

Processes and Rhetorics of Writing in Contemporary British Devising:
Frantic Assembly and Forced Entertainment.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the frameworks of writing and devising employed by two influential British theatre companies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries: Frantic Assembly and Forced Entertainment. I place these companies – not usually considered together – in dialogue, drawing on archive material from the decades-long span of their careers. Clues to the development of their creative methods are sought from rehearsal tapes and scripts, as well as other material surrounding each company's output; this includes education packs, reviews, interviews (some newly conducted by myself), promotional videos and other manifestations of the rhetoric around the creation of the works in question. I focus closely on several specific productions for each company, but frame these detailed studies within a wider exploration of the developing styles, shifting methods and changing material circumstances within which these productions were created.

My first chapter assesses existing proposed definitions of devising, adopting and nuancing certain key terms in the light of my observations of the companies examined. Within these frameworks, I use the particular case studies to illuminate concerns central to the creation of new theatrical work more widely, involving overlapping processes of devising and writing. In particular, I probe anxieties, paradoxes and revelations around the roles of writing and collaboration. By tracing the companies' rhetorics and practices over a considerable length of time, I throw new light on the slow accretion and nuancing of process within both companies.

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Author's declaration

I declare that all written work and use of expression is, unless cited, my own, and has not previously been published or submitted for examination.

INTRODUCTION

Frantic Assembly and Forced Entertainment are well-established British theatre companies with long histories, varied and innovative outputs and high profile presences in the theatrical and academic landscapes of the UK. Both companies create new works, occasionally adapting existing texts but more commonly beginning from foundations other than the written word. They both present their respective work as the product of creative models which differ from (what they perceive or present as) mainstream UK theatre. In beginning from ‘an idea or concept’, ‘discussion’ or ‘improvisation’ rather than a pre-written text, both companies employ approaches which have in recent years been analysed in terms of devising.¹

My interest in these companies arose from an observation about the status accorded, perhaps unconsciously, to the writer in the processes described by both companies. In critical accounts of their works there is a clear tendency to frame discussions of their methods in terms of *devising*; this does not take full account of the importance of processes of *writing* in their creation of new work. By examining the companies through the lenses of both devising and writing, I will shed new light on their histories and offer new insights into their developing creative processes.

In addition, no serious attempt has yet been made to consider these two companies’ histories in parallel or comparative studies. Occasionally, lists of ‘devising companies’ such as Delgado and Svich’s in *Theatre in Crisis?* (2002: 9) will fleetingly mention both companies in terms of their contribution to the UK’s theatrical landscape, but these generally paper over the myriad nuances in and differences between what ‘devising’ might mean to one company or the other. So far no detailed account has been put forward of the largely unnoticed – but revealing – similarities and divergences between the two.

Aleks Sierz is one of these few commentators who have explicitly linked Frantic Assembly and Forced Entertainment, in his overview of ‘The State of British New Writing’ a few years into the new millennium. However, the reference is again brief,

¹ Harvie and Lavender (2010: 2), Oddey (1994: 45) and others give such non-textual starting points as (partial) definitions of devising, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 1 below.

and the unity he sees comes only through their shared struggle against ‘the banality of suffocating dramas set in sitting rooms dominated by centre-stage sofas’ (Sierz 2005: 57). According to Sierz, companies such as these, as well as the likes of Complicite, approach this struggle through ‘a fusion of text, dance and music’ (*ibid.*). Perhaps implicit in how broadly Sierz frames this observation are the widely differing natures of the specific ‘fusions’ in each of the companies he mentions. In any case, his purpose is to provide an overview, and the similarities he identifies are tentative at best.

At times, in fact, the artistic directors of both Frantic² and Forced Entertainment have made statements which might read as direct assertions that they define their work deliberately in opposition to the other’s: as I will examine, Frantic’s Scott Graham has questioned the purpose of (what he sees as) hermetic, experiment-driven ‘laboratory theatre’ of the Grotowskian kind adopted as a partial model for Forced Entertainment’s practice (Graham 2006b: 4).³ Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment, on the other hand, explicitly denounced Frantic’s ‘strutting’, muscular performances (not that he claimed to have witnessed them first-hand), in a 2010 conversation with Guy Cools (Etchells 2010).

These public statements mask the numerous points of overlap and profitable comparisons which may be identified between the companies. In my contextualising histories of the two companies I pinpoint several such hitherto unrecorded similarities in their development and processes. I am the first to scrutinise in this detail the lengthy and extensively (albeit erratically) archived performance histories of both companies and to delineate their developing practice over several decades. This has resulted in a new understanding of each company’s processes and of their contributions to theatre and devising in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

The points of similarity in their histories suggest a neat, albeit not always evident, parallelism between them; divergences then become productive avenues for exploration. In brief, each company was formed at first as a more or less tightly-knit

² I will often adopt this commonly-used abbreviated form of the company’s name.

³ See page 115 below for Graham’s eschewal of such approaches; see also pp. 150 and 194 below for Forced Entertainment’s Grotowskian reference points.

ensemble of university peers⁴ who adopted existing models of devising and performance before developing these and generating their own practices. In both cases, members of the companies have highlighted specific moments of divergence from an original model or way of working. Both Frantic and Forced Entertainment, then, sprang from collaborations in university settings and have worked outside models based on drama school and theatre-based training. Both have sought to challenge the writer-led tradition of theatre-making perceived as dominant in the UK. However, both were from the outset willing, while espousing rhetorics of rebellion and difference, to work within certain existing structures and institutions. Both have in turn been influential on new generations of theatre-makers.

For all these reasons, I have set out to investigate, in parallel studies, these companies' development of and engagement with processes of writing. The methodology I have adopted is to examine a diverse selection of detailed case studies, contextualised within the lengthy histories of each company and the developing notion of what 'devising' means in each case.

There were several criteria behind my choice of the specific case studies for each company. I worked extensively in the archives of both companies (Frantic's housed in their London offices, Forced Entertainment's at the British Library Sound and Moving Image archive), constructing detailed histories of the companies' developing rehearsal room practice, performance styles and public rhetorics. The case studies I chose to focus on were those which presented instructive contrasts within the companies' histories. Each presented ample rehearsal room and anecdotal material from which to explore a range of views on their creation, and each represents some significant development or shift in the companies' creation of new work. They are all selected to provide different, enlightening angles on the ways in which the companies involve writing in their devising processes.

Thus I single out Frantic's *pool (no water)* (2006) and *Stockholm* (2007) for particular attention. The work with Mark Ravenhill on *pool (no water)* was novel in many respects, with Ravenhill certainly the highest-profile of their collaborators at

⁴ Though in the case of Frantic Assembly's early group, a precedent was almost immediately set of seeking input from those outside this direct university circle, through collaborative relationships with writers such as Spencer Hazel and with choreographer/directors they encountered through links with Volcano Theatre. I trace this development in Chapter 2.

the time,⁵ and it highlights some tensions in the ways Graham and Hoggett worked with and perceived writers. The latter collaboration, with Bryony Lavery, was the first of several with this writer, indicating that the experience was considered a success by all parties. Graham and Hoggett discuss the production with fondness, but I do not wish to suggest by this juxtaposition that one collaboration was a paragon and the other a failure.

Building on these case studies in combination with an overview of Forced Entertainment's development, I identify certain key concerns – which I label 'anxieties' – and 'tactics' within the companies' approaches and rhetorics, some of which overlap and some which set the companies apart. I then explore two case productions in more detail: *Emanuelle Enchanted* (1992) and *Speak Bitterness* (in particular 1995's 'theatrical' version, which developed from the 1994 'durational' performance). *Emanuelle Enchanted* is the first production in the Forced Entertainment archive to benefit from extensive development and performance material, as it was the first process for which the company kept a large quantity of rehearsal video. It has been the subject of a number of critical approaches so far,⁶ but none of these has fully examined the processes behind its making nor linked these in detail to the company's development. *Speak Bitterness* provides a similarly (if not more) extensive quantity of archive material for analysis, and its development – from concepts found in previous shows, through a 'durational' performance lasting five or six hours and then honed into a shorter theatrical piece – provides new insight into the dramaturgies and writing processes at work here. For both companies, in building towards these more detailed examinations of two major productions each, I first identify the development of the frameworks within which the performances were created, with reference to several other key performances and events.

Forced Entertainment's foundation precedes Frantic Assembly's by almost exactly a decade, and I will here outline their formative moments and key developments chronologically. However, in analysing the processes at work behind the companies, I found it made more sense to present the Frantic Assembly case studies directly following from my examination of the critical literature on devising. These cases are

⁵ Though arguably Bryony Lavery's continuing prolific output and her commission for the National Theatre to adapt *Treasure Island* in 2015 may now make her the more prominent of the two writers.

⁶ Such as in several of the essays in Helmer and Malzacher's edited volume *Not Even a Game Anymore* (2004).

more readily relatable to well-documented models such as those of Joint Stock or Complicite and to terminologies of devising that draw on such cases in considering the work of the writer. Forced Entertainment, whose projects do not involve writers from outside the company in any established way, then provides a contrasting set of rhetorics and processes for analysis. Within these, and in conjunction with the observations on Frantic Assembly, I identify several previously undocumented ‘anxieties’ and creative ‘tactics’, through the case studies and histories I present. Furthermore, while Forced Entertainment precedes Frantic and I note some elements of similarity in their histories and influences, I wish to avoid any implication that the former company in some way led to the latter’s formation. They were formed and operate in different circles, and it seems unlikely that Frantic’s founders were in any significant way aware of the older company when they formed their own.

Forced Entertainment’s formation and development

Forced Entertainment was formed in 1984, by a group of students who had met at Exeter University on the Drama course led by Peter Thomson. The founding members were Robin Arthur, Tim Etchells, Richard Lowdon, Cathy Naden, Huw Chadbourn and Susie Williams; the latter two of these departed in 1986 and 1987 respectively, with Terry O’Connor joining in 1986 and Claire Marshall in 1989 (Etchells 1999a: 222). Hence, the company has consisted of a relatively stable ‘core group’ of personnel (Malzacher & Helmer 2004: 12) for the best part of thirty years.

The formation of the company was idealistic in its collective nature, and we must view this at least in part as a dissent from the prevailing political atmosphere of individualism and expansive capitalism as ushered in by the Thatcher government in 1979. It is important to situate Forced Entertainment (and, below, Frantic) within the cultural and theatrical context of their respective times, and a constructive parallel may here be drawn with the roughly contemporaneous, and also long-running and influential, Complicite.⁷ I do not propose close stylistic or methodological parallels between these two companies, but the founders of both were reaching adulthood and forming their self-professedly anarchic devising companies at the time that the policies of Thatcher’s government began to take hold

⁷ The company was founded in 1983 as Théâtre de Complicité, but I will adopt the more recent name and spelling Complicite, even when referring to periods before the company’s official change of name in the mid-2000s.

in the UK. Complicite thus provides some notable overlaps, contrasts and reference points for a brief historical outline of the development of Forced Entertainment.

Several members of Forced Entertainment have (like Complicite's Simon McBurney) professed vehement opposition to Thatcherite principles. Forced Entertainment set themselves up in Sheffield partly because it was a low-rent location, and partly due to their romanticised view of the city at the time as a haven 'outside of Thatcherite Britain' (Giles 2010). In interview, members of Forced Entertainment propose this as a distinctly working-class framework, with part of Sheffield's appeal its industrial history based in mining, steel and engineering. By contrast, McBurney and fellow Complicite founder-member Annabel Arden first met at Cambridge University and formed their response to Thatcherite Britain in the European context of the Lecoq School.

Both of these contemporaneous companies were formed by groups of friends who had already begun collaborating together during their training or education. From the outset, though, Complicite consisted of a looser 'constellation' of performers whereas Forced Entertainment worked – and lived – intensively together with often the whole ensemble contributing to each of their earliest performances, whether in design, direction, or performance. The company circulated and shared all of these duties to some extent in the earliest works. They performed in non-theatre venues and had modest design aspirations; they relied on the dole⁸ to fund their creativity.

Another of Sheffield's appeals for Forced Entertainment's members, relating to the working class ideals they claimed, was its 'musical heritage' (Giles 2010). From early in their development, Forced Entertainment collaborated with local industrial post-punk musician John Avery, who has provided soundtracks for many of the company's performances.⁹ From the beginning, Forced Entertainment drew on such popular culture reference points: punk music, television and film, whereas Complicite worked on the theatrical skills of clowning and mime, and (from 1989's *The Visit*) crafted literary adaptations. Forced Entertainment's response to the

⁸ Terry O'Connor recounts the early realisation that 'the commitment to making theatre was something that was going to take all our time even if it originally couldn't pay us any money' (Giles 2010).

⁹ Members of Forced Entertainment also performed in the music video for *Poison* by Avery's band Hula. An interview with Avery and a glimpse of the video was aired on Channel 4's *The Tube* sometime around 1985. This can be seen in the Forced Entertainment archive at the British Library, or online at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s30cEyIFQP0>> (accessed 15 August 2014).

culture of the time was, outwardly at least, less literary, and until recently they have largely eschewed the overt use of literary precedents in their work (2005's *Exquisite Pain* was based on a text by Sophie Calle and 2014's *The Notebook* was based on a novel by Ágota Kristóf). The later shift here is noteworthy, as the American influences of popular film and avant garde performance groups have been tempered by these Continental literary influences.

Forced Entertainment and Complicite openly state these different angles to their (early) approaches with reference to popular culture. McBurney, notably, has claimed to have grown up in a house without a television (in Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 75), whereas Forced Entertainment for a long period described their work as 'understandable by anybody brought up in a house with the TV always on' (Etchells quoted in Shank 1996: 109). Speaking of the punk, do-it-yourself attitude embraced by the company, Terry O'Connor recalls:

Across filmmaking, fine art and music, there was this feeling that you could just do it, you didn't have to wait for someone to fund you to do it. There was a real grass-roots level of artistic production that we felt we could fit into. (Giles 2010)

This rhetoric presents the company as in opposition to the skills- and training-based attitude of the likes of Complicite, which in turn places Frantic perhaps more closely in line with McBurney's attitude. This is one of the major oppositions which I examine in my case studies; I summarise this as the choice to emphasise either *effort* or *skill*.¹⁰ Another revealing (and related) rhetoric highlighted by O'Connor's statement above is that of the company's claimed 'outsider' status. Forced Entertainment's members have sought to maintain this rhetorical line even when receiving, as they recently have, over £250 000 per year from Arts Council funding alone.¹¹ Within two years of forming the company, Forced Entertainment had received project funding from the Arts Council, so while they did not 'wait for someone to fund [them]' (*ibid.*), they quickly became adept at seeking sources of financial backing and other support.

¹⁰ See, in particular, my section on the subject, pp. 191-195 below.

¹¹ Information from the Arts Council website (Arts Council 2014).

As Alison Oddey points out in her overview of the company in *Devising Theatre* (1994), Forced Entertainment do admit of a prior UK tradition (Impact Theatre is possibly the domestic reference point most reliably referred to by the company¹²). Also notable, though, are influences from overseas, including, significantly, the Wooster Group. This New York-based company inspired in Forced Entertainment an ‘aesthetic about urban culture, film and television’ and a ‘texture of confusion and technical chaos’ (Oddey 1994: 94). Forced Entertainment’s contact with such influences came at first mostly through television documentaries but, as I will chart, they soon began regularly visiting festivals such as the National Review of Live Art, and broadening their influences through such direct contact with other practitioners’ work. The non-balletic dance theatre work of Pina Bausch’s Tanztheater Wuppertal, which draws on ‘ordinary, everyday movements’ (Müller in Climenhaga 2013: 24-5), was another clear early influence on Forced Entertainment’s developing aesthetic of messy, human-scale performances involving ‘dream-like scenarios’ and performers ‘caught in conflicting narratives’ (Jennings in Climenhaga 2013: 243).

As Forced Entertainment grew in stature and began presenting work at London-based international festivals and those overseas, they nonetheless retained their core membership and their base in Sheffield, operating since 1993 out of offices in a converted building named ‘The Workstation’.¹³ They still describe themselves as ‘a group of six artists based in Sheffield’ (Forced Entertainment 2014).

Frantic Assembly’s formation and development

Frantic Assembly was founded officially in 1994, roughly a decade after Forced Entertainment’s formation. Its founding members were Scott Graham, Steven Hoggett and Vicki Coles (now Middleton). Like Forced Entertainment’s members, the founders had met through university, though in Frantic’s case they had been involved in drama society productions together rather than studying on an explicitly theatre-related course.

The political moment in which Frantic Assembly formed was one in which Thatcher had left power, but still one of a Tory government. Whereas Forced Entertainment

¹² See, for instance, Etchells (1995: 9).

¹³ See Helmer (2004: 59); her chapter also contains other useful contextual and historical detail on the personnel and productions of the company from (as its title states) *Speak Bitterness* (1994) to *Bloody Mess* (2003, the time at which Helmer was writing).

spent at least two years funding themselves through the dole while creating their earliest works, Frantic was formed by its founders' enrolling on the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. This policy had in fact been created under Thatcher in the early 1980s, but only by the late 1980s had it gained traction, funding an estimated half a million people in becoming self-employed by 1991 (MacDonald 1996: 433), and placing a greater focus on business planning and marketing strategies in training these would-be entrepreneurs. To enrol on the EAS was a deliberate entrepreneurial choice on the company's part: Graham recalls that it 'gave us less money than going on the dole' (Ideastap 2012). As part of the requirements of the scheme, they attended 'finance and business' training from the outset (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 2).

Both companies thus availed themselves of the government funding available at their inception, but the above-mentioned difference in the prerequisites of this funding contributed towards a different emphasis in the companies' structures. This in turn may be seen as having some impact on their resulting styles and approaches, though personal tastes and direct environmental factors (such as collaborations and other influences) will of course also have had an impact on the two companies.

