and Linford Butler, University of Lincoln, given at *Where From Here: 21 Years of Third Angel* symposium at Leeds Beckett University on Thursday 17th November 2016.

Linford: Act One – Double Negatives

Michael: 2007

Linford: 2016

Michael: Edinburgh

Linford: Lincoln

Michael: On stage

Linford: On DVD

Michael: A memory

Linford: A table, six chairs. Precariously carried, precisely placed. Start the DVD: after breakfast, students have arrived. 9am on a Thursday morning and it's probably about February and it has been raining. Or at least I presume it has, because I remember a rushed start and an intense desire for a large cup of hot tea. I take a lift to the third floor and take my seat in the half-empty half-darkness of a half-filled university seminar room.

Michael: I don't not love her. That's what I remember. The double negative. I was in a relationship at the time and I thought about how we measure love and how a double negative is not as good as a positive and why a show might want to start with a double negative. It connotes absence. It feels half empty rather than half full.

Linford: A table, six chairs. Callum, Mandeep, Mark, Michael, me. One spare: in case or miscounted. Bags down, coat off, tea spilt, as usual. Lights off – Michael. A PC, a projector, a DVD, Windows Media Player – and an image stutters into life.

Michael: Then I look around the empty stage. The well-worn, well-loved, now defunct dancefloor of the Theatre Workshop in Edinburgh and see that there are lots of LX tape marks, or spikes, across it. I wonder if these are from previous shows, palimpsests of past performances, ghosts of sets no longer there, or whether they are intended to be used for this show – *Presumption*. It connotes absence. A promissory note written in electrical tape to

furnish a bare stage. An IOU to the theatre space. A text unfolding itself onto an empty page. An aesthetic ellipsis. Then the set appears.

Linford: I don't not remember what happens next. I don't not remember the beginning of the video, or the title card. A man I know as Chris walking on; and a woman too, whose name I don't yet know. A series of small white squares and large white oblongs chalked onto the black canvas of the stage; like a blueprint for a structure, or the minims and quavers and rests of a musical score torn apart and scattered, or like crime scene markers anticipating the evidence that will be found there later. As Pearson and Shanks say 'In this forensic world, every empty space is littered with debris, traces. There is ubiquitous entropy. Our occupation is precarious.'¹ By occupation they mean dramaturgy, piecing together the evidence.

Michael: Piece by piece. A flat-pack IKEA aesthetic before DIY was everywhere. The stage now half full, not half empty. An empty space full of memories. A couple accumulating furniture, a bookshelf reflecting shared tastes, photographs of package holidays, a CD collection meeting in the middle. A Venn diagram of two single lives until they point they become a couple. Half empty. Half full. A double negative. Anything multiplied by nothing. Absence. 'I don't not love you. I don't not know you. I don't even want to think about not loving you or knowing you. But it is there.'

Linford: I don't not remember the detail, but it isn't the detail which I remember clearly. Instead, I remember a feeling as an image flickers into life, and the half-empty room on screen half-fills the room I sit in, 50 miles and nearly 10 years between this February-Lincoln, 2016 and that May-Sheffield, 2006. The recorded video strikes me as half-empty compared to how I imagine it would have been to witness it live; but in that moment, the room on screen and the one I sit in are filled with new – then and now and here and there.

Michael: Act Two – Assembly Instructions. This provocation remembers what it was like to watch *Third Angel's Presumption* both live onstage in 2007 (Michael Pinchbeck's experience) and on DVD in 2016 (Linford Butler's experience). We have reasonable basis for belief or acceptance that something changed our understanding of what devised theatre could be in that moment of watching a room being built.

Linford: We apply a semiotic and phenomenological critique of the work in what Cezanne calls, 'the world's instant' when we ask 'what it is and what it is doing before our eyes'. Our encounters with the work unravel different dramaturgical threads around its original devising, for example, using 'text as a tool'² and 'moving objects around the stage'³, citing Alex Kelly and Chris Thorpe's dialogue in Duska Radosavljevic's *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre-makers* (2013). We also draw on Dee Heddon and Alex Kelly's notion of 'distance dramaturgy'⁴ with reference to *The Lad Lit Project* (2005). As Heddon and Kelly did not meet until the work was completed, the relationship was defined by written correspondence between collaborators, a kind of postal chess. We have used this same process to write this paper. Our words have been cut and pasted, dropboxed and track-changed, until we don't know where one voice ends and another voice begins.

