

INTERVIEW

CONFIRMATION: CHRIS THORPE IN CONVERSATION WITH §

Chris Thorpe is a founder member of Unlimited Theatre and is also an Artistic Associate of live art/theatre company Third Angel. He has worked with, among others, Forest Fringe, Slung Low, Chris Goode, RashDash, Belarus Free Theatre and Portuguese experimental company mala voadora. His fourth piece for the company, Your Best Guess opened at Lisbon's Almada festival in 2015. Chris is an Associate at the Royal Exchange in Manchester, for which he wrote the play There Has Possibly Been An Incident. He has an ongoing collaboration with director Rachel Chavkin from New York's TEAM and poet Hannah Jane Walker, with whom he made The Oh Fuck Moment and I Wish I Was Lonely. He is writing a new version of Beowulf for the Unicorn Theatre, and has written a new piece, Victory Condition, which will be produced at the Royal Court in 2017.

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Confirmation is a performance piece written and performed by Chris Thorpe, developed with and directed by Rachel Chavkin, which premiered at the 2014 Edinburgh Festival Fringe where it won a Fringe First award. It has since toured in the UK and internationally to venues in New York, Brisbane, Aberystwyth, Leicester, Bucharest and Beirut.

The piece is a one-man show about dialogue. In it, Thorpe tells the story of his interactions with a neo-Nazi white-supremacist activist. The ensuing dialogue is framed and mediated throughout as an investigation into the concept of confirmation bias. First postulated by Stanford University cognitive and social scientists Charles D. Lord, Lee Ross and Mark R. Lepper in 1979, confirmation bias describes the tendency in people to seek out and interpret information in selective ways that confirm the beliefs they already hold, while correspondingly being more dismissive of information that does not conform to their preconceptions: as Thorpe puts it in the play: 'we have evolved to be beings that see in the world evidence that supports the point of view we hold already' (12).

The piece itself focuses on Thorpe's pursuit of the essence of confirmation bias as it is expressed through the interactions he relates that occur between himself and a neo-Nazi and committed racist ~~that~~ who he gives the pseudonym 'Glen'. Thorpe positions himself with all candour as aligning with a leftist and socially liberal outlook, with the discussion framed as an attempt to have an honest and straightforward conversation across the political divide with the extremist racist right. As the piece develops, it becomes clear that Thorpe is voicing both the opinions of himself and Glen without making any clear demarcation between the two individuals, with the conversation proceeding at times as a verbatim account. As a consequence, there are points within the show where the racist views of a white supremacist are articulated in great detail and with compelling rhetorical force. What Thorpe hopes may be a process by which dialogue leads towards a measure of understanding instead moves inexorably towards what Jürgen Habermas calls 'strategic dialogue', with each exponent attempting to assert their own viewpoint rather than achieving mutual recognition; it becomes clear that the failure of communication is a manifestation of confirmation bias itself. The piece deals with the ethical conundrum of how useful and effective tolerance is as a political category when it permits the ventilation of intolerable views: and in its deft manipulation of perspective and point of view, treats the issue of racism with uncompromising frankness.

Commented [A1]: Is tolerance a category?

This interview took place on 26 March 2015 in Lincoln.

If at any point you are made to feel like the special guest murderer on Columbo, just say, and we'll stop and we'll go onto something else.

I won't be upset when it appears that we've come to the end of our conversation and you say the words 'just one more thing.' But we can simply carry on until you stop saying 'one more thing'. Bearing in mind that special guest murderers have been played by such luminaries as Leslie Nielson and the late great Leonard Nimoy, I think I'm in good company.

Commented [A2]: Neilsen

And moving from one joke to another, talking about Confirmation. In Jon Ronson's new book So You've Been Publicly Shamed, he makes a nice little joke about confirmation bias: 'ever since I first learned about confirmation bias I've been seeing it everywhere. Everywhere.' I was wondering if this was anything like your experience, confirmation bias being a thing that confirms itself.