Nonetheless, the organisational difference is clear. In their very earliest years of work together, members of Forced Entertainment were answerable only to the others in this increasingly intimate group of friends who lived together in shared houses and hence spent lengthy and intense periods debating and forming their work. They were constituted as a 'Theatre Co-operative'. Even had Frantic desired a similar, flatter leadership structure,¹⁴ the requirements of the funding meant that the three founders were the only official members of the company. There was some continuity of personnel in the earliest of Frantic's shows, but the performers in these pieces were at first Graham and Hoggett themselves, along with friends who were willing to rehearse for little or no salary. The lengthy, discursive development periods embarked upon by Forced Entertainment and comparatively goal-focused (and – again relatively – brief) rehearsal processes described by Frantic Assembly may in part be seen as a response to these differences in their immediate funding and organisational circumstances.

¹⁴ I outline below some indications that a few privileged collaborators, despite having no official organisational role, sometimes spoke to the press on behalf of the company, creating more of a 'gang' or 'troupe' mentality or image (see, for example, pp. 77-78 below).

Like Forced Entertainment, Frantic also made a conscious decision to set up their home away from the capital in a smaller, less populous city. Graham and Hoggett's *Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* (2009) summarises the appeal of Swansea: it was familiar, they had burgeoning relationships with Swansea-based Volcano Theatre and the Taliesin Arts Centre, the cost of living was relatively cheap, and the city was small enough for them to be noticed with relative ease (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 2). Unlike in Forced Entertainment's telling of their own history, the reasons given for the choice of location are not political (nor particularly aesthetic) in motivation, though Graham has later stated that they 'also liked the idea of being outsiders – of doing things on [their] own terms' (Ideastap 2012). In any case, when the need arose to tour more widely and collaborate more closely with established companies and venues, roughly four years after their foundation, Frantic moved to London (*ibid.*).

Further significant divergences in the companies' structures can be seen in the fact that Frantic has built up a network of regular collaborators (its Learn and Train Practitioners, including former performers and choreographers Steve Kirkham and Eddie Kay), but maintained a small core of artistic leadership. I will examine ways in which this structure differs from the comparatively unwieldy but remarkably consistent and long-running composition of Forced Entertainment's creative personnel.

The most noteworthy development for Frantic in recent years has been the departure in 2013, after nearly twenty years of close collaboration, of Steven Hoggett from his role as co-artistic director. The company continues with Scott Graham at the helm, but it is clear that a new era in its direction and development is opening up. I focus here on the period prior to this departure, examining the development of this close working partnership before Hoggett's growing other commitments to West End and Broadway productions – several in collaboration with his lifelong friend John Tiffany – began to take precedence over his work with Frantic Assembly.

The companies' styles and appeals

Both Frantic and Forced Entertainment attracted attention in local circles from early in their development. Forced Entertainment often worked in non-theatre settings such as art galleries and found spaces, and pitched their output, as discussed, as a

populist (but still arch and intellectually challenging) product to appeal to the post-punk musical scene which had been burgeoning in Sheffield since the late 1970s. Frantic arose at a time when the club scene was the dominant force of youth culture; electronic dance music and the euphoric drug ecstasy had in the 1980s started to cross over from the underground 'rave' scene into more popular culture.

Graham and Hoggett describe how seeing (and subsequently working with) Volcano Theatre opened up to them the possibility of creative expression in theatre through physicality and music. Frantic's earliest productions borrowed the Volcano style almost wholesale, and were created in an attempt to reflect the concerns and interests of audiences who were the performers' peers. In productions such as *Klub* (1995) the company attempted through extreme physical feats of endurance and energy to recreate the atmosphere of the nightclubs with which 20-year-olds were familiar.¹⁵ Forced Entertainment, on the other hand, drew on the striking, repetitive soundscapes of industrial and post-punk music in vogue at the time. The staccato gestural languages and stilted verbal phrasings of (often American, New York-based) bands such as Talking Heads, or the UK's The Fall, were adopted in performance such as *The Set-up* and *Nighthawks* (both 1985). They also sought a wide youth appeal and advertised their performances with obscure imagery and photocopied, cut-and-pasted lettering familiar from the fanzines of the underground music scene.

Forced Entertainment also sought a more intellectualised engagement from the audiences it courted, whereas Frantic pitched their works as verbally dextrous but also physically and energetically thrilling, in a culture in which club music and drugs encouraged an abandonment of thought in favour of immersion in loud music and bodily response. If anything, as I shall argue, Frantic smoothed off the angry political engagement of Volcano Theatre, retaining certain aesthetics and working methods but abandoning much of the interest in politics that Volcano's founders Fern Smith and Paul Davies emphasised in their theatre. These different approaches were presented by both Frantic and Forced Entertainment as reactions against what they saw as a stagnant, literary theatrical mainstream.

¹⁵ In Chapter 2, I examine this early style's debts to and links with Volcano and dance theatre companies such as Lea Anderson's the Featherstonehaughs and the Cholmondleys.

As Forced Entertainment evolved through the context of national and international arts festivals, they quickly developed this intellectual engagement with their processes and output into a dialogue with academia. Tim Etchells in particular has taken on the position of company spokesperson (and latterly artistic director), speaking on panels and publishing theoretical writings as well as a column in the *Guardian*.

Frantic Assembly has thus far been less interested in positioning themselves within academic study. Since its inception, the company has aimed to develop audiences and support its income through education work in schools, appealing to young student audiences and disseminating the Frantic approach and aesthetic through education packs geared towards GCSE and A-Level students (and teachers). Again, a new development suggests a possible shift here: Frantic have undertaken a new engagement with university studies beyond undergraduate level, forging strong links with Coventry University and offering a Master's programme (in 'Collaborative Theatre Making') in conjunction with that university's Performing Arts department.¹⁶

The tones of the key works associated with each company provide quick evidence of this difference in pitch: Graham and Hoggett's *The Frantic Book of Devising Theatre* (2009) is aimed at 'provok[ing] the reader into looking for new means of creating theatre performance' and at 'encourag[ing] practitioners to get into the rehearsal room' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 4-5), whereas the seminal *Certain Fragments* (Etchells 1999a) and semi-official *Not Even a Game Anymore* (Helmer & Malzacher 2004) are more ambitiously theoretical and experimental in style. Graham vaunts the 'unashamedly nonacademic' (Graham 2010: 25) nature of their influences in numerous interviews and 'guides' to their work directed at 'students (aged 14+), teachers & arts educationalists' (*ibid.*: 1).

There has been much notable case study and analytical work on Forced Entertainment, including Oddey (1994), Mermikides (2010), and the aforementioned volume *Not Even a Game Anymore* (Helmer & Malzacher 2004). I draw on all of these in framing the processes and rhetorics at work.

¹⁶ See Coventry University (2014) for a press release about the course, due to run from January 2016.

Frantic has received less scholarly interest, though Nina Steiger's 2006 interview with Scott Graham in *Contemporary Theatre Review* provides one of the first lengthy platforms for the expression of the artistic director's views, and Mark Evans conducted another similar interview with Graham and Hoggett, about the creation of *Beautiful Burnout* (Evans 2012). Platform discussions, of the kind seemingly second nature to Forced Entertainment, have also been organised around aspects of *Stockholm* and *Othello*, thanks to the interest of psychologists Mary Morgan and Philip Stokoe (Graham *et al.* 2008a & b). In terms of analytical case studies, Mark Evans is one of the few to have embarked upon such work, delivering a paper on 'Perceptions of the Body in the Dance/Theatre of Volcano and Frantic Assembly', published in the Proceedings of the first MoMentUm conference (Evans 2001). I develop some of his work on the model and influence of Volcano Theatre in Chapter 2. David Lane's chapter on 'Writing and Devising' in his 2010 work *Contemporary British Drama* offers some observations on Frantic's work with Lavery on *Stockholm* (2007), which I also augment with closer analysis.

In my fuller historical overviews of the companies I discuss in more detail the influence of and models provided by Impact Theatre for Forced Entertainment and Volcano for Frantic. I also discuss the development of these stylistic legacies as the companies mature.

Possible precedents

While there are some precedents, such as those of Impact and Volcano, admitted to or otherwise identifiable in the companies' methods and output, I have also looked further afield to seek examples from the broader field of devising (specifically within UK-based traditions).

Thanks in large part to the enormous success and popularising forms of Complicite, the approaches of the Lecoq School were gaining popularity and currency in the UK throughout the 1980s and onwards. Though Lecoq does not claim to disseminate an aesthetic, the visually inventive, often physically strenuous styles of movement theatre which derived from his teachings echo through the forms adopted by Frantic. However, Lecoq, who focuses on mime and on transformation of the body, is not as immediate an influence on Frantic as DV8's dance theatre. Though there are shared roots and practices, this legacy is derived more directly from contact improvisation

as developed, for instance, by Steve Paxton (see Kaltenbrunner 2004), and from Pina Bausch's politicised movement pieces – hence providing another overlap in lines of influence between Forced Entertainment and Frantic Assembly. Though they are present in the genetic makeup of both Frantic and Forced Entertainment, however, such influences do not constitute a *training*, and both companies proudly declare their amateur status and patchwork of inspirations in creating new work, as I will discuss in the respective chapters.¹⁷

Several companies thus seem to provide significant points of comparison while not, apparently, featuring at all in the rhetoric or reference points of the companies in question. Complicite is one of these, and their popularisation of physical theatre and clowning, in combination with devising approaches to text and movement, will provide some useful comparators for both companies. The other key, influential model of collaborative theatre-making involving processes of writing which I invoke in my first chapter is that of Joint Stock. In my opening exploration of the key terms and frameworks in the field, that company, founded by David Aukin, David Hare and Max Stafford-Clark in 1973, provides several practices which have clearly had a shaping influence on ongoing practice from the 1980s to the present day. The company can be examined from the point of view of 'collaboration' and the division of duties within such creative practice. They disseminated their own approaches towards the end of their existence as Joint Stock through *The Joint Stock Book* (Ritchie 1987), and several of Stafford-Clark's own publications offer elaborations on his practice (Stafford-Clark 1990; Stafford-Clark & Roberts 2007). Elaine Aston has offered several useful observations on the nature of the company's collaboration with Caryl Churchill, and below I highlight some of these and apply their logics to Frantic Assembly's work with writers. The notion of 'ownership' recurs when dealing with collaborative creation, and analytical works on these earlier companies provide useful starting points for an examination of the ownerships involved in Frantic's and Forced Entertainment's processes.

Writing and devising

This often contentious issue of 'ownership' brings us full circle to the question of how writing and devising overlap and interact in recent British practices which

¹⁷ See in particular page 67 on Frantic's workshop culture, and page 194 on Forced Entertainment's inheritances from their time at Exeter University.

create new work. As devising processes involving writers in the rehearsal room become more common, the question of how to situate writing – from a purely organisational and legal point of view, how to *credit* writing – becomes trickier. Both of the companies in focus have grappled with this question in different and revealing ways throughout their development. Frantic Assembly's earliest productions, based on group devising processes which produced performances closely tied to the performers themselves, have not been published, and the texts which are preserved in the Frantic archives resemble those of Forced Entertainment in the declaration of their own incompleteness and status as working, evolving, at times only loosely notated documents. Frantic have more recently worked with established writers whose status (as well as their livelihood and contractual arrangements) make more common the publication of the texts, which are hence available for subsequent performance. Forced Entertainment self-publish several of their performance texts, which are offered as only partial records or sketches of the performed works, and they have, notably, refused permission for subsequent performance of the texts (or use of the rule-based 'games' which form the basis of many of their more improvisatory 'durational' works).

That both companies are involved with physical creative processes, often as inspirations for and in tandem with verbal ones, further complicates this question. My first chapter surveys recent literature on physical theatres, devising, collaboration and authorship, aiming always towards seeking models useful in examining Frantic's and Forced Entertainment's work, and nuancing these frameworks towards a better understanding of this question of writing and devising.

It is a question of quite surprisingly constant importance to many of those working in today's theatre, as a variety of collaborations strains to fit within institutional structures and terminologies which were not evolved to cope with these processes. At a recent workshop on 'The Role of the Writer in the Devising Process' in 2012,¹⁸ Paul Hunter, artistic director of devising company Told by an Idiot, told a story concerning perceptions of devising and writing. In his anecdote, a certain theatre (which he diplomatically declined to name) claimed not to see why they should pay royalties for performances of a play, by Told by an Idiot, which 'did not have a

¹⁸ 'The Role of the Writer in the Devising Process' workshop 26-27 March 2012, led by Paul Hunter and Carl Grose.

writer'. Hunter's response was to ask, 'how do you think this play *happened*?' (Hunter & Grose 2012). As Hunter also insisted at the same workshop, 'devising is a form of writing'. Similar claims and concerns are echoed by representatives of both of the companies which form the focus of my study. The reasons behind this insistence – this repositioning of devising and writing – and the implications for an understanding of recent devising practices are the motivating factors for my work.

1. FRAMEWORKS AND TERRITORY

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1. FRAMEWORKS AND TERRITORY

Introduction

In surveying, examining and contrasting the processes which lead to the new works of Frantic Assembly and Forced Entertainment, several conceptual frameworks will be useful. Both companies are involved with processes often categorised under the (expansive) umbrella of ‘devising’, though only rarely do they describe the outcome of these processes as ‘devised theatre’. In this chapter I examine several key explorations and attempts at description of the variegated and shifting practices indicated by the term ‘devising’ – especially those offered in recent work by Alison Oddey (1994), Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling (2006), and Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender (2010). This overview will provide a brief exposition of the ‘state of play’ of current thinking on devising, which my study will test and nuance through direct case studies and broader analysis of the work of these particular companies, between which I draw direct comparisons.

From around the early 1990s, there has been a range of energetic and acute writing in the UK around the sorts of companies who define their outputs as ‘devised’; this has reflected, of course, a rise in the numbers of companies embracing the terminology. However, some terminology traditionally employed here often remains ungrounded in close critical examination of actual practice. One aim of undertaking this literature overview is hence to analyse and combine critical approaches to ‘physical theatre’, ‘dramaturgy’ (in its various forms¹⁹), ‘collaboration’, ‘ensemble’ and ‘authorship’. There are unavoidable difficulties in attempting to generalise such terms on the basis of the widely varying processes which practitioners have claimed under such headings. My aim in the current chapter is to sharpen a set of working definitions of the terms for use in my case studies. I subsequently focus these studies on close examinations of the actual processes in operation in both companies as they have evolved over time. Hence, while I do not claim to lay out a single methodology nor a fixed set of terms for describing devising, I develop a

¹⁹ Jacqueline Bolton, in her doctoral thesis *Demarcating Dramaturgy: Mapping Theory onto Practice*, neatly summarises the ‘grammatical tension between dramaturgy as noun and dramaturgy as verb: depending on context, dramaturgy may refer to *the composition* and/or *the composing* (or advising on the composing) of a dramatic text’ (Bolton 2011: 3).

terminology which will aid comparison and contrast between the two companies and contribute to the literature I outline here.

As mentioned, the evolution of the literature reflects to some degree shifts in how theatre companies creating new work represent their own processes. No company, of course, operates according to a strict model nor in a vacuum, and all are to greater or lesser extents aware of the perceptions of their work in public, academic, and funding circles. In my case study chapters I outline the anxieties, reactions, pressures and innovations which have contributed to the various developments of these two companies' practices; so my examination of the frameworks here will also help in an understanding of these shifts.

I am not suggesting by this that Frantic and Forced Entertainment are overly or openly concerned with a critical, academic understanding of their work, nor with their positions within a wider landscape of 'devising' or 'physicality', for instance. Both of these companies have at times emphasised their lack of formal training and their disinterest in attempts to define their work within existing traditions. In general, lines of training and inheritance are certainly rarely as foregrounded in UK theatre and performance contexts as they are in the dance world and in certain, usually European-based, forms of mime training, as Murray and Keefe point out (2007: 53). But there are also important precedents and models which are deeply significant in the development of both companies' current, active practices. I have invoked some of these in my introductory chapter. Here I examine further the deeper inheritances which were present in the UK theatre scene into which Frantic and Forced Entertainment emerged, giving more detailed consideration of the direct influences on the companies in their respective later chapters. I begin with a close look at Oddey's *Devising Theatre*, which has set precedents for the discussion of devised work in British theatre, before querying some of her assumptions and examining more recent scholarship in this area.

Oddey, defining devising, and 'beginnings'

Alison Oddey's *Devising Theatre* (first published in 1994) was an influential and important early attempt at a representation, both personal and academic, of processes and practices of devising among British theatre companies. Its impact has been considerable, as its major influence on subsequent significant works in the field

attests (Heddon & Milling 2006, Mermikides & Smart 2010). It provides a useful account on the basis of which we can identify some difficulties of definition and of stance faced by many critical accounts of devising, and provokes an important consideration of the nature of ‘beginnings’ in creative processes, particularly those of the kind I examine in this work.