Michael: The provocation unpacks *Presumption's* aesthetic influence that collides *Dogsville* (2003) with the Kitchen Sink genre. It asks how the piece may have influenced a generation of DIY theatre makers and its residue resides in texts and aesthetics in work made today. Finally, we draw on our own research into the dramaturgy of contemporary and DIY performance, citing interviews with Alex Kelly and Rachael Walton on my Outside Eye Project blog, where Kelly describes 'building the room'⁵ as both a literal and metaphorical part of the devising process. We use this metaphor as a central plank for how Third Angel have continued to 'build the room' for contemporary performance makers. I see echoes of *Presumption* in *What happens to the hope at the end of the evening* and *Adler and Gibb*, from the Forest Fringe to the Royal Court, the DIY aesthetic is pervasive, an empty space is filled up.

Linford: I became aware of *Presumption* and Third Angel's wider work at around the same time that I began to develop an interest around DIY approaches to theatre-making. I was interested in DIY's aesthetic style, and what that style denoted. Was the aesthetic, as many defame it, 'about bits of cardboard strewn about to make a set'⁶ and nothing more? Or, as Robert Daniels suggests, was it rather about 'working with anything they have in frugal ways as a political and philosophical *modus operandi*'⁷- artists as a sort of punkish wamble? About a wider theatrical 'countercultural community'⁸, applying a DIY aesthetic as merely one of many 'symbolic forms and methodologies of ethos'⁹ available in the artist's theatrical toolkit?

Michael: For my research into the role of the dramaturg, I interviewed both of Third Angel's artistic directors about how the role of the 'outside eye' functions in their work. Alex Kelly and Rachael Walton, apply a 'big paintbrush' (concept) and a 'little paintbrush' (detail) respectively.¹⁰ I wonder if this is an appropriate metaphor for the idea of building a room and remember *Where From Here* (2001), remembered rooms drawn in dry wipe pen, the walls decorated onstage with the memories of other walls. I realise my life has been bookmarked by shows like these about couples and houses and living together and loving together and falling out. I think about how my life has mirrored the ebbs and flows of their work. Peter Brook writes that 'In the theatre the slate is wiped clean all the time'¹¹, but I'm not sure it is. Shows accrete, memories accrue, one show performed on top of another, like the different iterations of electrical tape on the Theatre Workshop floor, palimpsests of performances that grow into layers of pentimento, oil painting thinning to reveal previous layers of paint underneath. This is what John Freeman describes as '... an early draft being somehow made visible ... half-thoughts and potential changes of mind being exposed rather than edited out ... an act of seeing once and of seeing again.'¹² These changes of mind are referred to in the piece itself when Rachael or Lucy and Chris start the text over again, their mundane routine becoming a motif.

Linford: *Presumption* embraces, through its flat-pack aesthetic, the ubiquitous genericism of the suburban household: 'the wonderful everyday', as Ikea puts it. DIY emerges from nothing, a bare stage transformed to an everyday setting which - on a purely aesthetic level - is almost more bare for its genericism than the infinite potential of a bare stage pockmarked by LX tape, *Presumption's* starting state,. It indicates what Grotowski in *Towards a Poor Theatre* calls 'poverty in theatre'¹³. The bare stage made full contradicts itself: the entrance of items as a structural mechanism pulls focus onto the materiality of the objects and their genericism, avoiding what Grotowski calls the 'artistic kleptomania' of the 'Rich Theatre' by

discarding the illusory pretense of a 'total' theatre¹⁴. It is, from the start, 'stripped of all that is not essential to it'¹⁵. Grotowski's ideas, nearly 50 years in the making, are broadly consistent with currently-emerging understandings of the aesthetic expression of a DIY politics and practice, and in the moment of watching one bare space full of possibility from another - a university seminar room - *Presumption* exploded my understanding of DIY. Michael spoke earlier in this paper of watching the show for the first time in the Theatre Workshop in Edinburgh in 2007, and it strikes me as interesting that what he remembers is the 'well-worn, well-loved, now defunct dancefloor', and how he reflects on the ghosts of performances long since passed that might have inhabited that same room: his memory of *Presumption* is of an empty stage confronting him with its material reality - emptiness.