It's certainly something that people say to me after the show, they'll say, 'since the show I've become hyper-aware of the extent to which confirmation bias is a constantly running part of me'. And I think that's true for me as well. It's a really odd phenomenon not only in the way it's experienced, which is odd enough, but in the fact that there's not a single person that I've ever explained it to that hasn't reacted in the same way that I first reacted when I came across it. That is to say, if you explain confirmation bias to someone and name it, the reaction isn't, 'oh my God that's really fascinating' or, 'oh yes, let me see how that might apply to my own life': it's much more of the order of, 'oh so *that's* what it is. *That* thing, that obviously I've just never had a name for before'. But we're all kind of aware of how it works and how we use it, so it's not like people are suddenly becoming aware of a thing that they weren't aware of before: it's just that it now has a name and they can focus in on that particular band of wavelengths and spectrum of cognitive processing.

As to whether that's *useful*, I have no idea. There's a related cognitive phenomenon called the Baader-Meinhof Effect, where you are introduced to a new word or concept and suddenly you start seeing it everywhere. And obviously it's no more prevalent than it was before you'd heard of it, it's just that you're primed to notice it. And I think that the effect is kind of squared within confirmation bias because that is in itself a cognitive process. So you're very much more aware of the workings of your own mind. So yes, that has happened to me. I am annoyingly prone to employ my realisation that it is going on in discussions, because I will admit to it going on in myself and suggest it as a possible mechanism or possible reason for the mechanics of the discussion that I'm having with someone else. I try not to do that. But also the extent it's useful to know that confirmation bias is there is debateable, because you can't be de-biased for any more than a very short space of time. So even being aware of it is not a constant thing. You very quickly slip back into those unconscious processes.

What was it that first started your interest in it? Was it something you were aware of and wanted to explore or did it come out through the process itself of writing?

It was referred to in an article that I was reading. I can't remember which one. It wasn't a particularly academic or high-analytical article, but it was referred to and I did that typical thing of thinking: 'I'm not sure that I know what that is'. And it was hyperlinked so I clicked it. And I had that same experience of going, 'well, that's a name for a thing that I probably always knew was

there'. And then that intersected with that very lazy liberal interest I had in exposing myself to opinions that were very far from my own in order to confirm that I –

You mean, in not exposing yourself?

No, in *exposing* myself. You know, in that thing where we – I say 'we', I'm making assumptions about you now – but where I will watch Bill O'Reilly on Fox News, or pick up the *Daily Mail* if it's lying on the table in a pub in order to confirm my own rightness in my own viewpoints. And that's what led me to the structure of the show, whereby I speak to someone who is fundamentally very different from me, at least politically.

But that's interesting, because for me the idea of seeking something else out is in itself a gesture that suggests that you want to understand. For example, I've been an avid reader of Peter Hitchens's blog for the past five or six years. I don't agree with it but I want to try and understand where he comes from so that I can become better informed in a way. I don't get pleasure from my opinions about it being confirmed, but I want to understand how it works in order to improve myself, in a way. But what you've just described is something where you would look at something from an opposing viewpoint which confirms your prejudice and therefore you can discount it.

Absolutely. I think the way you interact with Peter Hitchens's blog is a healthy and active one. What I'm describing is my tendency to deliberately provoke myself into a reaction which I can then turn into a reassurance that fundamentally I am right and he is wrong. Whereas this is much more an attempt to understand the processes of thinking rather than necessarily the detail of the thought as it's expressed.

Has this tendency changed at all because of what you've written and undergone? Would you say you are less inclined towards doing what you would formerly do?