Oddey’s avowed interest is in providing a ‘practical and theoretical handbook’, and we must bear in mind the nature of her own experiences as a practitioner, drawn largely from work with students at the University of Kent. Her approach therefore shifts between the polemical and the analytical, and tends to perpetuate the companies’ and individuals’ rhetoric of difference and subversion. She also sustains some inherited but questionable dichotomies. While she claims not to wish to set devised theatre up as ‘a form in opposition’ (Oddey 1994: 4), her frequent invocation of a ‘dominant literary theatrical tradition’ (*ibid.*: 4, 7, 11, and elsewhere), with which she contrasts the work of companies such as Lumiere & Son or IOU, falls back on this antithesis. In fact, she states explicitly that

[d]evised work is a response and a reaction to the playwright-director relationship, to text-based theatre, and to naturalism, and challenges the prevailing ideology of one person’s text under another person’s direction. Devised theatre is concerned with the collective creation of art (not the single vision of the playwright). (*ibid.*: 4)

This highlights a difficulty in discussing ‘devised theatre’ at any level of generality. Attempts to come up with terms which set devised theatre apart from other forms regularly fail to produce logically sufficient conditions as criteria for any attempted definition. For example, at one point Oddey claims that ‘[g]roup dynamics, relationships and interaction between people are a distinguishing feature of devising theatre’ (*ibid.*: 9). Yet at this generalised level, such characteristics can surely be discerned in any performance endeavour. Any performance – except in the rarest of marginal cases – will be created through an interactive process of performance and feedback involving ‘group dynamics’ and ‘relationships’.²⁰

As we will see with later attempts at definitions of ‘ensemble’ or ‘collaboration’, such terms are used in multiple ways by different practitioners and academics, in

²⁰ Even a solo show will usually involve a director and often a wider creative team, or at least some form of ‘outside eye’, in its development phase.

describing what seem like generally desirable and positive but largely indefinable qualities in creative processes. John Britton opens his *Encountering Ensemble* (2013) by citing Peter Brook, who says ‘We can all instantly feel what it [ensemble] isn’t. No one can say what it is’ (Brook quoted in Britton 2013: 3); the same may be said to apply here.

However, Oddey puts forward another definition of devising which has an intriguing and counter-intuitive corollary: she suggests devising might be seen as ‘a collective way of arriving at a finished product through discussion, improvisation and writing’²¹ (*ibid.*: 45). The first of these methods, discussion and improvisation, are again important tools in reaching the finished product of most theatrical performances, including performances making no claim to ‘devised’ status. So perhaps it is only *writing during the group creative phase* – or some form of collective writing – which sets devising apart from conventional processes of mounting productions from pre-existing texts. Though she does not prioritise this element of her analysis, what Oddey here proposes is a useful observation on the movement of writing into the rehearsal room in devised theatre. As indicated in my introduction, several companies have recently sought to claim devising, along Paul Hunter’s lines, as ‘a form of writing’ (Hunter & Grose 2012). By subjecting Frantic Assembly’s and Forced Entertainment’s rhetorics and rehearsal room practices to close scrutiny I later offer differing conceptions of how ‘writing’ and ‘devising’ may interact in practice, developing on these foundations in Oddey’s work.

Much critical work on devising also picks up on practitioners’ attempts to define their processes with reference to the absence of a written text. In interview with Oddey, Vivian Westlake of Lumiere & Son suggested the radically open definition of devised theatre as ‘any show that is being prepared in ways other than the pre-written script’ (*ibid.*: 54). Heddon and Milling similarly attempt to delineate the scope of their explorations by deciding to consider devising only in its form as ‘a mode of work in which no script – neither play-text nor performance score – exists prior to the work’s creation by the company’ (2006: 3). For Harvie and Lavender, devising is ‘a method of performance development that starts from an idea or

²¹ She is here borrowing the definition from Coventry’s Belgrade Theatre-in-Education Company, but offers it without further interrogation, as part of her chapter on ‘Ways and means of making theatre’ (*ibid.*: 42-72).

concept rather than a play text' (2010: 2). So Heddon and Milling use their criterion as a means of narrowing the field of their study, rather than as a cast-iron definition of the whole field of devising processes, and Harvie and Lavender do not posit theirs as a logically sufficient condition in itself; there are other elements in their sketched definition, such as a 'significantly open-minded' approach to the end product, and a key role for improvisation (*ibid.*). Yet it is arguable that this reliance on the absence of a text in starting to define devising is misleading: where does this leave the Wooster Group's *Brace Up!* (1991) (based on Chekhov's *Three Sisters*) or *Hamlet* (2006), both of which rely on the prior existence of a playtext as the basis of the development of the performance?²² In fact, Jen Harvie herself opens the introduction to *Making Contemporary Theatre* (as cited above) with a slightly different nuancing of the issue. Here she suggests that devising is best understood as a mode of creating theatre which questions – but does not necessarily reject – the 'text as a starting point' (Harvie & Lavender 2010: 2).

It is difficult, then, to come up with a definition of devising which firmly distinguishes it from other processes of making theatre. As mooted definitions of devising, the above are logically incomplete; for instance, the work of the archetypal writer in the garret also starts 'from an idea or concept', which is then fleshed out into a playtext. Bicăţ and Baldwin's 'practical guide' to devised and collaborative theatre (2002) opens by contrasting a process in which 'a copy of the script drops through [the company members'] letterboxes' and which forms a 'baseline' from which they all work, with the more moveable baseline of 'collaborative invention' (2002: 7). But even the 'text-based' theatrical processes against which Bicăţ and Baldwin (and others) in part define devising are at heart collaborative, and many of the creative exercises in the rest of the book may just as well be applied to the development of a performance based on a pre-existing script.

So these attempted delineations of devising rely upon particular – and not necessarily self-evident – definitions of when the development of a theatrical piece *begins*. As Peter Brook observes, in a slightly different context, '[a] word does not start as a word – it is an end product which begins as an impulse' (1968: 15). His formulation

²² In the case of *Hamlet*, the Wooster Group's production relies more on the existence of the 1964 film of the play, directed by John Gielgud and starring Richard Burton, as the text upon which it draws. (See, for instance, Werner 2008.)

posits a dramatist who goes through one creative process in laying out the playtext, with the actors' and director's job being that of finding 'the true path to the speaking of a word' via 'a process that parallels the original creative one' (*ibid.*). I examine ways in which these 'parallel' processes are overlaid more or less directly upon each other in the contrasting cases of Forced Entertainment and Frantic Assembly.

While this may seem a technical quibble with the likes of Heddon and Milling and Harvie and Lavender, where it is useful is in highlighting that neither of these attempts to differentiate devising processes foresees or deals with issues around the definition of the 'beginning', the 'start'-point of such processes. Oddey, in her chapter on 'Beginnings – How and where to start' (1994: 24-41) and elsewhere, does attempt to tackle the question, and she foregrounds the fact that it is a non-trivial issue. Her own discussion of beginnings, however, at times requires one to read 'devising' as a very limited subset of the creative process behind the shows which result; elsewhere her conception of the 'beginning' of a show seems internally inconsistent.

For instance, Oddey claims both that '[d]evising begins with the interaction between the members of a group and the starting point or stimulus chosen' (*ibid.*: 24), and that '[i]n the early stages of devising, it is important to explore and experiment with a range of stimuli [...]' (*ibid.*: 25). This itself suggests that the delineation of a single 'beginning' for such a process is not straightforward, as the narrowing of the stimuli into a 'starting point' is an element of the process not accounted for in Oddey's terminology.

Oddey elsewhere states that devised theatre 'demands decisions about how and where to begin', and explicitly claims: 'This is different from text-based theatre, where the play script defines and determines the parameters of the performance, however abstract the content might be' (*ibid.*: 7-8). There are evidently difficulties in defining the 'beginnings' of a creative enterprise with clarity. Furthermore, this is true whether or not the 'play script' pre-dates the rehearsal period: Oddey's reduction of 'text-based theatre' seems to assume little interpretational flexibility on the part of directors, designers, performers and other creative individuals, and in terms of planning and structuring a rehearsal process alone there are myriad different ways to begin. In other words, even if we accept the division implied by Oddey, a

‘text-based’ process also demands decisions concerning starting points. Rarely will text-based work begin with the first line of the text. To give but one example, Michael Bloom reaches ‘Day one’ over half-way through his very much text-based guide *Thinking Like a Director* and, in describing the work of that day, prioritises the ‘hosting’ of a ‘meet and greet’, the laying out of the rehearsal schedule, the examination of a model or plan for the set, and administrative tasks over a full read-through, which is ‘a matter of tradition or preference, not necessity’ (Bloom 2001: 120-1).

On the other hand, some single-author texts act more as the kinds of ‘stimuli’ which Oddey seems to envisage as the basis of devised theatre, deliberately doing very little to ‘define[...] and determine[...] the parameters of the performance’ (Oddey 1994: 8) in the ways that her (posited) text-based theatre does. For instance, playtexts such as Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on her Life* (1997) or Sarah Kane’s *4:48 Psychosis* (2000) leave most of the staging decisions and even questions of the composition of the company open, by the lack of set requirements and role definitions in both.

So the question of ‘beginnings’ is problematic whether discussing ‘devising’ or ‘text-based’ processes – and in fact this might be seen as an indication that it is divisive and misleading to separate ‘devising’ so distinctly from an imagined text-based mainstream. Furthermore, simply in terms of the processes with which Oddey engages directly, one may interrogate her above-cited claim that ‘[d]evising begins with the interaction between the members of a group and the starting point or stimulus chosen’ (*ibid.*: 24). This prompts the reading I suggested above, which sees ‘devising’ as a limited subset of processes within the procedure of creating ‘devised theatre’. The decisions Oddey mentions in her opening gambit as novel to devising theatre – about the size and composition of the company, about the type and scope of the initial impetus for the creation of the production, and so on – clearly need to have been at least provisionally settled before the ‘beginning’ point marked here. Oddey does not explicitly address the question of who makes such decisions, or how they do so, but such questions feed into my examinations of the case companies’ leadership structures and processes, and my examination below of issues of ‘authorship’ and devising.

In more recent scholarship, Helen Freshwater, in her characteristically astute chapter in Mermikides and Smart's *Devising in Process* (2010) examining theatre O's 2008 production *Delirium*, is one of the few to observe 'how difficult it can be to identify the moment when a company begins work on a particular project' (Freshwater 2010: 133). She also raises related questions around Heddon and Milling's criteria for devising. Her sensible solution here is to conclude that for the purposes of her analysis she must 'put these questions of definition aside' (*ibid.*: 134). She does, however, state up front the complications of examining such a process, involving overlapping and open periods of creation. In the specific case of theatre O, she cites the various stages of discussions between the company's directors Joseph Alford and Carolina Valdés, along with the writer Enda Walsh, the overlaps in cast and crew from one project to another, and the thematic connections with previous work by the company (*ibid.*: 132-3). Freshwater's observations here could easily be transferred to apply to the work of Frantic and Forced Entertainment, and my approach acknowledges and works within these difficulties by examining a number of detailed case studies within the context of the companies' historical development.

Thus I aim to take into account the possibility of multiple or differing conceptions of 'beginnings' for any given production.²³ The ways that practitioners discuss their own creative methods reflect (or have perhaps contributed towards) the difficulties of critical analysis outlined above. In describing their 2006 production *Stockholm* in different contexts, Frantic Assembly's Scott Graham offers contradictory views: the *Comprehensive Guide* education pack for the production, credited to Graham, quotes at length from 'Day One' of his rehearsal diary (Graham 2007: 12), but in interview he has commented that *Stockholm* was 'probably a good example of "Day One" not being day one because there was quite a smooth and very fruitful research and development' (Graham 2008). These questions of the demarcation of different phases – how a production may have several 'day ones' – have a clear impact on the analysis of devising processes in both of the companies I examine. In brief, there are various reasons for which a practitioner may pinpoint a certain 'starting point': institutional requirements such as funding and programming, the representation of

²³ Gay McAuley also points to these difficulties, citing the anthropologist and ethnographer Tim Asch: 'Observers and subjects may differ greatly in their perceptions of when an event or interaction begins and ends and whom it includes' (Asch in McAuley 2012: 11). As I consider here, even the *same* subject or observer may define a 'beginning' differently in different contexts.

processes in a comprehensible way outside the company, and for one's own reflection and planning processes. In many cases, these will lead to different demarcations of the same process, and all are in tension with the reality of such blurred creative methodologies, particularly but not only when collaborative and collective development plays a part.

Physicality and the verbal

It is also important to examine devising as a process which necessarily involves the presence of physical bodies in action: to consider the ways in which text for performance can be derived from the interactions of bodies in physical ways.

'Actors write with their bodies', as Ariane Mnouchkine says (quoted in Murray & Keefe 2007: 116).

The output of both of the case companies has in some ways been described as involving 'physical theatre', so questions of what this rhetorical emphasis means must also be considered. Frantic Assembly frequently include this description in their marketing; Forced Entertainment is less frequently but nonetheless regularly included in analyses of the field. For instance, Murray and Keefe make several references to the company in *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction*, explicitly linking Forced Entertainment to Pina Bausch (and both of these to Brecht) (Murray & Keefe 2007: 80). The same authors also include Tim Etchells's text for *Club of No Regrets* in their edited volume *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader* (Keefe & Murray 2007: 136-141). The companies' approaches to physicality differ massively, in ways which I analyse largely in terms of their contrasting focuses on either *skill* or *effort*. However, they share the requirement of shared physical presence and experiment during the creation of a work from its early stages – as opposed to the archetypal writer in the garret who instead imagines embodied performance as the goal of the text he or she is writing.

Some critics are more forthright in ascribing precedence to physicality in the creative processes they analyse. Sánchez-Colberg (1996) suggests that physical theatre can be defined as that involving a 'body focus [...] arising from a progressive devaluation of language and a move towards a non-verbal idiom' (1996: 40), a devaluation which, in her self-confessedly simplified representation of its politics, stems from a 'mistrust of language to convey the condition of man-in-the-world'

(*ibid.*). Similarly, in identifying starting points for ‘physical theatres’ (in John Keefe and Simon Murray’s wary pluralisation), many have identified some form of anti-textual stance²⁴, or – more moderately – a deprioritisation of the ‘textual’ (or verbal) in favour of the ‘somatic impulse’ (Callery 2001: 4).²⁵

While many physical companies have thus at some point in their history felt it important to declare an ‘anti-textual’ position of some form, many more seek instead to re-evaluate the relationship between text and physicality. Royona Mitra identifies Frantic Assembly alongside DV8 and Ultima Vez as companies that ‘explore the points of conflict and dialogue between movement and text, the personal and the political and the emotional and the physical’ (Mitra 2005: 7). This seems apt, in differing lights, for both Frantic and Forced Entertainment. My case studies explore processes of physical improvisation and actor-led creativity alongside and ‘in dialogue with’ apparently verbally-bound creative processes which have often been described in entirely different terms.

Helen Freshwater, in ‘Physical Theatre: Complicite and the Question of Authority’ (2008), offers a promising approach to this undertaking, questioning the opposition of the written document to the output of ‘physical theatre’ companies (specifically, Complicite’s more recent output). In doing so, Freshwater seeks to open a debate about ‘the role of the script in relationship to performance’ (Freshwater 2008: 191). Her analysis focuses on journalistic coverage of Complicite’s work, and ‘the company’s own contribution to the construction of their public image, analysing the statements made about Complicite’s work by its artistic director, Simon McBurney’ (*ibid.*: 175). Freshwater suggests the need for ‘a more nuanced response’ which ‘relinquishes the binarism’ of the ‘journalistic [and critical] tendency to place the script and the body in opposition to each other’ (*ibid.*: 190). Citing Worthen, she invokes the need to investigate ‘exactly what we mean by a text’ (*ibid.*). She warns of the way that McBurney’s (shifting) positioning of Complicite’s methods tends not

²⁴ Heddon and Milling produce a long list of the stances surrounding devising they have traced, including ‘a distrust of words; the embodiment of the death of the author’ and ‘non-literary’ traditions or approaches (Heddon & Milling 2006: 5). It is important to interrogate practitioners’ rhetorics carefully, though: Freshwater (2008: 171) cites Hornby (2002) as having an ‘anti-textual stance’, but his article in fact identifies the ‘anti-text mania *running through performance studies* today’ rather than a stance in practice (2002: 355; my emphasis).

²⁵ Callery states that, at its simplest, physical theatre is theatre in which ‘the somatic impulse is privileged over the cerebral in the making process. This is true whether the product is an original devised piece or an interpretation of a scripted text’ (Callery 2001: 4).

to be interrogated with the rigour that would further our understanding of his work, hence ‘elid[ing] the complexity of the relationship between text and movement’ (*ibid.*: 190).

Freshwater identifies several such lines of enquiry, pointing to elements of Complicite’s practice and of the rhetorics surrounding it which suggest fertile frameworks for exploring the question of writing and devising in contemporary (so-called) physical theatres. She posits that

examining physical theatre’s relationship to the written document would undoubtedly unsettle belief in the ‘anti-textual’ bias of contemporary performance, as well as allowing us to reconsider the role of the script in relationship to performance. (*ibid.*: 191)

My case studies provide ample practical and rhetorical material for detailed and comparative analysis along lines opened by Freshwater’s investigation into Complicite; her caveats concerning the need for rigorous interrogation of practitioners’ claims are pertinent here too.

Freshwater elsewhere suggests that one issue impeding the analysis of the history and growth of physical theatre in Britain may be the fact that ‘many practitioners consider writing about their work to be inimical to its achievements’ (Freshwater 2010: 174), with the somatic impetus behind such work held up as one likely explanation for this reticence. This reluctance may be, and often is, conflated with the mistrust (as identified by Heddon and Milling) of the verbal in forms of devised theatre.

This is not, however, a reluctance manifested by any of the practitioners involved in the case studies in question, all of whom keenly support and theorise – one might even say evangelise – their processes in writing, at the very least to the extent required by Arts Council funding and marketing campaigns. With these requirements becoming more and more crucial in gaining access to dwindling funding opportunities, companies spend more and more time on educational materials and workshops. I use the growth and development of the rhetoric of these extra-performative texts as one way of analysing the shifting approaches to and concerns of the companies’ work.