Michael: The dramaturg sits on the edge between full and empty, suggestion and reflection, question and solution. Rachael Walton says 'I think the role of the dramaturg is to ask the right questions'¹⁶. To some extent, it is a clash of cultures, between playwriting and devising, the writer and the theatre maker. However as Alex Kelly, points out: 'I knew what dramaturgs at the RSC, for example, did, illuminating the text, but devising is itself a dramaturgical process. Devising is all about associations, generating meanings, making connections'¹⁷. Walton sums up the difference between the director and the dramaturg as: 'Rather than the role of the director that decides things for you, the dramaturg enables you to decide for yourself'¹⁸. In *Presumption*, associations are made and meanings generated by words and objects and also words *as* objects. When Thorpe talks about 'moving objects around the stage'¹⁹ he is referring as much to the text as the set, the text *is* the set. Dramaturgy, like flatpack furniture, is an act of assemblage.

Linford: Jeremy Barker sums it up well when describing DIY practitioners as those who 'use the materiality of the spaces they operate in to make a political statement not only about the broader socio-political climate, but the means by which artists operate in society'²⁰. *Presumption's* stage is either empty or filled with the everyday, the generic, the easily obtainable by anybody, what Rob Daniels calls 'rudimentary, accessible, tools [to] promote self-reliance'²¹.

Michael: This form of communication with the work echoes the relationship between Dee Heddon and Alex Kelly on Third Angel's *The Lad Lit Project* (2005). Described as 'distance dramaturgy'. As Heddon writes: 'Correspondence registers in two ways here: it implies not only communication by letters, but also a correspondence of interests, a shared focus'²². This geographical distance from the process and Heddon's 'massive doubt' and 'ignorance/naivety' about the male subject matter enabled a degree of objectivity to inform her remote input²³. Kelly would send written updates, postcards from the process, and Heddon would reply by interrogating the rehearsal with instructions such as: 'If you were to choose five photographs from your own 'photo album' what would they be? What might be just outside the frame? What happened just before? What happened just after?'²⁴ Like Kelly's postcards, Heddon's instruction is a 'touristic' approach to dramaturgy, working with photographs, sending letters, the world changes before they arrive.

Linford: Reporting on a discussion at a Devoted and Disgruntled event, Clive Judd writes that 'self-started work has the possibility to be more political, more subversive in nature'²⁵. In being made of the same stuff any of us can rock down to Ikea, Homebase or (my personal

favourite) Wilko to buy, *Presumption* begins to address the 'urgent revision' which Hannah Nicklin advocates around 'the means of production and who can access them'²⁶. It is an attempt towards what James Stenhouse of Action Hero calls 'a way of working that deliberately avoids mainstream modes of production'²⁷, towards rendering 'the political act of democratising art-making'²⁸ that Daniels argues is 'a defining feature of contemporary art and DIY performance'²⁹ as an aesthetic. *Presumption* suggests that if everyone can, everyone could.

Michael: This process deals directly with notions of autobiography and the relationship returns to a question Kelly asked Heddon at the beginning of the process: 'Why do we feel the need to tell our own stories?'³⁰ The style of dramaturgy Heddon employs mirrors a technique proposed by Elinor Fuchs in her article *EF's Visit to a Small Planet*. For Fuchs, dramaturgs should not only step outside of the work but look at it from afar. She urges us '...to construct meaning in the most inclusive way you can. There will still be more to see'³¹. It is perhaps only by achieving the objective distance of a tourist, by taking pictures and making postcards, that we see this world. As Richard Foreman writes in *The Bridge Project* (2004), 'Only by being a tourist can one truly experience a place'.³² Rachael Walton describes her role: 'To be outside of the process enough to allow questions to be asked, to open up the possibility of discovery rather than framing the discovery process.'³³ She says that 'Dramaturgs are there to unpick, to help to untie what might have become knotted, making it possible to address and resolve issues in the work.'³⁴

Linford: *Presumption's* DIY influences are not merely limited to its aesthetic. James Stenhouse says of Action Hero's work that 'Seeing what happens when an audience sees you genuinely trying to make something empowers the artist and the audience in a way we think is quite political and I think similar to the ideologies of DIY music'³⁵. Imperfection in *Presumption* is at the heart of the piece, breaking and fixing as further items are demanded, the text 'changing moment by moment or section by section according to what is needed'³⁶. *Presumption* needs to not work, to work.

