

The luxurious balance of an elephant on tiptoes...

I recently designed a show at a theatre near here that has a stage floor that is set down from the 3 sides of the auditorium by about 4 inches. Given the nature of the piece and the way I wanted to present the performers it was essential, and to me obvious, that the stage floor had to be raised to auditorium level. Now whilst this would in most respects be an 'invisible' – not perceptibly performing - aspect of the scenography, it made a significant difference to how the space felt and would be read. On no less than 3 occasions in ascending rank the theatre staff approached me.....

to ask why the...heck... should £1500 be spent on something that nobody will notice?

Perhaps I was wrong but I like to think that I made an alteration to the space that they should have retained, a small effective alteration that transformed a passive space into a much more vibrant one, - very simply one that felt connected to the auditorium.

For me it is as fundamental and simple as that – a space being allowed to perform, be present, the luxurious balance of an elephant on tiptoes, still large, grey and rather baggy but there's something about it that will cause you to look more closely, pay attention, think twice.

Once upon a time I probably wanted to be the designer of Parsifal at the Royal Opera house or La Bastille in Paris, with huge design budgets, floosies flunkies and flymen at my disposal, a gala opening and assistants running around fetching me coffees and sharpening my pencils. But despite a lingering hankering for immense budgets, I know I am not interested any longer in doing 'pretend' or artifice;

I need to make shows that are grounded in some kind of reality (in quotation marks) however theatrical or distorted those realities might become. And in a sublimation of that younger design ego, I am much more interested in making 'real' objects and environments that can function on a more immediate and tactile level, and pursuing subtle, discrete resonances and ambiguities.

My interests co-incided and converged with Richard Gregory and Renny O'Shea and we co-founded Quarantine whose work I'd like to show you today. Quarantine is currently the John Thaw Fellow in Theatre here at the University of Manchester, and won the Arts Council England North West's **art05** award for outstanding achievement this year (2005.)

**"...behind every face we pass in the street there beats a life of infinite complexity"**

This phrase from Joyce Macmillan's review of **see-saw** (an early Quarantine production) at Tramway, Glasgow crystallises the concepts that underpin the work of Quarantine and which are manifest in a series of events that have at their core , through a collusion of scenographic and dramaturgical strategies, a confusion and fusion, a blurring of boundaries between performers and audience, a process of disorientation, re-orientation, and a re-iteration of liveness, always with the invitation to act, to partake and even possibly derail the perceived trajectories of an event., making possible the discovery and presentation of personal histories that become communal through the exploration of the intimate, the mundane, the 'normal' and 'ordinary'.

And so, through my work with Quarantine I have continued my move away from the baroque and the overt to something more discreet, even unseen, a gentler manipulation of all the senses, working with the biographical resonances of objects, developing performance contexts and sensory experience, .the performance space and the performance itself, tinkering within the reality of the familiar and at its edges, looking for even the small spaces of ambiguity and tension between what we expect to happen and what might happen – a kind of 'in the meantime' of infinite potentiality;

Here are a couple of images from an early piece : SeeSaw – a tale of the city and a meeting of folks in Glasgow – created for the main space at the Tramway. Two banks of seating units separated by a curtain with a mixture of audience and ‘performers’ in each bank – the immediate assumption was that the other bank, in each case, was the ‘show’. The audience travelled through a maze on their journey to each side (we were the first show in after their refurbishment and for our production we had to label the doors A and B and in a pleasing fusion with the building the signs have remained and are still used to designate entrances). The insubstantiality of the sharks tooth walls and lack of ceiling to the performance/auditorium space allowed the Tramway building to mark and retain its presence within the performance context. As we are very often working with traditional playhouse venues, we are keen to exploit, subvert, and extend the historical lineage and received expectations by specifically looking outside these contexts for more appropriate and effective practices but always by looking out from within , rather like a sailor trying to rebuild a ship at sea and never being able to start at the bottom.

The next show was ‘Frank’ – a performance-installation where audience members travelled as individuals through a series of interconnected rooms set up on the main stage at Newcastle Playhouse. After a period of waiting, listening and observing from the wings ,an audience member would enter a perimeter corridor, dimly lit and smelling of sour cabbage where some doors were locked and others gave access to a variety of rooms and installations, through which one could wander at leisure, there being no limit to how long you could spend in the installation and no knowing if the people you encountered were performers or other audience members. The penultimate room, a soup kitchen, proved a strong focal and gathering point, where complete strangers would settle and talk, creating a strong sense of community, in fact a new community that began within but developed a life of its own outwith ‘the performance markers’.