It is hence necessary for practitioners to pitch their work in particular ways in order to secure funding and audiences. However, there are also more subconscious processes at work, which seem essential in preserving the practitioners' own creative instinct and energies and in guiding and supporting those with whom they collaborate. These factors all contribute towards the mythologies and anxieties surrounding the work in question, though they seem relevant to many if not all creative endeavours. In my case studies I thus analyse the terms 'physical theatre', 'devising' and 'collaboration' (as discussed below) more for their use as rhetorical tools than as labels useful in defining actual theatre practice. As Callery puts it, '[p]hysical theatre is not codifiable' (2001: 5). Callery does offer a list of 'significant parallels' in the ways different physical theatre practitioners describe their processes, though, and these suggest productive overlaps with notions associated with devising. For example:

- the emphasis is on the actor-as-creator rather than the actor-as-interpreter
- the working process is collaborative (*ibid.*)

My case studies of the two companies involve investigations of both of these claims. Given this distribution of creative authority to the actor-performer, questions also arise as to the potential implications for the 'ownership' of a piece of work, both in terms of internal politics and as codified in royalty and copyright arrangements, as I discuss below.

Devising and physical theatre in the mainstream

Though we must bear in mind the above caveats on the possibility of straightforward definition, Freshwater's claim that 'physical theatre now has an established position in the theatre industry in Britain' (Freshwater 2008: 175) certainly seems a line taken by many within the industry. There is a new openness, in more mainstream venues, to seeking alternative methods of producing theatre, focusing on the physicalities of the performers and the integration of movement – as well as design, lighting and sound – from an earlier stage of the development process than had perhaps been traditionally expected.

For instance, since its establishment in 1984, the NT Studio has done much to legitimise new and mixed approaches to theatre-making in establishment contexts (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 128-30). The Studio's main role is to fund 'research and

development' phases both for writers and for up-and-coming companies, and to act as a meeting-place and sharing space for such practitioners. Mermikides cites correspondence with the NT's Head of Press, Lucy Morrison, in which Morrison describes the Studio's aim as providing an 'environment in which writers, actors and practitioners of all kinds can explore, experiment and devise new work' (Morrison quoted in Mermikides 2013: 154). Turner and Behrndt also point out how the National Theatre has employed increasing numbers of associates with proven track records in developing new writing in many forms, and in implementing development programmes. They point to Tom Morris's appointment as an Associate Director (in 2004) as part of a 'broad [...] policy towards new work' (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 129); Morris's tenure at the Battersea Arts Centre (1995-2004) had seen the introduction and growth of a strong culture of 'scratch' performances in which companies were encouraged to present work-in-progress showings for further development on the basis of audience and peer response. 'Morris's theatrical mantra is "collaboration". His tastes are catholic, and frequently risky, but they can produce some of the most inspired, inventive theatre in Britain today' (Davies 2010). Turner and Behrndt are hence right to identify the appointment as indicative of new approaches to play development at the National. Referring also to similar positions at the Royal Court and the RSC, they argue that, more than ever before, these state-funded institutions are officially enshrining not the primacy of the writer (as Turner and Behrndt argue was previously overwhelmingly the case) but a variety of writing processes in creating new work, 'reflect[ing] a shift in the climate' in general (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 132).

I do not propose so strong a reading as to suggest that Frantic Assembly was responsible for this shift, or even necessarily trailblazers in this respect. However, the story of that company's development is certainly aligned with the spread of performer-centred physical devising practices, combined with writer-centred support and development work, which grew in prominence in the early 2000s in the UK. Tom Morris himself was influential in supporting Frantic Assembly's early productions, with some of their earliest performances touring to Battersea Arts Centre in the mid-nineties. There are other connections between Frantic and the National: more recently, Graham and Hoggett were asked to work with director

Rufus Norris on *Market Boy* at the National Theatre (2006).²⁶ Like Graham and Hoggett, Norris began as a performer (though, unlike the Frantic practitioners, Norris underwent professional training at RADA). His direction emphasises partnerships and the contributions of performers and other collaborators rather than a singular directorial ‘vision’, including a lasting working relationship with the writer David Eldridge.²⁷ His appointment as the new artistic director of the National Theatre is thus surely a sign of the accuracy of Turner and Behrndt’s observation on the shifting climate of collaboration.

The progression of physical-based and devising practices into larger theatres has often, however, been tinged with a sense of ghettoisation or safely ring-fenced assimilation. Turner and Behrndt do not identify the unconscious disparagement in the line they quote from Nicholas Hytner, in which the then NT artistic director explains Morris’s role at the theatre as being ‘to identify, develop, nurture the non-literary stuff none of us knows how to do’ (Hytner quoted in Turner & Behrndt 2008: 129). Hytner here (cited by Turner and Behrndt from the National’s website in 2007) appears as the living embodiment of the mythical, dominant, *literary* ‘establishment’. Faced with the assumptions Hytner’s pronouncement implies, it is understandable that such physically-interested and devising-based processes still occupy somewhat counter-cultural spaces in the mainstream, even as the climate gradually shifts.²⁸

Furthermore, notwithstanding the examples of appointments of practitioners such as Morris, Norris, or Jeanie O’Hare at the RSC, all of whom could be said to seek to encourage ‘a much more theatrical language, [...] a bigger canvas for writers to work on’ (O’Hare quoted in Bolton 2012: 223), the institutional structures of new writing which flourished in the UK in the late 1980s and the 1990s have been argued by Jacqueline Bolton as presenting if not a word bias, an ‘attenuated theatricality’ (Bolton 2010: 221). This Bolton attributes to several significant factors, not least to their focus on the ‘unique vision’ of an individual writer. She also argues

²⁶ They worked with him again on the ‘English opera’ *Doctor Dee* for the 2011 Manchester International Festival.

²⁷ ‘I surround myself with smart people, and I make decisions. There’s nothing visionary in that’ (Crompton 2013).

²⁸ It is also worth pointing out that Morris’s CV/biography lists him as a ‘Writer/Director/Producer’ (United Agents 2012), indicating Morris’s desire to emphasise his engagement with literary processes (writing) as well as the ‘non-literary stuff’ which Hytner assesses his contribution to be.

persuasively that the boom in what became a distinct phenomenon – ‘new writing’ – has led to a focus on (potentially formulaic) development rather than actual production, an emphasis on easily codifiable and teachable elements of dramatic writing (character, dialogue, plot), conservative aims and the encouragement of achievable but unambitious (i.e. small-cast and -budget) writing in the interests of maximising the likelihood of an actual production. Bolton also points to the prevalence of script-in-hand development and readings of works-in-progress as leading to a reinforcement of the ‘premium on verbal dialogue at the expense of other theatrical vocabularies’ (*ibid.*: 222). As discussed above, some more recent developments at the National Theatre may indicate a move towards more ‘collaborative’ approaches involving writers alongside designers, directors and actors. Nonetheless, whereas Bolton hopefully exhorts the newly swollen ranks of literary managers to ‘advocate and curate new models of collaboration between writers and other theatre artists’ (*ibid.*: 223), I suggest that it may instead be companies such as those under examination – particularly Frantic Assembly – which currently come closest to fulfilling this dramaturgical role.

Dramaturgy

I do not wish to enter into the deep and ongoing debates around the use of the term ‘dramaturg’ – both Luckhurst (2006) and Turner and Behrndt (2008) suggest that there is ‘little consistency in the current British use of such terminology’ (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 123). However, several aspects of such discussions offer productive models for the processes of collaborative work with writers which take place in the companies examined.

Mary Luckhurst’s 2006 *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* cogently lays out the growth of and continuing issues surrounding questions of dramaturgy and ‘new writing’ in European and British theatre. Of particular interest here is the post-Brechtian distinction drawn between the Development Dramaturg and the Production Dramaturg, with the former often fulfilling the role of a ‘writing tutor’ or ‘mentor’, and the latter a much less well-understood role, at least in the England of the 1990s (Luckhurst 2006: 205-6). The Production Dramaturg’s functions include textual work and pre-rehearsal conceptual development but also, significantly, work in the practical environment within the rehearsal room, and around the production in generating publicity and educational materials. Luckhurst points out that these

functions have long been important to the development of productions, and have often in UK contexts been distributed amongst directors, assistant directors, education officers, and so on. Luckhurst's view of the situation in 2005/6 supports Turner and Behrndt's take – she notes that 'development cultures have grown exponentially' (2006: 206) – and she argues that the current use of the term 'dramaturg' by industry professionals 'denotes a practical involvement in theatre-making either with writers or directors or both' (*ibid.*).

Turner and Behrndt develop this line through their discussion with Frauke Franz, a dramaturg working with Polka Theatre.²⁹ They suggest that while a literary manager tends to give feedback 'in the line and in the language', Franz's work involves 'think[ing] about the whole stage picture' (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 140). Hence, they argue, a dramaturg 'looks at the text in terms of the spaces it offers for other things, such as physicality. [...] The dramaturg's approach *joins* the writer's work to the production process' (*ibid.*; emphasis in the original). And in the processes of devising theatre, where there is not necessarily a single nominated writer, or where a script might not exist prior to the gathering of performers and other creative artists in a rehearsal room, Turner and Behrndt suggest that a dramaturg's role in devising is essentially that of 'a particular kind of production dramaturg', and as such – as identified by Luckhurst – often overlaps with the functions of (assistant) director or writer (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 173).

In Frantic Assembly's processes, it is profitable to bear in mind the related concepts of the development dramaturg and literary manager as well, as the company provides support for a writer through both the provision of initial stimuli (see Turner & Behrndt 2008: 174) and feedback 'in the line and [...] language' (*ibid.*: 140).

Forced Entertainment's members are more likely to use the term 'dramaturgy' than Frantic Assembly's, but they employ the word in its sense of a characteristic in the work they produce, rather than that of a role or process in producing the work.³⁰

Seeking to see the creation of their work as entirely collective, Forced

²⁹ And, according to Radosavljević, one of only 'possibly three or four fully integrated institutional dramaturgs' working in the UK in the early 2000s (Radosavljević 2009: 45).

³⁰ *Some Confusions in the Law about Love* is described as involving 'a dramaturgy of collision and overlap' (Forced Entertainment 2014; <<http://www.forcedentertainment.com/project/some-confusions-in-the-law-about-love>> accessed 15 November 2014). Etchells elsewhere describes the habitual process of examining videotaped rehearsals as 'notating and plotting the timeline, trying to understand its dramaturgy' (Etchells 2007).

Entertainment's rhetoric positions the 'dramaturgy' of a piece as something inherent in the work – its organisational principles – rather than something imposed from outside, or the product of a specialised role.

Collaboration and ensemble

'Collaboration' is often stressed, by practitioners and academics, as key to both devised and physical performance. As mentioned above, Callery states from the outset that 'the working process is collaborative' in physical theatre, but more generally that one of her basic assumptions about the methods she explores and espouses is that 'theatre is [...] rooted in collaboration' (Callery 2001: 5).

Mermikides and Smart expressly link devising processes to physical theatre through their shared 'collaborative agenda, especially the creative emancipation of the performer in rejection of the written text' (Mermikides & Smart 2010: 10). It is, of course, not novel to observe that theatre-making is by its nature a collaborative process, or set of processes. Theodore Shank, in 1969, pointed out that playwriting, directing, acting and designing are some of the most important 'creative activities' behind the creation of 'a work of dramatic art'; but 'because there is so much overlapping among these activities, it is more accurate to think of these terms as indicating rather arbitrary divisions of labour' (Shank 1969: 9).

On the other hand, just as Govan, Nicholson and Normington sound a note of caution around the notion of 'community' – they cite Raymond Williams, who calls it a 'warmly persuasive word' (Williams, cited Govan, Nicholson & Normington 2007: 73) – so too must care be taken around the simple acceptance of 'collaboration' as a catch-all and fuzzily friendly term. Its current use (by innumerable recent companies) seems most often to indicate a particular performer-focused creativity; it may also indicate the inclusion of designers, lighting designers, musicians and other contributors in decision-making from an early stage in the creative process, as discussed above in the context of larger institutions such as the National Theatre.

In his chapter 'From Author to Spectator: Collective Creativity as a Theatrical Play of Artists and Spectators', Florian Vassen places the notion of collective creativity in context, indicating that

The form of artistic co-operation extends then in size from big collectives through small groups of artists to the collaboration of two people. With regard to the method, it ranges from radical collectivity through co-operation on equal terms to the form of *primus inter pares*. The only factor all these forms of production have in common is the working together of several artists. There might be the closest proximity, as when working together in the same room, or a clear separation of locations, or even just a virtual link, as with a video platform. The work might be done simultaneously or in successive phases. (Vassen 2011: 302)

As Vassen explains here, the related notions of ‘collaboration’ and ‘collective creativity’ are catch-all terms for a multitude of possible processes. Thus in my case studies I aim to unpack such terminologies through close examination of the particular relationships involved in the companies. The tools by which we can pinpoint the various uses of such terms include the tracing of companies’ and individuals’ histories, and the analysis of the shared vocabularies they develop – the frameworks within which the companies create a specific piece. Murray and Keefe, for instance, highlight the quest of the likes of Simon McBurney, Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine and Anne Bogart for gestural, movement-based languages as the basis for their (separate but related) cross-cultural collaborations (Murray & Keefe 2007: 201). Although Murray and Keefe do not say so explicitly, their discussions of lineages of training (*ibid.*: 200, for instance) suggest that the collaborators sought for such practices will often be those trained in similar ways and embarked upon similar explorations. Murray and Keefe do also remind us of the ‘critical gap’ between practitioners’ claims (for example of happy ‘collaborative’ processes) and the realities of the process, or the observations of others (*ibid.*: 202).³¹ Part of my approach is thus to explore such relationships through vocabularies of collaboration, which differ from company to company and practitioner to practitioner.

There are also differences to be noted – a slightly different ‘critical gap’ – between practitioners’ private languages and modes of creation, and their public rhetoric. These languages are linked but frequently contain significant variations, and I use material from the case companies’ archives of rehearsal footage, rehearsal notes, and public documents in attempting to pinpoint some of these differences and avoid

³¹ The term ‘critical gap’ to describe this space between tendencies to self-mythologise (or at least self-narrate) and actualities of the creative process comes from David Williams: ‘it became apparent to me that there was a critical gap between what Brook said and what he did as a director’ (Williams in Keefe & Murray 2007: 242).

straightforwardly relying on the potentially imprecise ('fuzzy') terminologies of their public pronouncements.

The ideas of ensemble and collaboration are often discussed in terms of a shared vocabulary or language which derives from similar training or traditions. John Britton identifies 'shared training' as a recurrent factor in encouraging ensemble (Britton 2013: 6). He cites Ellen Lauren, whose training at SITI provides, in her view, 'a very real vocabulary that actors can speak together [...] working in the same world with a similar sensibility' (Lauren quoted in Britton 2013: 6). Helen Freshwater also refers to the 'shared language' (Freshwater 2010: 133) possible in rehearsal when practitioners have studied together under the same teachers or in the same traditions, or have worked together on previous productions: 'The importance and impact of these earlier collaborations and contacts upon the process of devising cannot be overstated' (*ibid.*). Such existing relationships can help in 'the speedy development of a shared language in rehearsal' (*ibid.*). Murray and Keefe also group numerous practitioners together as offering more structured and popularly disseminated training regimes, including Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret, Lev Dodin's work at the Maly Theatre, Anne Bogart and her Viewpoints training methodology, and of course Jacques Lecoq and his Paris school, whose influence is perhaps currently the most familiar of these to British audiences and critics.³² While such methodologies are gaining ever wider recognition and dissemination, those outside the tradition may find the languages counter-intuitive or obscure. Furthermore, the two companies which act as the focus of the current study do not cite such well-documented antecedents, instead placing at times calculated emphasis on their patchwork of influences and lack of rigorous training. The rehearsal-room languages developed over these practitioners' careers, or in any given production, may hence seem yet more private. Even a single project with collaborators with little or no shared history will often produce notation which is difficult to unpack to the outsider, in the same way that the preparatory notes for an individual writing project will often make sense only to the writer him- or herself.

³² Complicite's work has of course done much to popularise Lecoq's approaches in the theatrical mainstream since the mid-1980s. Lecoq's writings are now readily available in translation and Chamberlain and Yarrow's, Simon Murray's and Mark Evans's studies on Lecoq and movement training have, since the mid-2000s, helped diffuse such approaches into the critical mainstream in Britain. (See Lecoq 2000, Chamberlain & Yarrow 2002, Murray 2003, Evans 2009).

As Britton indicates, though, the notion of a ‘shared’ or ‘common language’ is often tied intimately to the idea of the ensemble.³³ As a cornerstone of both Frantic Assembly’s and (particularly) Forced Entertainment’s history, creative relationships recur, with discernible consequences on the shared languages in use. Questions of the politics of collective creation arise around the notion of the ensemble, which again gives rise to provocative disjunctures between the private and the public language of a company. Collaboration is not the same as collectivism, but both terms are often invoked in order to imply (or more polemically claim) the struggle against hierarchies and against the ‘arbitrary divisions of labour’ (Shank 1969: 9). John McGrath’s foreword to *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* argues that 7:84’s aim was not the ‘free-for-all, utopian fantasy’ of group writing, but the breaking down nonetheless of ‘the insane hierarchies of the theatre’ (McGrath 1981: viii-ix). Though individuals had different roles and responsibilities, no skill was to be valued over any other, and no personal superiority granted to any individual member of the collective.

The realities behind this stance have been questioned, both by academic commentators³⁴ and by practitioners themselves: even within McGrath’s committed preface, there are hints at discord. He asserts that the hands-on, egalitarian approach to the show’s tour meant that there was no time for jealousies, spites and gossip, though in the same breath he admits that some members did not appreciate the onstage drunkenness of others, while some questioned the balance between politics and entertainment being struck in the ever-evolving performance (*ibid.*: xxv). Mermikides argues that attempts in the 1970s and 1980s at creating ‘[t]rue collectives’ with ‘distributed authorship’ proved ‘administratively clumsy, often creatively stunted and impossible to sustain’ (Mermikides 2010: 105). In interview,

³³ Another example is to be found in Mitter and Shevtsova’s *Fifty Key Theatre Directors* (2005). Here, the ‘common language’ developed by Lev Dodin is described as crucial in creating continuity between the training regimes and the permanent company at the Maly Theatre, and hence in its development as an ‘ensemble’ (Mitter & Shevtsova 2005: 200).