Linford: Act Three – Last Orders

Michael: Brook said, 'Theatre is the place where writing disappears'.³⁷ In *Presumption* the line between the written text and the devised act is blurred to such an extent that I can't imagine the show without its growing set, its words unfurling without its actions. The promissory note written in electrical tape to furnish a bare stage. The IOU to the theatre space. The text unfolding itself onto an empty page.

Linford: The rain stops in Lincoln and the house lights fade in Sheffield, and the show begins in 2006 and it begins again in 2016, and Chris walks on now and Lucy walks on then, or Chris walks on then, and Rachael walks on now. And so on.

Michael: And the curtain falls. And the bar calls last orders. And the venue closes. And the show stops touring. And then starts again. And is released as a DVD. And when I am asked to teach an MA module in Contemporary Theatre Companies, this is the one show that I think will enable students to see what an empty stage can be. As Brook wrote, 'I can take

any empty space and call it a bare stage'. What Third Angel do in *Presumption* is take a bare stage, call it an empty space and then fill it...

Linford: End. Return to title screen. Start again. From the beginning. A table, six chairs.

Biographies

Michael Pinchbeck is a writer and theatre-maker based in Nottingham, UK. His work tours nationally and internationally and has been selected three times for the British Council's Edinburgh Showcase. Pinchbeck studied Theatre and Creative Writing at Lancaster University and has an MA in Performance and Live Art from Nottingham Trent University.

He lectures in drama at the University of Lincoln and recently completed a PhD at Loughborough University exploring the role of the dramaturg in contemporary performance. He was commissioned by Nottingham Playhouse to write *The White Album* (2006), *The Ashes* (2011) and *Bolero* (2014-16), which toured to Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo.

mpinchbeck@lincoln.ac.uk twitter.com/mdpinchbeck www.michaelpinchbeck.co.uk

Linford Butler is a theatre-maker and postgraduate student, based in Lincoln, UK. He obtained his undergraduate degree in Drama at the University of Lincoln in 2015, where he is currently working towards an MA in Contemporary British Theatre. He intends to begin a PhD in late 2017, studying DIY politics and practice in contemporary theatre-making.

He regularly performs, most recently co-devising and performing *Happy Together* (2016) at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. He is co-artistic director of theatre company Wooden Warehouse, and chair of the Student Performers' and Artists' Creative Exchange (SPACE), a national network for student and emerging graduate performers to advocate for and support art making within student contexts across the UK. Outside theatre, he works in higher education, with a particular interest in student engagement and work to enhance the student experience.

linfordbutler@gmail.com twitter.com/LinfordB

Footnotes

- ¹ Michael Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 61.
- ² Alexander Kelly and Chris Thorpe, 'On writing and performance in an ensemble', *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre-makers* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013, ed. Duska Radosavljević), 157-171 (p. 162).
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- ⁴ Dee Heddon and Alexander Kelly, 'Distance Dramaturgy', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20.2 (2010), 214-220 (p. 214).
- ⁵ Michael Pinchbeck, *Outside Eye Project blog* [online] (3 November 2010) <<http://outsideeyeproject.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/dramaturgy-in-dialogue-rachael-walton/>> [accessed 17 May 2012].