Yes, I generally don't do it any more, although I still sometimes succumb to the temptation. I don't think it's fundamentally an unnatural thing to do. We all do it. I've become less lazy in my liberalism. I've become more of a proponent of what I've started to call 'aggressive liberalism', which is replacing that kind of lazy relativism that a lot of people employ with a kind of moral certainty. In a way, in the thinking of my liberalism I've become much more of an extremist. But also, I think this has changed me in that I don't necessarily seek out confirmation of my own viewpoint by exposing myself to views I disagree with. I'm much more inclined to engage with those views in a sympathetic way. I don't tweet about politics anymore. It's just useless. Tweeting about politics is useless. Because I recognise now the echo chamber that most of my online life is lived in and I dislike intensely that mechanic of 'let's tweet a link to a stupid thing that a politician has said so we can sit round and call him an idiot'. I think this kind of thing deflects us from the actual issues. But I got off a plane recently and I hadn't been in Britain for a couple of weeks, and you know they have those free newspapers when you get on and off planes? And it was the *Daily Mail*. I'll pick up a copy of the *Daily Mail* if a free one's put in front of me, *especially if*, as happened, it was a day in which the headline above the fold was: 'at last, a man in Britain who wants to have an honest conversation about race'. And I have to admit, the part of me that used to watch Bill O'Reilly to make myself angry went: 'Brilliant. Nice to be home. I'm going to pick up the *Daily Mail*, what the fuck have they got?' Because obviously my assumption is that Nigel Farage or a senior Tory has just said something incredibly provocative about race and the *Mail*, being the *Mail*, have picked it up and used it to open the floodgates for the people who normally comment on

those articles with views just as terrible as the ones that I talk about in *Confirmation*. And of course I picked up the paper. I opened it up and there was a picture of Trevor Phillips on the front page when it unfolded. So that was a learning experience, because obviously that complicates things. Because it's Trevor Phillips. And because I agree with Trevor Phillips. And because Trevor Phillips is not the face that you expect to see on the front of the *Daily Mail*. And of course the *Mail* are doing a very clever thing because they're insulating themselves from criticism there about having that conversation about race which would probably only go a certain number of ways for their readership – there's an assumption there for you – but it was a really good example of attempting to do what I used to do and the real world had come back and said, 'it's a bit more complicated than that'.

Another of their strategies is to use female columnists to write any kind of anti-female sentiment.

I have friends who are journalists who have been offered thousands of pounds: 'can you write us an article as a mother about your disapproval of mothers who do "x" at your children's school?' Yes, of course.

So we started with confirmation bias but we segued pretty quickly into politics. One of the things that's interesting about this show is that it could have been about anything. It could have been about grammar schools, or ADHD or the economy, or whatever. But it is not that. I take it to be about the reactionary mind, as you say: 'an attempt to have an honourable dialogue, real and imagined, with political extremism'.

It's a dialogue about race, between the beliefs that I have and the beliefs that the person I'm talking to have, and the gulf between them. It's about racism. You're right that it could have been about any of those things. But it's about extreme – I wouldn't characterise it as extreme right - racial belief.

*So for you it begins and ends with the fact that it's about race? Because we're talking about **who it's fundamentally a fascist.***

But there's a very deliberate reason it's someone with those beliefs. As you said I could have used any subject area or specific political flashpoint to examine this. But what I needed to put in the audience's mind is the most complicated picture possible of the two people who are talking, within the usual assumptive framework. And the most complicated picture possible is me and someone who looks like me. And not just someone who looks like me but someone from my background, economically, educationally, someone from the kind of place that I'm from. He's a bit older than me, but someone who's around my age. Someone who looks as close to me as possible, and crucially, someone who is white. Because if I were to try and have a conversation with Islamic fundamentalism for example, just by me saying the words 'British Islamic fundamentalist' means that the vast majority of people in the room are going to imagine someone that looks very different to me. And that is going to give them an 'out'. Because they are going to say 'of course those two people are different, because mentally, because of the way I have been trained to picture an Islamic fundamentalist as non-white, I can see the difference between them'. So it had to be between me and someone who looks like me. I think it had to be quite a profound difference, not just a voting difference. It had to be beyond the democratic political process. And so the subject area narrows down quite quickly to things that are about extremities of race or extremities of violence or

Commented [A3]: Someone who is fundamentally...? or what's fundamentally a fascist viewpoint?

extremities of national identity. Because those are going to be the gulfs between me and between somebody that looks like me.

And did you take it on because they're specifically topical? Immigration is the big topic in political discourse now.