³⁴ In addition to the examples given below, Virginie Magnat’s article ‘Devising Utopia...’ gives a fascinating insight into a university production in which she participated when a doctoral candidate at U.C. Davis, led by Annabel Arden and Stephen Jeffreys. Described to participants as a collaborative, ensemble-driven, Complicite-style project, the process was, in Magnat’s view, a flawed compromise. She identifies within it a clash between on the one hand the rhetoric of ‘ensemble work’ and group creation and on the other realities of competitiveness, ‘frustrated exhaustion’ and ‘authority’ (Magnat 2005: 77-82). Magnat remains nonetheless hopeful that the production might have achieved more, had the participants been granted more ‘room for input’: ‘had it emerged from a more truly collaborative artistic endeavour’ (*ibid.*: 81).

playwright Mike Kenny further supports this: his early work, with Leeds Playhouse Theatre in Education, involved ‘a situation where we called it devising – which was more a political statement than an artistic one really. It was deliberately egalitarian’ (Kenny 2011). In his work as performer and writer, the group ‘worked collaboratively’ and the pieces thus created were copyrighted to each individual in the company, ‘including the stage manager and the administrator, [...] people who hadn’t been actively involved in putting the words on the paper’ (*ibid.*). As a result, subsequent productions have been administratively difficult and royalties split thinly between the nine or so people involved – but more importantly, ‘towards the end of that period it started to feel egalitarian but inequitable, [...] in that some people were much more at the heart of creation than others’ (*ibid.*).

The tension between collaboration, leadership, and distinct responsibilities is identified by Heddon and Milling as a widespread paradox among devising companies of the 1960s onwards, citing Nancy Meckler, director of UK company The Freehold (established 1969), speaking in 2001: ‘I was the guide, but I was desperately trying to be totally collaborative’ (Heddon & Milling 2006: 47). The Joint Stock Company (formed in 1973 by Max Stafford-Clark, David Hare and David Aukin) provides an example of a company working in close collaboration with writers and actors, with the professed ideal of employing collectivist working methods in producing new plays. Elaine Aston writes of their work with Caryl Churchill in particular as ‘collaboration’, and cites Stafford-Clark’s professed views of ‘the writer as a collaborator’ and theatre ‘as a real collaborative art form’, with his own role as that of ‘facilitation of a shared thinking and creating process’ (Aston 2009: 149). In some ways the company provides a procedural precedent for Frantic (in particular), and a political one for Forced Entertainment.³⁵ However, we must also weigh up the grander polemical claims for the egalitarian structure of the company. Stafford-Clark is an ambitious director whose diary records the company’s decision to function as a ‘democratic body’ with the words: ‘Big deal.

³⁵ See below, for instance pp. 133-139 on the role of the performer and other collaborators in Frantic’s Research and Development, and pp. 167-170 on ‘collectivity’ in Forced Entertainment’s organisational structure.

Talk, talk, talk. Submit to process but no great faith in it as a working-method’ (Ritchie 1987: 111).³⁶

So it is important to interrogate the actual processes which are occurring behind the claims of ‘collaboration’, and to differentiate between notions of collaboration, collectivity, collective authorship, or democracy. Tim Etchells has posited collaboration in Forced Entertainment’s work, after several decades with essentially the same personnel, ‘not as a kind of perfect understanding of the other bloke, but a mis-seeing, a mis-hearing, a deliberate lack of unity’ (Etchells 1999a: 56).³⁷ This is a claim which I interrogate more fully in practical terms, particularly examining the deliberate disunity of some of the company’s lengthy improvisation processes. As a rhetorical standpoint, it adopts a new angle on the long tradition in which practitioners advocate the strengths of group work which preserves individual input.

This tradition can of course be traced back beyond Stafford-Clark’s above-cited claims for ‘collaboration’ in Joint Stock’s work. Robert G Newton writes about his experiences with improvisation from the 1930s onwards focusing on a Stanislavskian (i.e. not original, albeit still developing) use of improvisation in character work. This is not (explicitly) intended as generative of performance material, but his account nonetheless echoes much of the more recent rhetoric around ensemble-building. He describes his course in improvisation with a ‘Theatre Club’, one of whose aims was ‘to work, for the most part, as a Group, rather than a number of isolated individuals’ (Newton 1972: 9). Murray and Keefe identify physical theatres in particular as inevitably involving an ‘explicit and celebratory sense of the ensemble’ in making a performance, and ‘an expectation that performers will share in collective authorship of the work alongside, for example, director, writer and scenographer’ (Murray & Keefe 2007: 93).

This is a theme which recurs both in practitioners’ rhetoric and in critical assessment of the work, but somewhat less prevalent is the development of this line as explicitly advocated by Newton: he places the emphasis on processes in which one works ‘as a

³⁶ In Duncan Wu’s *Making Plays* (2000), Stafford-Clark also openly claims that ‘I don’t think we ever defined ourselves as a co-operative although we had a co-operative style of management. [...] I think that, having encouraged other people to make the effort, I sat back and watched it fail, and saw how it couldn’t work’ (Wu 2000: 70).

³⁷ This is not only Etchells’s line, but shared company rhetoric. Terry O’Connor, for instance, uses the same terminology: ‘Ideas themselves are misheard, misunderstood, mistaken, taken on a little reroute down a different path. Or they’re copied, but never exactly’ (O’Connor 2009: 89).

Group’ but ‘without a loss of individuality’ (Newton 1972: 9). One clear expression of this particular rhetorical focus comes from Ariane Mnouchkine. Talking in 1971 to Irving Wardle, she describes a set of similar frameworks in Le Théâtre du Soleil’s work, particularly on the show *1789*. ‘[T]here’s no talent hierarchy; we’re equal, but not identical’, she says (in Williams 1999: 25). She concludes there that

it would be wrong to describe this process as collective decision-making. It’s a process of confronting evidence and solving the puzzle. And rehearsals were so enthusiastic that there were no decisions to be made. Everyone knew what was good and what was bad, so there was no conflict. (*ibid.*: 26)

This is also, it may briefly be noted, a line which unites Stanislavskian and Copeau-derived training traditions, both of which are relevant to the companies in question. Both of these practitioners inspired legacies which consider it crucial ‘to train actors as a “team” rather than as “individuals”’ (Carnicke 1998: 37).³⁸ Neither of the companies under examination in my case studies expressly uses such rhetoric, but Mnouchkine’s denial that ‘decision-making’ is occurring in rehearsal is echoed by Forced Entertainment’s practitioners, and both of the companies here have developed their work and evolved their practices in (relatively) stable group configurations over lengthy periods. I will later examine some of the ways in which both companies attempt to preserve individuality in the group processes they employ.

Authorship

As Max Stafford-Clark’s above-cited scepticism suggests, there is a tension between the rhetorics of collective collaboration and the authority and singular vision of strong creative personalities. This singularity – sometimes voiced in terms of ‘authorship’ – is a framework through which theatrical output is frequently viewed. It is often relatively easy to discern, even behind supposed rebellions against ‘text-led’ theatre, a slippage (back?) to a set of literary criteria for judging the merit of a work, and the Romantic urge to ascribe sole authorship to a performance. Peter Brook, for instance, moves with surprising rapidity from his famously revolutionary redefinition of the theatrical minima in *The Empty Stage* to an implicitly literary

³⁸ Carnicke is here citing Boleslavsky’s statement in the American Laboratory Theatre’s catalogue. Mark Evans lays out the significance of Copeau’s ensemble-based approach to performance in his 2006 book *Jacques Copeau*, for instance summarising the focus on choral work: ‘For Copeau, the art of acting is not simply the art of a talented individual, it is an ensemble art’ (Evans 2006: 50).

view, attributing a play's success (or rather failure) to (the mediocrity of) its *author*, whose 'dull successes, universally praised' perpetuate 'the Deadly Theatre' (1968: 13). Later, he states explicitly the view that 'There is eventually a need for authorship to reach the ultimate compactness and focus that collective work is almost obliged to miss', (*ibid.*: 40) and in other more submerged ways continues the author focus and word bias of his conceptual framework ('the word that is spoken on this stage exists, or fails to exist, only in relation to the tensions it creates on that stage within the given stage circumstances', *ibid.*: 42). Yet Brook does much to open the way (in British theatre) for a reconsideration of a theatre 'language' in which the archetypal author only contributes one element towards and within the whole. Many of those who have come since and who are similarly positioned between practical engagement with and theoretical exposition of the nature of theatre have tussled with these tensions. I will probe the question of what authority and priority Frantic Assembly's and Forced Entertainment's members grant the writer, and where 'authorship' might be said to enter into their processes.

Mermikides and Smart point out that the 'anti-hierarchical' claims of many devising companies have been questioned, and that many would-be or one-time collectives – even the most explicitly political, such as The Red Room – have in fact survived by adopting more conventional development methods and working with writers as 'new writing companies',³⁹ or electing one of their number as the named writer of their work (Mermikides & Smart 2010: 12). Mike Kenny's above-cited concerns and Peter Brook's requirement of a unifying (presumably specifically skilled) vision (Brook 1968: 40) seem to support this view. John McGrath's desire to break down theatre's hierarchies is also allied to the expression, nonetheless, of a strong individual aesthetic, from a viewpoint which neatly encapsulates the paradox at the heart of devised – and arguably all – theatre:

Obviously I, as a writer, had a very clear idea of how I wanted the show to be. I knew who it was for, and I knew what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. But I also wanted everybody in the company to be intimately involved in the actual process of creating it. (McGrath 1981: viii)

³⁹ See also Jacqueline Bolton's above-cited discussions of the state of play in 'new writing' (Bolton 2012).

Furthermore, the expression of a unifying and prioritised vision – the ‘singularity of vision’ which could be seen as a form of authorship – may creep in in ways other than those involving (named) writers. Richard Hornby’s article ‘Forgetting the Text: Derrida and the “Liberation” of the Actor’ argues from an analogy with auteur-driven and semi-improvised film-making that, if actors suffer a tyranny, it is not that of the text but that of ‘the *auteur*-director who denies the actor the creative freedom that can be claimed from the text on the page’ (Hornby 2002: 355). Such improvised or loosely text-based films and plays are

driven by directors, not by actors. We rarely find collectives of actors spontaneously getting together to make ‘evolved’ plays or films on their own; when they do, inevitably one of their number becomes the director/writer/guru. (*ibid.*: 357)

Some critics have argued that this guru role may tend to the dictatorial. For example, John Freeman concludes his *New Performance/New Writing* (2007) with a brief examination of Steven Berkoff’s practice, or at least his persona. In it, Freeman refers (not unsympathetically) to Berkoff’s work as being ‘less like ensemble practice and more like an extended act of guru-driven self-homage’ (Freeman 2007: 135). It seems as though in some ways the authority sits uncomfortably with many of the directors and *de facto* ‘director/writer/gurus’ (though perhaps not with Berkoff, according to Freeman’s characterisation), so we must examine with care the ways in which they seek to deflect, to defer this author role.

Cathy Turner has proposed a model that suggests that the most long-lived and successful companies draw upon collaborative relationships which do not represent or aspire to a ‘retreat from authorship’ (Turner 2009b: 219). She has written several articles arguing, from the perspective of ‘new writing’, in favour of a ‘radically inclusive dramaturgy’ (Turner 2010). In ‘Something to Glance Off’ (2009b), she proposes ‘a series of linked speculations about the range of relationships taking place between texts, writers and performances’ (Turner 2009b: 217). Crucially, she interprets the heart of the Writing Space project which forms the basis of her study as not ‘imply[ing] a retreat from authorship in favour of the collaborative event’ (*ibid.*: 219). The project offered instead a relational, dialogic interaction which relies still on ‘individual creativity’ (*ibid.*). Helen Nicholson also draws links between

dialogic process – involving the necessary development of a shared language, as discussed above⁴⁰ – and writing. She applies Wittgenstein’s theories on language as part of the ‘vehicle of thought’ rather than ‘a reflection of pre-existing inner thoughts’ (Nicholson 1998: 79). One of her conclusions from this is that ‘the process of learning about drama is not didactic, but dialogic and interactive’ (*ibid.*).

These observations spring, of course, from specific contexts in which the commentators are seeking to influence practice, not merely to conduct or assess it: Nicholson’s focus is on theatre-making in schools contexts, and Turner describes a specific project which carved out its own ‘writing space’. However, the view of writing as ‘dialogic’ is reflective of actual practice among many playwrights not considered avant-garde or collaborative. Elizabeth Dyrud Lyman’s article ‘The Page Refigured’ cites Tom Stoppard’s acknowledgement of long-time collaborator Peter Wood’s contributions to his plays through their original development and staging (Lyman 2002: 100).⁴¹ As a more recent example, playwright Nick Payne’s latest work (particularly with director Carrie Cracknell) evidences the balancing act between collaboration and individual vision: ‘I’m [...] up now for doing something that is a bit messy and does need a lot of work, and does need a workshop, does need R&D. And that’s not to say you absolve yourself of the responsibility’ (Payne 2013). This desire is exactly aligned with the combination of personal responsibility and responsiveness to the interventions of others which Turner posits as a new model for writing processes: collaborators as well as other texts providing ‘something to glance off’ (Turner 2009b).⁴² Following this conversation, Payne has indeed participated in projects along the lines discussed. For *Blurred Lines* (2014), for instance, the National’s website gives the credits:

created by Nick Payne and Carrie Cracknell
devised by the Company
poetry by Michaela Coel

⁴⁰ ‘The acquisition of a dramatic language with which to articulate and exchange ideas is part of the process of writing plays’ (Nicholson 1998: 78).

⁴¹ W. B. Worthen makes reference to Lyman’s article, and also flags up the way that actors’ business and directors’ and designers’ work has habitually been ‘silently incorporat[ed]’ into the published playtext (Worthen 2005: 29). This is another indication of the difficulties inherent in a straightforward view of authorship.

⁴² Similarly, David Williams cites his collaborator Barry Laing, whose gloss on the ‘heurism’ of a dramaturg’s role in devising involves ‘a form of understanding that is born of the productive collisions of disparate and inconclusively related ideas, forms, strategies or practices’ (Laing quoted in Williams 2010: 200).

[...]
text Nick Payne (National Theatre 2014)⁴³

Evidently, the attribution of responsibilities and of authorship is complicated here by the multiple collaborations at the heart of these creative processes.

Turner, then, places dialogues at the heart of creation, and both Frantic and Forced Entertainment have created structures in which an emphasis on collaboration through such dialogues is unavoidable. Mermikides and Smart point to the ‘core of two’ structure which is prevalent in the devising groups they examine (2010: 17), and this is clearly one way of seeing the core of Frantic Assembly’s structure throughout much of the company’s history, with Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett working closely in tandem until Hoggett’s departure in 2013. This collaboration and friendship has evolved over time; for instance, I will examine how the pair initially worked as performers within a semi-regular ensemble, bringing in directors and choreographers from outside the company. Forced Entertainment began somewhat similarly with a rotating system of directing, and with group contribution to text and other aspects of productions; this seems to some extent to have given way to the leadership of more of a guru figure in Tim Etchells. Yet the recurrence of performers over several decades’ worth of performance and a flatter structure (in terms of salaries and decisions concerning the direction of the company) nuance this view.

Both Graham and Etchells demonstrate a keen awareness of the way that their companies’ processes do not fit neatly into the institutional constraints and expected structures of copyright, royalties, marketing, and programming. Despite the popularity of ‘devised’ and ‘physical’ theatre as labels in such marketing, Paul Hunter is certainly not alone in expressing difficulties in aligning the work of his company with the expectations of the theatres into which they tour. While many journalists and critics, too, seek to identify the (singular) ‘author’ of a piece of theatre, Elaine Aston’s assessment of Joint Stock’s collaborative processes offers a useful model. Aston argues that where the company was instrumental in effecting change in the landscape of theatrical possibilities was through introducing a

⁴³ This information is drawn specifically from <<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/blurred-lines>> and <<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/blurred-lines?cast>> (accessed 4 December 2014).

‘different economy of ideas “ownership” in which a writer is involved with and has a responsibility for ideas that are not just her own’ (Aston 2009: 146). If devising is a form of writing, then attempting to identify *the* writer of a piece of devised theatre is to perpetrate a category error. Instead, Aston argues convincingly that examining the work from the processes of its creation outwards, rather than tracing back from the resulting production, is the way to analyse such work, even when a named writer has been responsible for ‘scripting’, or ‘authoring’, or ‘finishing’ the piece.

This ‘inside-out’ approach highlighted by Aston, which was once somewhat novel for examinations of the playwright’s craft, is becoming more common, as evidenced by Harvie and Lavender’s collection of examinations of such processes in *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* (2010), Mermikides and Smart’s *Devising in Process* (2010), and, investigating the work of directors within the context of the creative team, works such as Russ Hope’s *Getting Directions* (2012). By tracing examples of the case companies’ practices over time, I also employ a largely ‘inside-out’ approach in examining the ways in which they delineate their creative processes. The above-mentioned functions of dramaturgy, directing and writing may be seen to operate in distinct phases of their creative process, or to flow into one set of overlaid methods, with ‘collaboration’ being used to summarise a large number and variety of practices. Through a careful consideration of these methods as they have developed over a number of projects, I will highlight the differences and similarities between Frantic’s and Forced Entertainment’s evolving creative processes and identify some major movements in current devising practice.

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2. FRANTIC ASSEMBLY

Introduction

Frantic Assembly, formed officially in 1994 as Frantic Theatre Company, is remarkable not only for its longevity and popularity, but also for the position which the company occupies between fluid notions of the physical, devising, collaboration and writing. I will here seek to examine Frantic's practice in developing new plays through the interplay of these shifting concepts.