I don’t have time here to describe the various installations, but the process of the journey through rooms ideally enabled a ‘re-remembering’ of self, whether that was by tapping into an old memory triggered by a smell or a sound (e.g.

World Cup 1970), or moments for self-reflection in a mirror, or simply the heightened perceptions enabled by alone-ness, whereby, again ideally, one reached the soup kitchen with a renewed, or heightened, or 'opened' sense of self and that this promulgated the extraordinarily intimate communality engendered in this penultimate room. In our work, you are offered situations where you can reveal as much or as little as you wish, situations where you can be as honest or as imaginative as you choose – the making of that choice is interesting and it is both heartening and intriguing that 'in the company of strangers' we all do mostly choose to reveal rather than disguise.

And so whilst scenographic and dramaturgical strategies might deploy tools of pretence and artifice, the ultimate aim is not either, and we always make visible the seams and stitches where theatrical construction meets the 'realities' of the event. - We're not pretending, we're showing or telling, we're inviting others not to pretend, to show, to tell and in that sense the scenography serves best by making the familiar just a little bit unfamiliar, (and of course vice versa) to help one to 'pay attention', and in an 'extra-daily' context see and seek the extraordinary in the 'daily'.

Here, for example, is the table in the timber framed Tudor Hall in Leicester set for *EatEat* (2002) where refugees and recent arrivals to the UK offered their stories in a performance which took the form of a shared meal for performers and audience. A table and a room for a 'simple' supper, but needing a poetics of space extending beyond its immediate function to resonate more closely with the histories that are unfolding around it. Interestingly, a later version of this in Ghent was in many ways a more scenographically satisfying experience but the circular table in this version meant that the audience were restricted to communicating with those near their section of the table rather than as previously those across the table who became only observed in the same way that the performance moments that happened on the table were 'on stage' and thus the scale of the event denied the intimacy that fostered the shift from observed performance to becoming implicated in the event.

This notion of being implicated was developed in the next show 'White Trash'

“a dirty ballet” as Lyn Gardner called it - In *White Trash* (2004) young white working-class men talked about their lives in a performance which took place on and around a pool table. The work also asked questions about what is ‘real’ and what is ‘true’ and foregrounded how theatrical construction might privilege one story over another. Whilst the pool table (the green island of Britain) was what people remembered about the ‘design’, for me the most compelling aspects of the scenography were the low mdf walls that framed the space and the linoleum tiled floor scarred by the footmarks and fag burns of rehearsal, both of which were to a greater or lesser extent overlooked but contributed to quality of the performance space. When you booked a ticket for *White Trash* you were given the choice of sitting within the space or standing outwith the space but it became clear that when the audience entered the space they adjusted their preferences according to their immediate reaction upon viewing the options, the choice effectively between being ‘onstage or offstage’ participant or observer, active or passive.

*“Everywhere Quarantine delves, it uncovers the extraordinary in the seemingly ordinary and banal.”Lyn Gardner*

In our exploration of the relationship between theatre and reality, one of the strands is the construction of ‘not naturalism’. This might be defined as a form of theatrical hyper-realism, in that the multi-layering and texturing of real stories and lives can transform the very ordinary into the extraordinary. Our most recent production, *Butterfly*, was a return to the Tramway in Glasgow. *Butterfly* was created with a ordinary family from Glasgow, found by newspaper advertisement, and this piece tried to investigate how a family functions, what’s private, what’s public a process of self discovery for both performers and audience. It was structured as a party, with a hired hall with dance floor and surrounding tables, buffet tables laden with party food all beneath a cloud of mirror balls., invitations to dance, share food, a bar in the corner, all the elements of a real event framing and focusing on the negotiated relationships within this one family. And perhaps it is with this sense of negotiated, or rather performance-mediated encounter between people, between people and space, where people can be most themselves and other

times when they can be other than themselves, where the function and poetics of the space affects, but not necessarily consciously, that I position my work as 'undesign', always looking for that luxurious balance of the elephant on tiptoes.