I think it's always been an area of politics that I've been fascinated with, partly for those reasons of confirming my own biases, and partly because I find it difficult to understand and actually I do want to understand it beyond those selfish emotional fulfilment kind of reasons. So I guess it wasn't a conscious decision to be topical. I think you can find topicality in it. Twenty years ago there would have been topicality in it for different reasons. Probably not for reasons of people in danger of getting serious electoral power who have a version of these views. But certainly because of the culture of violence towards minorities which I think has never really gone away – you think particularly of Stephen Lawrence. And before that, if we'd done this show in the 60s the issue is back on the electoral agenda again in a different but related way. But the topicality is kind of accidental.

But it is a political piece of work.

Yes. It's attempting to be even-handed with the complexity of the minds of the two people talking to each other. It doesn't necessarily come to the conclusion that we should be even-handed with the viewpoints, and in fact if anything it's the opposite.

If we think about the ways in which 'political theatre' has developed over the past fifty years, to do an injustice to it, there's a kind of middlebrow consensus that for a political piece of work to be effective it should be objective, it should be disinterested, it shouldn't privilege a specific viewpoint because otherwise it becomes didactic, it becomes dogmatic, and therefore it's 'lesser art'. You know the kind of ~~perspective~~ that I'm talking about.

Yes.

And yet you're purposefully framing a piece of work in which there is no question that someone's views that are represented in this are abhorrent.

But the way in which those view are expressed is not abhorrent at points.

And there are a number of different techniques by which this is put across, one of which you've already alluded to when you said that you purposefully need to be similar to 'Glen' in a lot of ways. And this is a one-man show, in effect. It specifically states that it could be performed by anyone, though the name that's given in the text is you. Therefore it's not too big a leap to think that this encounter has in effect happened in some way.

That the things that I'm talking about actually happened? It's true. I do not express an opinion in the show on someone's behalf that hasn't actually been said.

And yet I sense there's some kind of slippage between the writerly hand that's shaped and redacted this material and the character inside the play. Those two things aren't the same to me. And also the character who performs in this plays both roles. So there are a lot of easy assumptions that are cancelled out or disallowed.

There's loads of weird stuff going on. In terms of the idea that there is a character performing this text as a whole, yes, it's complicated because it's me. It's the 'performance' version of me obviously, but it's me. The idea that that character, whether it's me or not, is then performing the viewpoints

Commented [A4]: Not sure how 'person' relates to the previous point.

of two different people, one of whom is that person, the other is the person they spoke to, is something that I try to avoid because there's no 'acting' in this for me. There's certainly no impersonation. And also a really important area of slippage, one that people quite often say to me afterwards that was slightly destabilising for their experience of watching it, is that there are points where it is hard to tell at the start of a section which one of those two people might actually be speaking to you at that moment. And that's not an acting thing, that's a deliberate ambiguity that is much more acute than I thought it was when it was there deliberately. Because the show is all about investigating how the same cognitive processes can lead to different conclusions. And so the same rhetorical processes, the same expressive processes, the same processes of intelligence, the same tones of voice, and the same argumentative structures are common to both viewpoints. And that's a destabilising ambiguity because there are times when I think *thate* some of the most reasonable tones of voice that I employ in the play are generally around the expression of probably the most damaging views in the play, and the points where I'm closest to losing control vocally or physically are the points where it's actually the more liberal half of that dialogue coming up against the frustration of being unable to express themselves with both the specificity and the extremity that they want to because of not wanting to break this self-imposed idea of who they are. So even our assumptions about modes of expressions are kind of switched at points in a way that complicates who is speaking, so actually at some points there is just the performer and the views; there's just the performer and the words. Now this show hasn't yet been performed by anyone else. And when it is performed by other people initially it will be performed in languages other than English. So there's actually a job there that I *can't* do. It has to be performed by someone else if it's in German, say. But I'm really interested to see if, language aside, there's another level when there is someone performing that is not me that might get in the way. I think it won't, but I'm interested to see how we'll get round it.

But you also bring the audience into this as well. They contribute, they read things, so that's yet another level that's added to it. What's your conceptualisation of the way the performer/audience role is functioning in this piece?