As throughout this thesis, my approach is to interrogate the company's methods through analysis of several sources including the public portrayal of these practices, the reception and framing of the company's work in critical material and reviews, and the experiences of collaborators (particularly writers) on a number of specific productions. The comparative lack of analytical studies on the company has led me to focus on Frantic's (self-)representation in the media, and I have conducted interviews with Scott Graham to fill some of the gaps. I also seek to use established or proposed frameworks from the literature on other similar companies in situating Frantic's practice.

Frantic Assembly has become known, first and foremost, as a 'Physical Theatre Company'. Like so many companies identified as such, the identity is due almost entirely to their own marketing and rhetoric, in what the company's published material very openly refers to as creating, and managing, a 'brand'⁴⁴. Yet almost from the outset there have been noticeable efforts on the part of co-founders and co-artistic directors Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett to counter or renegotiate this identity. This in itself is not particularly remarkable: such terminology moves in and out of vogue. A mass of student and amateur companies now insist on their 'physical theatre' credentials, and professional companies once in the vanguard and

⁴⁴ For example, the company uses the idea of the 'brand' (Frantic Assembly 2013: 4, 13), 'marketing' (*ibid.*: 12-14), and related terms, in the online *Guide to Frantic Assembly*. This describes their deliberate and insistent use of the name 'Frantic' to reach 'a point where people would talk about going to see "the new Frantic show", with no show title necessary' (*ibid.*: 13), and states the importance of the logo and other striking imagery in building a name for the fledgling company. More succinctly, 'Frantic had to be not just a company but also a brand' (*ibid.*).

proudly claiming the term now play down its relevance to their output.⁴⁵ Mark Evans's 2001 survey of the early work of Frantic captures their earlier adoption of the term: rather than situating themselves as theatre or dance they preferred, writes Evans, 'to identify their work under the more nebulous term of physical theatre' (2001: 135). In contrast, while their website today retains references to the physical nature of the work, the descriptor 'physical theatre' is usually buried and advertisement of the physical nature of their work is generally combined with that of other theatrical elements, such as: 'Vivid and dynamic, Frantic Assembly's unique physical style combines movement, design, music and text' (Frantic Assembly 2013).⁴⁶ The company's own current desire to frame themselves as something other than a 'physical theatre company' is neatly summed up in the section in their *Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* (hereafter the *Frantic Book*) entitled 'What is physical theatre? (and why we hate answering that question)' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 29).

In questioning the term, Graham and Hoggett gesture towards the vast range of performance modes to which this umbrella label is applied, and hint also at the difficulty which arises when the journalistic use of a popular phrase obscures the processes really at work behind the company's output. It is important to examine the use of physical exercises and the focus on dance-theatre-influenced contact improvisation in Frantic's output; these have been crucial in the aforementioned 'branding' of the company and in securing funding, collaborative opportunities, and work outside the company for its directors. However, this is not necessarily the core of their approach and output, and the evolution of their own methods and imagery relies on a combination of processes and ways of talking about those processes.

The company's own recent preference has been to conceive of the focus of their work as 'devising' rather than 'physical theatre', as even the title of the *Frantic Book* suggests. Yet their conception of devising needs further investigation in connection with the various other concepts at play. Heddon and Milling deliberately restrict their use of 'devising' to 'describe a mode of work in which no script – neither

⁴⁵ The most prominent example of this is DV8 Physical Theatre, which commonly elides its name to simply DV8 (though the company does retain the full title officially). The company's artistic director Lloyd Newson hesitates to use the term in describing his own work 'because of its current overuse and abuse to describe almost anything that isn't dance or traditional theatre' (quoted in Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 109).

⁴⁶ This quotation is from <<http://www.franticassembly.co.uk/what-is-frantic>> (accessed 4 June 2013).

written play-text nor performance score – exists prior to the work’s creation by the company’ (2006: 3). They make this move in order to avoid the ‘unhelpfully broad’ application of the term ‘devising’ to ‘the traditional rehearsal and staging of a play-text’ (*ibid.*), and it makes sense for Heddon and Milling’s study to limit the scope of their enquiry in this way, as discussed above.⁴⁷ Yet at the same time, it seems clear that – as they partly acknowledge – similar methodologies may well lie behind both the approaches to devising which they identify as involving no script ‘prior to the work’s creation’ and those which involve work with pre-existing texts. Franc Chamberlain’s article ‘MAG – The Next Five Years 1997-2002’, written in 1997 but unpublished until it appeared in Keefe and Murray (2007), expressly links the idea of ‘actors as creative artists’ to that of ‘devising’, and argues that combining this with ‘the idea of movement’ could be seen as providing a sketched definition of physical theatre; he seeks to move away from definitions on the basis of whether a work is ‘text-based’ or otherwise (Chamberlain 2007: 152).⁴⁸ Along these lines, and in direct (albeit, presumably, unknowing) contradiction to Heddon and Milling, Graham and Hoggett announce:

It is possible to imagine that devising implies that we have gone into a room with nothing and tried to make a start from scratch. This is not the case.
(Graham & Hoggett 2009: 5)

As I have discussed, it is difficult to identify with certainty what may be meant by the ‘beginning’ of a work: counter to Heddon and Milling’s implicit assumption, it is impossible to pinpoint the moment of ‘the work’s creation’ (2006: 3). By examining the development of Frantic Assembly’s (and, later, Forced Entertainment’s) processes, I will make a case for a more fluid use of the term ‘devising’ based on the porous boundaries between discussion, writing, rehearsal and research and development. I suggest that the idea of a designated starting point for the work is provisional and artificial at best, and hence misleading as a defining term for devising processes. However, I also argue that several of the conceptual frameworks

⁴⁷ See pp. 27-28 above.

⁴⁸ Murray and Keefe also summarise Chamberlain’s position (and that of Lehmann’s 2006 work *Postdramatic Theatre*) on physical theatres and devising as concerning not ‘whether there is a pre-existent text upon which to construct theatre making, but *how* actors, director, scenographer, movement choreographer and others work on such a text’ (Murray & Keefe 2007: 17; emphasis in the original).

constructed by these practitioners aim at delineating these fluid boundaries, for reasons to do with institutional frameworks and personal creative motivation.

Alongside physical theatre and devising, a third key concept in examining the company's developing methods is that of collaboration. The focus here is on their collaborative practices of working with writers, but reference must also be made to the ways in which Graham and Hoggett collaborate with performers, designers and other members of the creative team. David Lane's chapter on 'Writing and Devising' in his 2010 work *Contemporary British Drama* mentions Frantic's work with Lavery on *Stockholm* (2007) and is subtitled 'The Call for Collaboration'; it provides some useful starting points for a fuller examination of this particular working relationship. He also identifies the company's roughly contemporaneous work on *Market Boy* (2006) with Rufus Norris and David Eldridge at the National Theatre as significant, and I examine below this (at the time) new institutional context.⁴⁹ However, it must be remembered that 'collaboration' is a rhetorical and by no means self-explanatory concept. Lane's chapter does not closely examine this. The work Graham and Hoggett carried out in the company's formative years generated the foundations for a particular form of collaborative creation, in which the performers have a significant input into the generation of the spoken text. Though in later years this is buried in the rhetoric and somewhat qualified in the process, it is a formative experience which can still be seen to inform the company's methods.

The final element I wish to consider in the context of Frantic Assembly's physical, devising work is their approach to processes of writing. In Frantic Assembly's practices, text has been used in varying ways, inspiring, springing from, and developing in tandem with their devising processes, but their approaches involve, I argue, a rarely remarked-upon reverence for the text and for the work of the writer. As a broad initial observation, almost none of the company's works have been created without a (designated, usually well-established) writer present in the

⁴⁹ Lane frames this in terms of the search for a 'choreographic language' for the show, and also points to the lengthy, and compartmentalised structure of that production's several development phases (Lane 2010: 92-4). I later examine parallel (and not coincidentally contemporaneous) developments in Frantic's own processes.

rehearsal room.⁵⁰ This is a clear contrast to the work of ostensibly similar companies such as DV8 or Volcano, neither of which includes work with writers as a significant part of their public rhetoric. It is also a noteworthy difference from the approach to writing of Forced Entertainment's work, where text is generated by members of the company for specific needs within the structure of a piece. Writers who have worked with Frantic have also observed that Graham and Hoggett are 'very adept at commenting on text' (Kenny 2011), and 'avid scrutinisers of a piece of writing' (Ravenhill 2006a). As Mermikides and Smart have pointed out, 'the distinction conventionally made between writing and devising is somewhat misleading' (2010: 20). Graham and Hoggett are clearly practitioners interested in developing modes of expression involving both the physical and the verbal.

Without understanding the interplay of these approaches, and the shifts in this terminology employed by the company's practitioners, much critical material seems to have difficulty identifying what it is that Frantic Assembly actually does. Heddon and Milling's *Devising Performance* gives a fleeting reference to the company in an extensive list of 'some of the most long-lived' Arts Council funded 'physical, dance, circus and mime theatre companies who devise work' (2006: 177-8). One recurrent observation among collaborators⁵¹ and the artistic directors themselves is how expectations for the company are frequently misguided. Much of the company's most aggressive marketing and rhetoric is, by their own admission, aimed at managing these expectations.

In response to this and other pressures of expectation – both audience-based and in terms of the requirements of funding – Frantic Assembly has shifted and continues to shift its practice, with what Graham and Hoggett have described as 'a definite "Next!" mentality' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 3). For these and other reasons it is

⁵⁰ 2003's *Rabbit* was one rare occasion on which the artistic directors worked on a performance from an already published text, though the pair sought author Brendan Cowell's input and revisions in their staging of the work. 2008's *Othello*, for obvious reasons, did not involve the input of the author, though Graham and Hoggett's version was a much edited and adapted version, drawing also on Nick Davies's 1998 book *Dark Heart*, about the racial tensions in the North of England around the turn of the millennium. (See Graham *et al.* 2008b). Similarly, *Little Dogs* (2011) was a rare return to a more purely devised work (on the basis of Dylan Thomas's short story 'Just Like Little Dogs'), to a more fragmented, non-narrative structure, and to Swansea.

⁵¹ Such as Mark Ravenhill: the article cited above states that the writer 'was surprised by how detailed and insightful their notes were. I'd wrongly assumed that in the world of physical theatre, the writer would pretty much have to fend for him- or herself, while the director got on with creating physical shapes' (Ravenhill 2006a).

unproductive to seek a stable meaning for ‘physical theatre’⁵² or ‘devising’, or any of the other myriad terms that have been applied by Frantic or others to the company’s work. My approach here seeks to take soundings along the three main axes mentioned above – physical theatre, devising and collaboration – and to explore the meanings these contain at given moments in the company’s development, including the crucial intersections of these axes with processes of writing.

This practice, as with any developing process, is the result largely of a cumulative progression of shifts and alterations rather than major revolutionary changes, but I wish to focus my attentions on three phases of the company’s development. Frantic Assembly themselves have divided their history into the ‘get in the back of the van!’ years and the ‘meet you in the bar’ years (Frantic Assembly 2009: 3-6). This humorously-worded distinction is based around the actually crucial decision for Graham and Hoggett to stop performing in each production themselves in order to focus on directing the shows – and, as they frame it themselves, on making ‘high level’, ‘cultural’ connections with other practitioners and potential backers (*ibid.*: 6). This allowed them both to be more adventurous in their stylistic decisions and ‘to be advocates for the company, talking to the right people in the bar before and after the performance’ (*ibid.*).

I will focus first on the company’s early period, during which the influence of Graham and Hoggett’s experiences with Volcano Theatre was at its most immediate and evident, particularly up until the departure of key early collaborator Spencer Hazel, whom Graham and Hoggett met through work with Volcano. In contrast to their own distinction, I then examine a middle period, stretching from 1998 to 2006, during which time Graham and Hoggett built their profile and developed their work with a series of collaborations. This notably involved collaborations with increasingly high-profile writers and the backing of more and more large-scale institutions. I then focus on the company’s work (from 2005 onwards) with Mark Ravenhill and Bryony Lavery. Lavery is the writer with whom they have

⁵² As Murray and Keefe have indicated, adopting ‘Clifford Geertz’s (1983) notion of “blurred genres” or categories’ in stating that theatres are always ‘blurred’ and ‘total’ by nature (Murray & Keefe 2007: 11).

collaborated the most frequently,⁵³ and I place particular focus on their 2007 production *Stockholm*.

I hence identify how Frantic Assembly's practice has been formed through a number of creative collaborations, as Graham and Hoggett developed, through what I have termed a 'self-apprenticeship', a method based on both text and physicality which thrives on enabling close collaboration between writers and performers. It is performer-centric and instigated from the point of view of Graham and Hoggett's keen participation in the rehearsal room, but seeks also to enable, respect and protect the work of the writer. Conscious of issues around authorship, attribution and royalties, the company has sought ways to compartmentalise what is an essentially ensemble-spirited approach. Countering sometimes wild expectations of what work with a youth-oriented physical theatre company will entail, the company's rhetoric has sought to emphasise the power of silence and stillness, and the central role of text in their physical, devising process.

⁵³ This collaboration has lasted longer than the brief, but intense, relationship with Spencer Hazel, and in terms of the number of productions, too, Lavery's contribution to the company has recently overtaken Hazel's. Lavery has now contributed to three full-scale productions – *Stockholm* (2007), *Beautiful Burnout* (2009) and *The Believers* (2014) – and the NT Connections play aimed at youth theatre performance *It Snows...* (2008). Hazel adapted *Look Back in Anger* (1994) and is credited as creating text for *Klub* (1995) and *Flesh* (1996) – though the nature of Lavery's and Hazel's collaborations was different in a number of ways, as I will examine. Michael Wynne and Abi Morgan are the only other writers so far with whom Frantic have collaborated on more than one occasion (Wynne on 1998's *Sell Out* and 2005's *Dirty Wonderland*; Morgan on 2001's *Tiny Dynamite* and 2011's *Lovesong*).

Early precedents: the Volcano lineage and DV8 connections

Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett first met at Swansea University, where both studied English Literature and were involved in the university's drama society. The 'Frantic' name (at first without the 'Assembly') – and the association with Volcano Theatre – began only shortly afterwards. It was under this name that the Swansea University Drama Society presented their 1991 production of Christopher Hampton's *Savages*, which was created under the direction of Volcano Theatre's co-founders Fern Smith and Paul Davies as part of the profile-raising work Volcano habitually took on in Swansea. Graham was an audience member for the production, and describes this experience as a theatrical awakening: 'a moment for me where I suddenly became really awakened to theatre and its possibilities' (Steiger 2006: 317). Hoggett performed in the show, mounted in 1991 at the Edinburgh Fringe and marketed under the name 'Frantic', given that 'S.U.D.S.' 'didn't quite match the ambition of the piece' (Frantic Assembly 2007).⁵⁴

Buoyed by the experience of this production, Hoggett and Graham teamed up together as directors for the first time to take a similarly energetic version of William M. Hoffman's *As Is* to the following year's Fringe, again under the auspices of the student drama society and using the Frantic name. Following this, Hoggett and Graham were both invited by Davies and Smith to take part in Volcano's 1994 production *Manifesto*, which as we will see proved to be a nexus for several crucial meetings and influences, and formed the inspiration – and to a large extent the practical model – for the foundation of Frantic Theatre Company in a professional capacity:

It was just an adoration, a blind adoration of Volcano. Because they were exciting, because they were our inspiration, and because they'd, practically, chosen us and nurtured us – we owed it to them. And they were just exciting, exotic people as well. (Graham 2011a)

⁵⁴ This quotation is from the Frantic Assembly website prior to its 2011 overhaul; the page is preserved at <http://web.archive.org/web/20070824012047/http://www.franticassembly.co.uk/p109.html> (accessed 4 October 2012).

Frantic Theatre Company was hence formed professionally in 1994 by Scott Graham, Steven Hoggett and fellow Swansea student Vicki Coles (now Middleton) as administrator, once all three had graduated. This team formed the backbone of the company, which soon (by early 1996) became 'Frantic Assembly' due to a clash with another 'Frantic Theatre'. The trio worked together for over ten years, until Middleton's departure in 2005 to continue her career in theatre production in Australia.⁵⁵ For nearly another decade, Graham and Hoggett remained the company's artistic directors and driving forces, and Middleton was still listed on the website until recently as an 'Associate' of the company. The majority of my research was undertaken at a time when Hoggett's involvement in the company was slowly being reduced, as he took on more and more freelance directing and choreographic work away from this partnership. This culminated in 2013 with an officialisation of his departure from the company, though only recently have the pair spoken openly to the press about this situation. Lyn Gardner's 2015 article on the company includes interviews with both directors in which Hoggett's interest in work overseas, as contrasted with Graham's family commitments in the UK, is claimed as largely responsible for Hoggett's departure. Graham claims that working on 2014's *The Believers* as a solo director gave him 'a new confidence' which is 'invigorating and liberating', and the split is nonetheless, they insist, 'not a divorce' (Gardner 2015).

Though there is now an interesting new phase opening up for the company, I focus my analysis on the work that Graham and Hoggett carried out in close collaboration, which is crucial to the development of Frantic's aesthetic and methods. It is clear that for the majority of the company's history, this pair enjoyed an intimate working partnership and understanding. Furthermore, the presence of several other key members of the company in its earliest incarnation (including Middleton) and the extent of these individuals' activities on behalf of 'Frantic Theatre Company' suggest that, at least to begin with, there was a much more ensemble-led drive to its activities and rhetoric. What this means for the company's early productions, and the lasting impact on Frantic's processes, will be examined later.

⁵⁵ Middleton was the General Manager of Legs on the Wall theatre company from 2005 to 2007, when she became General Manager of Company B in Sydney.