-
- ⁶ Clive Judd, 'DIY Theatre Makers', *Devoted & Disgruntled* [online] (13 July 2012) < <http://www.devotedanddisgruntled.com/events/dd-roadshow-newcastle-lyme/reports/diy-theatre-makers/>> [accessed 28 April 2016].
- ⁷ Robert Daniels, "'Shit-Good" and doing it myself (with a little help from my friends), *D.I.Y. (Do. It. Yourself.)* (Chichester: University of Chichester, 2014, ed. Robert Daniels), 6-13 (p. 8).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹⁰ Michael Pinchbeck, *Outside Eye Project blog* [online] (3 November 2010) <<http://outsideeyeproject.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/dramaturgy-in-dialogue-rachael-walton/>> [accessed 17 May 2012].
- ¹¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 140.
- ¹² John Freeman, *Blood, Sweat and Theory: Research through Performance* (Faringdon: Libri Publishing, 2010), p. xii.
- ¹³ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 19.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ¹⁶ Michael Pinchbeck, *Outside Eye Project blog* [online] (3 November 2010) <<https://outsideeyeproject.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/dramaturgy-in-dialogue-rachael-walton/>> [accessed 28 February 2016].
- ¹⁷ Michael Pinchbeck, *Outside Eye Project blog* [online] (3 November 2010) <<https://outsideeyeproject.wordpress.com/2011/12/13/dramaturgy-in-dialogue-alex-kelly/>> [accessed 28 February 2016].
- ¹⁸ Michael Pinchbeck, *Outside Eye Project blog* [online] (3 November 2010) <<https://outsideeyeproject.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/dramaturgy-in-dialogue-rachael-walton/>> [accessed 28 February 2016].
- ¹⁹ Alexander Kelly and Chris Thorpe, 'On writing and performance in an ensemble', *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre-makers* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013, ed. Duska Radosavljević), 157-171 (p. 161).
- ²⁰ Jeremy Barker, 'Chatting with Andy Field, Co-Director of the Forest Fringe', *Culturebot* [online] (1 October 2014) < <http://www.culturebot.org/2014/10/22206/chatting-with-andy-field-co-director-of-the-forest-fringe/>> [accessed 28 April 2016].
- ²¹ Robert Daniels, "'Shit-Good" and doing it myself (with a little help from my friends), *D.I.Y. (Do. It. Yourself.)* (Chichester: University of Chichester, 2014, ed. Robert Daniels), 6-13 (p. 11).
- ²² Dee Heddon and Alexander Kelly, 'Distance Dramaturgy', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20.2 (2010), 214-220 (p. 214).
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- ²⁵ Clive Judd, 'DIY Theatre Makers', *Devoted & Disgruntled* [online] (13 July 2012) < <http://www.devotedanddisgruntled.com/events/dd-roadshow-newcastle-lyme/reports/diy-theatre-makers/>> [accessed 28 April 2016].
- ²⁶ Hannah Nicklin, 'The lessons of punk', *New Theatre In Your Neighbourhood* [online] (9 Dec 2015) <<https://newtheatreiyn.wordpress.com/2015/12/09/the-lessons-of-punk/>> [accessed 27 April 2016].
- ²⁷ Hannah Nicklin, 'DIY Music and DIY theatre', *HannahNicklin.com* [online] (6 Dec 2011) < <http://www.hannahnicklin.com/2011/12/diy-music-and-diy-theatre/>> [accessed 25 April 2016].
- ²⁸ Robert Daniels, "'Shit-Good" and doing it myself (with a little help from my friends), *D.I.Y. (Do. It. Yourself.)* (Chichester: University of Chichester, 2014, ed. Robert Daniels), 6-13 (p. 8).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

-
- ³⁰ Dee Heddon and Alexander Kelly, 'Distance Dramaturgy', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20.2 (2010), 214-220 (p. 214).
- ³¹ Elinor Fuchs, *EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play* [online] <http://web.mit.edu/jscheib/Public/foundations_06/ef_smallplanet.pdf> [accessed 6 December 2016] p. 9.
- ³² Richard Foreman and Sophie Haviland, *The Bridge Project* (New York, 2004-ongoing).
- ³³ Michael Pinchbeck, *Outside Eye Project blog* [online] (3 November 2010) <<http://outsideeyeproject.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/dramaturgy-in-dialogue-rachael-walton/>> [accessed 17 May 2012].
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Hannah Nicklin, 'DIY Music and DIY theatre', *HannahNicklin.com* [online] (6 Dec 2011) <<http://www.hannahnicklin.com/2011/12/diy-music-and-diy-theatre/>> [accessed 25 April 2016].
- ³⁶ Alexander Kelly and Chris Thorpe, 'On writing and performance in an ensemble', *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre-makers* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013, ed. Duska Radosavljević), 157-171 (p. 162).
- ³⁷ Peter Brook, *Evoking (and Forgetting) Shakespeare* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), p. 41.