I'm not trying to make anyone complicit. There's two points where the audience ask me questions. One time they're being me, and that simply allows me to switch from subject to subject. The other time they're actually being 'Glen', the person I spoke to. And they're saying the things he said to me but those things that he said to me are not fundamentally disagreeable. So I'm certainly not trying to trick them into any sort of complicity with the viewpoint, and this is making the assumption that they would disagree with him which I think is probably a reasonable assumption to make. What I'm doing is I'm just keeping us all in the room. There's never a point where I'm not in charge of what's going on. Whatever happens, it's up to me to keep it going. But it's more about preserving that sense of liveness. That this isn't just a polished performance of a script. And actually the point where I ask them to interact with me in the little psychology experiment I do at the beginning: it's about reminding them at points that they are here, that we are all here, that this is not a 'play'. But also I think it slightly leaves the door open for them to say no, for them to disagree. People have refused to read things out. People have interrupted the show to take me up on specific points I'm making.

I presume as 'Glen'.

Yes, or, to ask me why I'm doing this. They disagree with the views that are being put forward by 'Glen'. There's only been one instance where someone has tried to talk to me in that 'hotseated' way, as if I was 'Glen'. But actually it's much more about questioning *me* as to why I feel it is appropriate to speak to someone like him and then to put his views in a public forum like this.

Well that pre-empt's a question of mine, which is: in planning this, in doing the research and in writing it, did you feel that there were any liabilities involved with allowing a racist, a fascist, to expatiate in such large volumes?

Absolutely not. I think if people walked into a theatre and I was standing on the stage and I said exactly what I said in the show except I was dressed as Hitler they wouldn't have a problem with it. There's a clarity of line there that is probably absent in this in a way that it wouldn't be in a play. My responsibility is to be able to exactly answer the question 'why are you doing this?' when it comes up. And actually the people who have been vocally opposed to it during the show are generally people I think that are upset on behalf of other people in the audience rather than themselves. And that brings me onto another area of responsibility that is more complicated, which is that quite often there's a somewhat diverse audience for this show in terms of [ethnic] background. And as a young black British woman pointed out to me the other day, taking into account the difference in ethnicity between me and other members of the audience, is it responsible for me to use this material, which they live every day, as a lens to look at the workings of the human mind? Is there a sense of irresponsibility there? And I don't think that's something that I can take account of in a general way. I really don't, and it's because that denies the idea that there can be a variety of opinion and reaction within groups of people who are arbitrarily defined by their race or their gender or whatever. So while I fully appreciate those reactions when they come to me, I have to count the weight of people that come from those socially designated groups that feel the opposite way, who feel that it's a necessary part of investigating these things to fully examine the viewpoint that you're coming into contact with. And so, I don't see how it's something that I could take account of or change the show because of, but that's where responsibility lies, and I think if there is a responsibility [then] it's to acknowledge the huge variety of viewpoints across the whole audience and treat everybody in it as an individual. [I'm uncomfortable] with allowing the idea that people in [the audience] who appear to be of a certain background can speak for the whole of the people that you perceive to be of that background – I mean I wouldn't do that for white liberals. I can't judge that whole group of people on that individual's reaction and I can't do that for any group of people. But I do have a responsibility, I think, to acknowledge that the lived experience of some members of my audience - in terms of their intersection with the kind of people that I've been talking to and the kind of views that I express in the show - is going to affect them in a way that is far outside the parameters of the investigation of thought processes that I myself have the luxury of undertaking: because I am white and not generally subject to any kind of automatic prejudice because of who I am. So that's where responsibility lies: in acknowledging that, and in keeping that debate alive so that when people come to me and say, 'I want to talk about this aspect of your show to you,' to have that conversation honestly and openly and not feel like I need to defend myself or take that as a genuine criticism. In terms of people just saying, 'you can't talk about x or y,' or, 'how dare you use the Holocaust in this way?' my reaction is 'no, fuck that, it's a piece of art'. If you simply think that this is not to your taste, or you simply disagree with what I'm doing, then just leave the room.

Did you have any kind of models or templates in mind? Did you look at the way things have been done previously like this? Because without being rude, it reminded me a little bit of a mid-career David Hare approach.