Frantic's company line, repeated in press coverage even relatively recently, is that its three founder members were of distinctly amateur status as they formed the company: a Guardian profile of Vicki Middleton in 2004 neatly summarised this status, asserting that Graham, Hoggett and Middleton formed Frantic 'even though they had no idea how to run a theatre company' (Gardner 2004). This rhetoric of the practitioners' amateur status is also distinguishable in Graham's claims that 'we formed the company in 1994, more with an energy than any idea about what we were really going to do' (Graham speaking in a promotional video for 2001's *Underworld*⁵⁶).

Despite these protestations, however, Graham, Hoggett and Middleton were clearly adept at positioning the company within existing institutional structures and at developing their own skills and practice through opportunistic exploitation of the contacts they made. The major way in which this manifested itself in the early years of the company was through their continued involvement with practitioners encountered through Volcano Theatre. Stylistically, too, Frantic owed a significant debt to the company, which in some ways persists to this day. Page one of the introduction to the *Frantic Book* declares that 'Volcano were a massive inspiration to us', and describes their contact with Volcano through the 1991 production of *Savages* as 'the life-changing moment' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 1). Hoggett also talks of watching Volcano's 1991 production *Medea: Sex War* at Swansea's Taliesin Arts Centre as 'something that turned on the biggest light bulb in my head. Without seeing [Fern Smith's] combination of text and movement, we wouldn't have formed Frantic' (Hoggett 2010).

Stylistic borrowings

In fact, Volcano Theatre and DV8 Physical Theatre (companies connected through the important contribution of Nigel Charnock) represent the *only* major theatrical antecedents openly cited by Graham and Hoggett as inspiration⁵⁷. These companies

⁵⁶ Available on the Frantic website (Frantic Assembly 2013) at <<http://www.franticassembly.co.uk/productions/underworld/experience/>> accessed 16 September 2013. Note that Fern Smith and Paul Davies, too, employ recognisably similar rhetorics in talking of the foundation of their own company: 'Both of us had a history of sport rather than theatre behind us, but turned this energetic ignorance to our advantage' (Smith 2005: 2).

⁵⁷ Individual plays are occasionally cited amongst lists of 'inspiration' for pieces, but these lists are 'shamelessly personal and could reference the banal as easily as the highbrow' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 218), usually pointing the reader towards films or musical inspiration rather than other theatre or dance practitioners.

– in particular the more direct contact with Volcano – had a deep impact on the production aesthetic and physical devising techniques adopted by Frantic from the outset. Graham has since admitted that at that time ‘we would’ve been happy to be [Volcano] clones’ (Graham 2011a).⁵⁸ The directors developed their style and approach through a process which may be seen as a ‘self-apprenticeship’, during which they worked with a variety of choreographers, directors and performers mostly with experience of (and met through contact with) the two more senior companies. Graham describes the video of DV8’s *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1990) as ‘the VHS that changed my life!’ and cites Volcano’s Charnock-directed production *L.O.V.E.* (1992) as ‘stunning’ (Charnock 2012).⁵⁹ Certainly the style, derived from contact improvisation and dance of the kind popularised by Steve Paxton and developed (and politicised) by Pina Bausch, is familiar in its use of lifts, leaps and other agile adaptations of everyday or ‘nondance’ movement.⁶⁰

The rhetorics around Frantic, DV8 and Volcano’s respective formations similarly reveal noteworthy resemblances. Where Frantic’s founders rail against ‘the usual talcum powder headed Chekhov and vanity projects’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 1) of their student days (‘This is what we thought theatre was’; *ibid.*), Lloyd Newson expresses a similar disenchantment with his pre-DV8 work as a dancer with Extemporary Dance Theatre:

I’d worked with thirty different choreographers; the value of this was that they showed me their perspective on movement and I realised it wasn’t mine. (Newson quoted in Granitch 1992)

Similarly, Paul Davies states in interview that he and his Volcano co-founder, Fern Smith, ‘both went to theatre performances and found them excruciatingly boring really’ (Davies 2012a). They found such performances lacking in the excitement which both Davies and Smith found from sporting activities:

⁵⁸ Though as early as 1999’s *Sell Out*, which showcased a shifted aesthetic, one commentator was moved to comment that ‘Frantic Assembly has shaken off its Volcano-clones tag’ (Adams 1999).

⁵⁹ These comments were both part of a tribute by Graham posted on Charnock’s official website following the sad news of the performer’s death on 1 August 2012.

⁶⁰ See Kaltenbrunner (2004) on Paxton and other roots of contact improvisation (the reference to Paxton and ‘nondance movement’ is from Kaltenbrunner 2004: 21). See also Giannachi and Luckhurst (1999: 108-114) for their interview with DV8’s founder Lloyd Newson, in which he describes his (and the company’s) training, politics, and debt to Pina Bausch.

How isn't this as vital as sport is? How doesn't this get your adrenaline going, either as an audience member or to perform? (*ibid.*)⁶¹

While it is not directly acknowledged by any of these practitioners, there is a link from this rhetoric and approach to that of the twentieth century's key exponent of 'the moving body' in creative theatre, Jacques Lecoq, who opens *The Moving Body* observing 'I came to theatre by way of sports' (Lecoq 2009: 3). But the training and attitudes of both DV8 and Volcano were more *ad hoc* than those of the Lecoq school, and not directly influenced by the teachings of the French practitioner. Graham and Hoggett came to this attitude at yet another remove, via these British companies – primarily Volcano.

To the young Graham and Hoggett, then, Volcano 'were alternative and sexy, intelligent and fierce' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 1). DV8, Volcano and Frantic all include strong rhetorics of opposition in the tales of their respective foundations. Frantic Assembly borrowed and inherited these rhetorics – and associated ways of working – in opposition to their imagined mainstream (university productions of Chekhov and the like) but also, unlike Volcano and DV8, in open emulation of the earlier companies. A result of this is that several of the earlier companies' methods and images crop up across Frantic Assembly's output regardless of the combination of collaborators with whom they were working at any given point. I will examine the influence of key contributors and the shifts in practice and rhetoric as the company develops, but for now it may be noted that the opening of Frantic's *Klub* (1995) featured an explosion of contact improvisation-based moves as the company explored the extremes of the stage. The leaps, rolls and catches are distinctly reminiscent of those in Volcano's *Manifesto*,⁶² as are the later sequences of stylised movement restricted to the arms and head, in which, one by one, the entire company joins in with these synchronised 'strings' of gestural 'material'⁶³. As Heddon and

⁶¹ This strand in Volcano's rhetoric has been consistent throughout their history – the line cited here from 2012 has direct echoes in that quoted by Evans from personal correspondence with Davies in 1999: 'I used to do Karate. [...] Went to University and had high hopes of going to a theatre, thought it might be interesting. It was really boring. So I thought, why isn't this as exciting as doing sport?' (Davies quoted in Evans 2001: 138).

⁶² An edited sequence of excerpts from this production, along with several other videos, can be seen on Volcano's YouTube channel (*aftertheorgy* 2013).

⁶³ This is terminology employed throughout the company's explanation and dissemination of its methods, for instance in the *Frantic Book* (Graham & Hoggett 2009: e.g. 131) and in information packs (Graham 2005: 17, 2006: 9, etc). The use of the term 'string' to describe repeatable sequences

Milling argue, ‘the tradition of devising continually betrays its influences as it repeats, appropriates, copies, and forgets its borrowings’ (2006: 24) – though in Graham and Hoggett’s case some efforts are made, notably in the *Frantic Book*, not to forget but to acknowledge these borrowings.

As discussed in Chapter 1, ‘physical theatre’ is a particularly shifting term, with Lloyd Newson among those who have expressed misgivings about its potentially limiting use. The use of the term by not only practitioners but also critics, theatre marketing departments, and others as a simple shorthand may also be misleading. Katja Schneider, in a DVD liner note on DV8’s collection *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men, Strange Fish and Enter Achilles*, provides a summary of the most commonly understood aspect of the term: ‘The performers jump, run and fall to the point of exhaustion’ (Schneider, in DV8 2007: 12). But the core of physical theatre is, in Schneider’s assessment, more than mere exertion: ‘As the name suggests, it is all about physical contact between the performers – with Lloyd Newson this can mean anything from an everyday gesture to an acrobatic leap’ (*ibid.*).

Frantic Assembly’s output certainly embraces these extremes, but early reviews (and, to a certain extent, shows) focused on the ‘aesthetic of sweat’⁶⁴ inherited from Volcano Theatre’s inspiration by the fitness and exertion of the world of sports. While the company’s rhetoric now repeatedly emphasises the elements of their theatre which are not merely about energetic exertion, Graham is also aware that what he and Hoggett at first offered Volcano and their other collaborators was an enthusiasm and physical daring that fit well with the demands of ‘physical’ theatre as construed in terms of exertion:

I think Steven and I must have just been absolutely full of energy, and willing to do anything, and that must’ve pleased people. Because we’ve always worked with an extraordinary calibre of people, willing to invest a hell of a lot of time in working with us and our development. (Graham 2011a)

of physical gestures may have been brought to the company by Liam Steel, as it is used notably more often in describing techniques employed in creating *Hymns* and productions since then than in contemporary discussions of earlier shows. However, the *Frantic Book* discusses two scenes from *Klub* in these terms, and the actual use of such gestural sequences, in any case, dates back to Graham and Hoggett’s earliest work with Frantic and Volcano.

⁶⁴ As Shuttleworth’s (1994) review of Volcano’s *Manifesto* memorably termed it.

As indicated above, the vital importance of the physical element in Volcano's aesthetic derives from the world of sport. As in other areas, Frantic can be seen to have inherited aspects of this aesthetic and of Davies and Smith's rhetoric, while shifting its emphasis. Frantic's rhetoric, while sharing some overtones of rebellion against expected theatrical norms, makes reference more to other pop culture worlds than to sport – those of clubbing, pop music, videos or (often what might be deemed 'low-brow') film – in exemplifying the effects Graham and Hoggett sought to produce among their audiences. Frantic has emphasised this populist eclecticism, seeking to avoid the more intellectualised discussions of Volcano's artistic directors: the information pack on *Beautiful Burnout* (2010) positions the 'bibliography' of influences by stating that

We have always wanted the creative process to be accessible and demystified and we believe that inspiration comes from all places and not just from the places that make us sound clever. It is unashamedly nonacademic. (Graham 2010: 25)

Though Volcano embraced a more intellectualised rhetoric and content, the mixture of high concepts with low-culture references was nonetheless a clear component of their theatre. *Manifesto* incorporated recognisable music from well-known films such as *Jurassic Park* and *Terminator 2* as the backing to famous declarations including 'A spectre is haunting Europe'. The movement work incorporated 'the acrobatic tumble', 'niftily execute[d] Fred and Ginger numbers' (Hoyle 1994) and 'the aesthetic of sweat that has arisen from contemporary club culture' (Shuttleworth 1994). These aesthetic aspects of the senior Swansea-based company formed a model for the early work of Frantic, and in some cases a lasting influence.

Though Volcano Theatre professed 'to reject both the use of The Script and the work of The Dramatist' (quoted by Shuttleworth 1994)⁶⁵, and more recent writings by Davies have referred to 'the problem of the text [...]' (1997: 2), the company regularly worked using existing texts – often political in motivation – as inspiration. Davies and Smith combined this avid engagement in politics using texts of various provenances with a frenzied physical expression adapted from the world of sport and gymnastics rather than that of the theatre or, as Mark Evans (2001) points out, dance. Shaped by this early experience, but eschewing much of the overtly political

⁶⁵ Shuttleworth adds: 'This doesn't always make it easy on The Reviewer' (*ibid.*).

motivation behind Volcano's work, Graham and Hoggett set about curating their own style through the partnerships they sought and developed.

The 'workshop culture' and *de facto* collaboration

Davies and Smith, like Graham, Hoggett and Coles, met as undergraduates at Swansea University. Volcano's inception came about due to their attraction to a 'heightened performance experience' through 'heightened language and heightened situations' (Davies quoted in Evans 2001: 136). DV8's *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1988) is cited by Davies as a major influence (Davies 2012b). On the basis of seeing this show, Smith was keen to invite Nigel Charnock, a performer in the show and co-founder member of DV8, to provide a workshop for Volcano. This began what Mark Evans describes as 'a regular summer workshop programme to which they invited companies and artists from whom they wished to learn' as a way 'to sample skills and methods of working' (2001: 136). The environment in which Graham and Hoggett gained their first experience of professional performance was hence one imbued with a 'workshop culture' – one of Murray and Keefe's terms⁶⁶ illustrating common factors in 'physical theatres'. But these partnerships went beyond training or *étude*-style closed workshops, with Charnock soon becoming a regular collaborator with Volcano, directing a total of four Volcano shows and choreographing two, including *Manifesto* (Davies 2012b).

Strikingly, this process of wooing and engaging more experienced practitioners is evidently inherited in Graham, Hoggett and Middleton's approach, which involved inviting choreographers and directors to work with them in creating the early pieces which built their company name and identity. Looking back over this process in 1999, Graham explained that '[w]e always had very clear ideas about what we wanted. [...] We wanted to learn on the job, while retaining the freshness that comes with inexperience' (Cavendish 1999).

Their first such choreographic collaborator/mentor for a Frantic production was Juan Carrascoso⁶⁷, whom they had met when he had performed alongside Graham and

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Murray and Keefe 2007: 129.

⁶⁷ This name is spelled 'Carroscoso' in the *Frantic Book* (2012: 9) and in various other ways throughout the Frantic Assembly website, but 'Carrascoso' on Volcano's website (Volcano 2013) and (as Juani Carrascoso) on dance company Atalaya's website (Atalaya-TNT 2013) – the list of past contributors to the company is at <http://atalaya-tnt.com/?page_id=1305> (accessed 14 September 2013).

Hoggett in Volcano's *Manifesto* (1993); he worked with them as director on Frantic's first professional production, *Look Back in Anger* (1994). Smith and Davies had also forged connections with members of V-Tol Dance Company and the Featherstonehaughs, and through this link, several members of these companies (Christine Devaney and T. C. Howard of V-Tol, Stephen Kirkham of DV8 and the Featherstonehaughs) also later contributed choreography or direction to Frantic productions. So at the very least, Graham and Hoggett's association with Volcano provided them with a series of contacts from which they could profit in sourcing more experienced collaborators; more than this, though, they gained not only training in physical and devising work, but also a model for collaborative learning by which they plotted their own training.

Furthermore, like Volcano, Frantic were rooted in collaboration by their very nature. The presence at the heart of the company of two close friends, both of whom were keen performers with ambitions of performing their own physical work,⁶⁸ is a clear parallel between the companies, and places collaboration and compromise at the heart of these creative processes. Fern Smith refers to Davies as a 'long-time friend and spiritual twin' (Smith 2005: 2); Graham and Hoggett turn to a sporting metaphor to describe the sharing and development of ideas together: 'you cross 'em over and I'll nod 'em in' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 31), and emphasise the role of trust in their collaboration – a trust developed through many years of close work together during which disagreements and doubts are nonetheless admitted as key to the development of this working relationship (for instance, *ibid.*: 7-8). Descriptions of later rehearsal methods suggest the ongoing importance to the pair of the dialogue between them. Graham's rehearsal diary for *pool (no water)*, for instance, refers to their frequent, and 'extremely useful', pre-rehearsal meetings:

It is quickly clear that this is not just a chance to find out what we both have planned. It instantly becomes a session where we can spark up new ideas and solve the creative problems that are troubling the other. (Graham 2006a; Day 13)

Hoggett has recently parted company with Graham as a regular collaborator – and it is perhaps telling that Graham's first project without Hoggett, 2014's *The Believers*, again involved Bryony Lavery, with whom he had worked closely on a number of

⁶⁸ In the example of *Manifesto*, both Davies and Smith were present as performers.

previous occasions. However, both of the directors still acknowledge the shared process they developed as a pair. As Hoggett says of his more recent work away from the company, ‘Scott is part of the theatrical language I use every day. We learned it together’ (Gardner 2015). Thus, as for Smith and Davies before them, inherent in Graham and Hoggett’s practice is the presence of ‘something [or someone] to glance off’ in generating creative momentum (Turner 2009b).

The rhetoric employed by Volcano when speaking about the time Graham and Hoggett worked with them is also, crucially, collaborative in other ways. As mentioned, Smith and Davies stressed the political impetus and themes behind their work; the production which galvanised the creation of Frantic, *Manifesto*, was one of the most overtly political, based as it was on the writings of Marx and Engels and of the Marxist poet Mayakovsky. But this political bent also extended, in their rhetoric at least, to the way in which the work was created. Volcano have always stressed the extent to which they strive for a collaborative, ‘democratic’ way of working: in Smith’s article ‘This Imaginary Woman: Where Did She Come From?’, she describes how she had

seen many projects with collaborative aims transform into traditionally hierarchical structures with artists such as musicians, performers and choreographers at the bottom, increasingly becoming subservient to the vision of the director. (Smith 2005: 2)

Volcano, she writes, ‘prefers to work in a more democratic way’ (*ibid.*). The extent to which this was a reality in Volcano’s case (or is realisable in general) is not under investigation here, but I wish to point out how such rhetorics were in play within the company at the time when Graham and Hoggett came into closest contact with it. They were party to a self-declared ‘democratic’ process instigated by the two performers/artistic directors, Smith and Davies, in which a certain degree of aesthetic leadership and responsibility for training was shared with – and indeed handed over to – the more experienced Charnock.

Politics and collaboration

The politics of collaboration is framed in Volcano’s rhetoric as something related to the company’s political interests in a broader sense. The word ‘politics’ itself crops up noticeably frequently in Davies and Smith’s discussion of their work; Frantic

inherit some elements of this rhetoric, but with clear alterations. Only rarely do they use the term ‘political’, and when they do it is often to invoke some form of ‘family’ or ‘social’ politic(s) (Graham 2003: 16, 17) or ‘sexual’ politics (Graham 2005: 3), or to refute or play down the relevance of ‘politics’ in a public sense: ‘we also realised that the political framework of the original was neither useful nor interesting for us’⁶⁹ (Graham, Hoggett & Rocha Allan 2008: 8); ‘We felt that this was not just a political battle between clashing ideologies’ (Graham 2003: 5).