Did it?

*Where he would go away and interview a hundred policemen and then he would go and write *Murmuring Judges* or something. The journalistic approach. And obviously verbatim is very popular at the moment.*

There was an element of verbatim in it, I would say... I mean it *is*. Yes, it *is* verbatim actually. I'm saying the things that were said to me. This takes multiple angles and even though it uses the things that were said to me and at points does use them with a little bit of editing for repetition, [it is] absolutely verbatim to what has been written to, or physically said, to me. I don't really know mid-career David Hare in that way but I can see what you're getting at. There's an element of that, but if the whole thing was [verbatim] I think it would go too far into the territory of confirming the prejudices of the audience. In the same way you wouldn't want to go too far down the Louis Theroux or Dave Gorman route. Or the Jon Ronson route, since you brought him up at the start. It's very different to that for a very different purpose. In terms of influences on why I decided to do it like I did, there was no conscious specific inspiration for it.

*But recently people have been putting 'themselves' in their plays. So you have *Tim Crouch who is 'Tim Crouch'* in *The Author* for example.*

Oh absolutely. I suppose if there is someone I want to be when I grow up it's probably Tim. Chris Goode is very influential. [So are] people like Alex Kelly and Rachael Walton from *Third Angel* who I work very closely with. Lucy Ellinson [too], [and] even younger artists like Selina Thompson. There's that whole world of artists who are very consciously 'themselves' in their work. It's been many, many years since I've stood on a stage and pretended that anyone that was in the room wasn't there. So there's a real tradition of that now that this is part of. In this piece I'm less interested in slippery meta-theatrical deconstruction of who I'm being at any particular moment. I'd like that to take place in the mind of the audience, but I'm not particularly trying to make any point at all about the nature of performance or reality through that. In the same way, it's not the other extreme, the kind of Dave Gormanesque, 'These are my adventures with the Nazis' - which has its place, but would kill this piece. I'm taking elements from other things but I'm trying to tread the line of being 'me'.

It's trying to be as straightforward as possible in a way.

Absolutely.

Well, one more if you don't mind?

Was that the *Columbo* moment? You can have as many as you like.

*In the book *The Reactionary Mind*, by political scientist Corey Robin, it is suggested that there's a lot of unity in conservative thought, so much so that he literally refers to all conservatives as reactionaries because he sees the conservative experience as battling with a sense of loss. And it is less about reaching back to a golden age or a perfect past and more a reaction to specific privileges being taken away, or being perceived as being taken away. Is that something that you can go along with in terms of what you've witnessed in putting this together?*

That's not too far away from the argument that the far right comes from economically disenfranchised working class areas. There's a sense of loss there and a sense of entitlement, and I would say in the case of economically disadvantaged areas an entirely justified sense of entitlement to something better that maybe used to be more achievable. I don't think that is where the far right comes from, but I think that idea of political views that we find threatening coming from a sense of deprivation or loss of entitlement is really common. It's not a long way from Jonathan Haidt's work in *The Righteous Mind*. The idea that the things we give weight to and value if we are of a conservative direction of mind are probably to do more with social and group cohesion than if we are of a liberal frame of mind. And that the things that are talked about as being lost are quite often cohesive forces, even though they are fundamentally oppressive mechanisms, like Britain, like empire, military discipline, knowing your place in society, and respect. In terms of whether that harking back is accurate, it's a useful and easily manipulated tool for certain politicians within the process. You only have to look at the BNP's use of Second World War imagery, the Conservative's use of this and community village greenism and very clearly UKIP's call back to a 1950s that isn't borne out by anything we know happened in the 1950s. So it's certainly something that can be played on within people who already feel a sense of dislocation or loss. As to whether it's relevant to this specific dialogue that I've had with this specific person, I would say there's an element of that in him. But I would say that also when that is combined with a worldview that actually sees people of different races as different types of organism from himself, then there's probably a sense in which the racial aspect of his beliefs combined with that blot it out. And I don't think what he believes is an inevitable consequence of conservative thought. Because he isn't a conservative.

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