So Graham and Hoggett manifestly inherit the interest in and reliance upon collaborative creation while buffing off the political rhetoric which surrounds its framing in Volcano’s self-projected image as a company. Both companies stress the importance of the differing collaborative relationships to their evolving processes in different productions. Davies writes, of the ‘political intervention’ of Volcano’s earliest works, that ‘[t]he kind of politics often varied. So much depended upon the company’ (Davies 2003: 1). Though Graham’s purpose is less overtly political, it is noteworthy that this concept echoes within the still-current rhetoric of Frantic Assembly, as in his recent suggestion that in undergoing one’s own apprenticeship, ‘it’s all about who you meet, who you work with’ (Graham 2011a). Davies, in his definition of the processes at work in Volcano’s earliest phases, echoes the politicised rhetoric of John McGrath and the analysis of Theodore Shank: the company’s methods represented ‘an attempt to rid ourselves of the ancient division of labour between directors/actors/choreographers and characters. We were creating what we would now call a flat organisation’ (Davies 2003: 2). This concept of the ‘flat organisation’ is clearly influential on Frantic’s earliest shows. At that time, as Graham puts it, he, Hoggett and Middleton

would be designing the lights, designing the sound, putting the set up, taking the set down, driving the van, doing the admin, doing the producing... So it was hands-on. (Graham 2011a)

⁶⁹ This apparently startling point, made in outlining their treatment of *Othello*, is mitigated somewhat by the contemporary political inspiration drawn from Nick Davies’s *Dark Heart* (1998). Graham and Hoggett’s discussion of their interest in the ‘hidden Britain’ described by Davies and in the politically-charged situation around the Bradford, Oldham and Burnley riots of 2001 is however a rare – if not the only – occasion when a broader political influence has been admitted for one of their works.

This extended, too, to the approach towards the other performers, many of whom appeared repeatedly in the first three or four Frantic projects:

[...] we liked the idea that any performer on stage at any time knows what's going on around them. Nobody gets lost: they're very much [...] there in that moment. [...]

[I]t meant things like if a light blew, we were there onstage to move a light. [...] It meant you could not so much improvise but that you were aware of the ingredients that went together to make this show. So we encouraged that from our actors. (Graham 2011a)

Graham here, speaking fifteen years after the period discussed, slips at the end into a 'them and us' reference to 'encourag[ing] that from our actors', but the rest of this rhetorical line suggests the development at first of a sense of ensemble – and it is crucial to remember that at the time 'our' (Frantic's) actors included Graham and Hoggett themselves. Frantic's rhetoric is here closely aligned with familiar ideologies of ensemble creation, such as Meyerhold's, summarised in Britton's *Encountering Ensemble* (2013): 'An actor must know the composition of the entire production, must understand it and feel it with his whole body' (Meyerhold quoted in Britton 2013: 69).

There are hints elsewhere too that, under Volcano's influence, the earliest incarnation of Frantic emphasised a conception of theatre-making as ensemble, group creation rather than a mass effort under the leadership or vision of the few. For instance, in Brennan's piece on the process behind *Flesh*, Hoggett, talking about this devising process, is described as a 'company member' rather than credited as one of the founders and artistic directors – part of the 'Frantic Assembly team' (Brennan 1996a). Nonetheless, the above, more recent slippage to talk of encouraging total engagement from 'our actors' may be seen as indicative of the way that Graham and Hoggett retained some priority within the company, and, certainly, is a sign that in the company's later phases they have seen themselves as distinct director/choreographers leading a team of actors and other practitioners.

The text and training in Volcano's physical theatre

Finally, in terms of the set of conditions which Graham and Hoggett began adapting in the creation of Frantic's theatre, Volcano have often been held up as a particularly textually-driven company, despite the above-cited 'rejection' of 'The Script' (with

capitals): they ‘from the outset differed from most other “physical” theatre practitioners by having a strong textual element in their ultra-political work’ (Adams 2002: 814). Though much emphasis has generally been placed by Volcano’s directors on both the lack of theatrical antecedents and the physical, sports-based nature of their work, they in fact inherited a great deal from Steven Berkoff (Davies mentions this explicitly in his ‘Physical Theatre and its Discontents’ 1997: 1) and their earliest shows focused on adaptations of Berkoff’s work, ‘an important example of a Lecoq-derived physical theatre which re-thinks the use of text in a creative way’ (Chamberlain & Yarrow 2002: 5). Smith and Davies have long been keen to work on the basis of many different forms of text – political writings, poetry, existing (often classical) plays – and to make extensive use of the verbal in their pieces.⁷⁰

Intriguingly, but somewhat opaquely, Davies refers to what he calls ‘the problem of the text, the author and the audience’ (1997: 2). This he links to the desire to create theatre that was ‘young, angry and urgent’, using ‘movement and words to break through what we considered to be irrelevant patterns of performance and inherited patterns of response’ (*ibid.*). While the neo-Marxist tone to the rhetoric is far from Graham and Hoggett’s more measured line, the sense is similar to Frantic’s annoyance at ‘flat pack presentations of Checkhov [*sic*]’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 9). In practical terms, Volcano introduced Graham and Hoggett to the possibility of decontextualising familiar stories and texts by using anachronistic but emotionally resonant film soundtracks, dynamic physical sequences, juxtaposition and cutting of textual matter, and other devices. However, as Chamberlain and Yarrow point out, ‘[b]eing freed from the tyranny of the text is not the same as abandoning the text altogether’ (2002: 5). From early experiments with writing processes which drew on the heritage of Volcano, Frantic would move on to develop a method of working with writers which enshrined a fundamental respect for the work of the playwright, and which has led to the creation of new playtexts which stand separate from the productions which engendered them.

It is important to remember, too, these practitioners’ shared lack (or it is perhaps fair to say eschewal) of formal drama training, and their more academic backgrounds.

⁷⁰ In fact, perceived tendencies to classify Volcano as ‘just’ physical theatre, with the company’s physical work foregrounded at the expense of ‘the vocal [...] both in sound and content’ (Smith 2005: 2) led Smith deliberately to seek collaborations with voice-oriented practitioners and singing coaches, leading to the creation of her 2003 piece *This Imaginary Woman*.

Like Graham and Hoggett, Davies and Smith had been students at Swansea University, Smith studying International Relations and Davies achieving a doctoral degree in Politics. This confluence of all the above influences goes some way towards explaining the style developed by Volcano Theatre in their early work, involving a political engagement, eclectic mingling of high and low culture, intellectually-driven text work and vigorous physicality, with a lack of interest in the playtext as published artefact and an emphasis – at least in theory – on the group impetus behind its creation. As I examine below, much of this approach to devising is easily discernible in Frantic's early productions, though much was also adapted and developed as Frantic Assembly matured as a company in its own right.

Frantic's early productions

Look Back in Anger and the early ensemble

The first three original pieces created by Frantic for extensive tours round the UK and beyond, grouped in retrospect as 'The Generation Trilogy', provide an insight into the immediate inheritance of the Volcano influence. They represent the basic framework for the company's working processes with writers and as a group in general, and the stylistics of the pieces provide a clear illustration of the first incarnation of the style they inherited and adapted from Volcano.

Before examining these three pieces in more detail, though, it is useful to consider the circumstances around their production. During their time performing in *Manifesto*, Graham and Hoggett met two collaborators who became crucial to their early works: Juan Carrascoso and Spencer Hazel. The former, as mentioned earlier, was a fellow performer in *Manifesto* and went on to direct and choreograph Frantic's very first professional production, a 'radical reworking' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 2) of *Look Back in Anger* in 1994. Carrascoso had established himself as a dancer with Spain's Teatro Atalaya dance company (founded 1983) (Atalaya-TNT 2013).

Hazel went on to prove an even more important member of the early team, having since been described by the company as '[p]ossibly the most influential of all our collaborators at this point' (Frantic Assembly 2009: 4). He was the stage manager for *Manifesto*, as well as having writing experience, with his play *Suede Head* having been broadcast on Radio 4. He had also been a freelance lighting designer and a production manager for BBC Wales, joining Volcano Theatre as their stage manager and sometime performer having been involved with the making of a documentary programme about the company (*The Stage* 1996). He then joined Frantic as a performer, lighting designer, and early form of (unofficial) in-house textual expert, being credited with adapting *Look Back in Anger* and writing (though what this means will require some scrutiny) the first two pieces in the Generation Trilogy.

With Graham and Hoggett having attended theatre workshops wherever possible during their university days, their company also set itself up, from its inception, with an emphasis on college and schools work. This included devised pieces such as A

Shock to the System directed by Graham and Hoggett in Corby in early 1994, and a school production of *Savages* in June 1994, led by Scott Graham and early Frantic performer Korina Biggs. While emulating the model of Volcano Theatre, they were also developing their own practice through such collaborations, as well as building their company profile and supplementing the subsidy provided by the Enterprise Allowance Scheme on which they enrolled.

One pattern apparent in this early period remains discernible up to the departure of Steven Hoggett. While duties were not divided between the two artistic directors in a formal or clear-cut way, some tendencies are identifiable. For instance, Hoggett tended from the outset to participate more in work on his own with other companies (either as performer or choreographer/director); Graham has been more involved in the development of Frantic's own brand – including hands-on work with outreach workshops and the development of education packs. In these early days Hoggett was more closely involved with Volcano than Graham, and he went on to perform with the Featherstonehaughs and more recently, as discussed, to work on movement for several productions directed by his childhood friend John Tiffany,⁷¹ leading to Hoggett's departure from the company he co-founded. Though it must be emphasised that Hoggett was regularly involved in the delivery of workshops and residential teaching for Frantic over the years, it is nonetheless noticeable that it was Graham who took on leadership of many early projects with schools such as those cited above. Graham has also written or co-written (with education specialists or assistant directors) all of Frantic Assembly's education packs to date.⁷²

However, the energies of Graham and Hoggett did always combine in the company's own shows, with both closely involved in the creation and performance of *Look Back in Anger*. The choice of this classic text as the company's first show was in some ways a deliberate move to attract audiences.⁷³ Yet as the company insists, 'the choice of play was pragmatic but not wholly cynical. We believed in *Look Back in*

⁷¹ These include critically acclaimed shows such as *Black Watch* (2006) for the National Theatre of Scotland and *Once* (2011) on Broadway and in the West End.

⁷² 2012's *Guide to Frantic Assembly* is described as being created 'By Frantic Assembly', but an early pre-publication draft from 2008 – titled *A Comprehensive Guide to Frantic Assembly* and sharing much material with the finished online *Guide* as well as some with the *Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* (Graham & Hoggett 2009) – is credited solely to Graham.

⁷³ '[C]hoosing a highly acclaimed text like *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne might deflect from the fact that we were a feisty little physical theatre company' (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4).

Anger' (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4). Hence, though the company's adaptation by their own admission 'took liberties with its text and structure' (*ibid.*) in a Volcano-inspired modernisation and physicalisation of the piece, the aim of their version was to reignite the 'fire' in the 'belly' of Osborne's work (*ibid.*).

Alongside Graham and Hoggett in the original cast behind the piece were Claire Evetts, who was cast from outside the company and did not appear in further productions or later iterations of this performance, and Korina Biggs, with whom Graham and Hoggett had performed at university and who was from the beginning (as indicated above) a significant member of the company. The show was created in Swansea, the adopted home of the newly-formed company, between 5 September and 20 October 1994, in a six-and-a-half-week rehearsal period. This was healthy but by no means over-generous given the extensive adaptation of and choreographic additions to the text. The adaptation premiered at the Taliesin Arts Centre, Swansea on 21 October 1994. When Hoggett took on other work, he was replaced temporarily (as Cliff) by Spencer Hazel, who moved between writing, performance and lighting duties for this and later shows. The role of Helena was also recast, with Emily Jenkins and Alison Forth taking on the role in later runs of the show. Graham stayed on playing Jimmy Porter throughout the cast changes, and Biggs remained as Alison.⁷⁴

Young, reviewing the play, writes that though the company subjected Osborne's original to 'mutilations', such as being played at a break-neck pace and 'a few perhaps ill-advised distancing moments reading from the script directions', the play nonetheless 'survive[d]': 'despite their irreverence, the engaging cast has located the emotional heart of the play' (Young 1995). As Hoggett describes the piece, it involved 'lots of athletic, aggressive actions, bodies pushing and bounding in unison and props being deployed forcefully but simply, like the four different ironing boards that the characters used to work out their feelings' (Healy 2012). The company hence launched itself with a production aware of British theatrical history, but ready to dismantle this tradition in seeking to represent a youth voice onstage. Reviews of the early performances tended to support the view that the company members were inexperienced and learning as they went, with the *Big Issue*'s coverage stating that

⁷⁴ This information is compiled from material in the Frantic archive and in the *Frantic Book* (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 9)

one false start gave the uncomfortable feeling of being at a University drama club end-of-term production. [...] we suddenly and inexplicably find ourselves at a rehearsal where the actors are still struggling with mundane lighting problems, their lines and stage positions. (*Big Issue* 1994)

While this reviewer may have mistaken some of the production's 'distancing moments' (Young 1995) for ill-preparedness, *Look Back in Anger* certainly became slicker as the company performed it repeatedly over a span of months, and by August of the following year, reviews such as Young's cited above and Villiers's in the *Glasgow Herald* were largely positive, Villiers describing it as 'magnificent theatre which elides innovation with convention – the ironing board as icon – to mesmeric effect' (Villiers 1995).

So the company had successfully launched themselves as a professional concern with a play which would define their style and demonstrate their 'unique selling point' (Frantic Assembly 2012: 3-4). In recasting the show, Graham and Hoggett also started to formulate a concept of what they looked for in a performer. Graham has recently expressed this as including an ability to sustain 'a truthful connection to the audience' (Ideastap 2012). The company's early original productions relied heavily on this concept of connecting 'truthfully' to the audience: as I will examine below, *Klub*, *Flesh* and *Zero* are all predicated on monologues which flirt between apparent autobiography and poetic flights.

The nascent idea of a form of ensemble was evidenced in the several recurring performers whom Graham and Hoggett saw as united by a shared vision and approach. For instance, they have since described Korina Biggs as, in their view, a collaborator who 'shared our enthusiasm for physical work' (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4) and she went on to become one of several regularly recurring performers alongside Graham and Hoggett in this early phase. Also appearing in several productions were Georgina Lamb (who later worked extensively with Frantic as an educational practitioner and performed in *Stockholm*) and Cait Davis, whose work with the company has similarly spanned a period of over ten years, thanks to her appearance in *pool (no water)* in 2006. Spencer Hazel, as mentioned, was also a constant and prominent figure in this pseudo ensemble, as a performer, writer and lighting designer for *Look Back in Anger* and *Klub*, and writer and lighting designer for *Flesh*. Tellingly, he also spoke to the press not merely as a writer or performer

collaborating with a separate company, but actually on behalf of Frantic Theatre Company, as a 1995 *Croydon Advertiser* interview demonstrates: ‘We are often preoccupied with curatorship rather than creatorship,’ (*Croydon Advertiser* 1995)⁷⁵ he says of Frantic’s nascent style.

So *Look Back in Anger*, *Klub*, *Flesh* and *Zero* were created at Graham, Hoggett and Middleton’s instigation, but by a team of semi-regular performers and under the direction, choreography and guidance of a variety of more established practitioners. These factors all contribute to the ensemble-driven organisation at first adopted by the company. That the earliest incarnation of Frantic Theatre Company was pitched as a broader team or ‘performance troupe’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 5), not merely as a vehicle for Graham, Hoggett and Middleton’s creativity, is evidenced not only by the way Hazel spoke on behalf of the company, but also in the educational workshops and other smaller projects provided from this phase onwards. *Terminus*, for instance, created in 1996, was the result of a four-day residency, and was credited as ‘directed/devised by Frantic Assembly’s Korina Biggs, Cait Davis, Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett’. Though this degree of ensemble credit is not to be found in any of the larger-scale projects, it is an indication of the extent to which Biggs and Davis were considered part of the company, and of a willingness at least to experiment with group forms of directorial and creative credit; it also suggests the group devising processes underlying the projects undertaken by Graham, Hoggett *et al.* at the time, as I examine below.

In later years, Hoggett and Graham have been conscious of this ensemble basis behind their earliest work – and of their subsequent shift away from this group devising emphasis, as we shall see – for example describing the impression the company probably gave off at the time as being ‘some kind of travelling troupe’; this impression was ‘not far from the truth’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4). Heddon and Milling point out the prevalence of the rhetoric of ensemble in much devised physical work of the 1970s and 80s, also arguing that truer ensemble company structures have historically, by necessity, been replaced by ‘a sense of ensemble’, as companies are rarely able to fund such large groups of regular performers (Heddon & Milling 2006: 178-9). We can almost witness this historical shift taking place

⁷⁵ This article is dated 9 September 1995 and preserved in the Frantic archive.

within the Frantic case study, though there are reasons other than financial ones for Graham and Hoggett's move from ensemble to more compartmentalised creation with, still, a 'shared understanding of physical and visual composition' (*ibid.*: 178). It is moreover arguable whether funding is ever truly the primary cause for the shifts in structure and practice (correctly) identified by Heddon and Milling. Although the ambitions and scope of both of the companies in this study have expanded massively over their lifetime, so has the funding which these particular companies have managed to access.⁷⁶ The move to a 'sense of ensemble' (as distinct from truer ensemble forms involving continued input from a stable group⁷⁷) seems to take place even as funding levels for the individual company increase, and in Frantic's case to be related instead to the scale of their ambition: to Hoggett and Graham's desire to create plays with various compositions of cast members while retaining a recognisable company aesthetic.

Frantic's earliest incarnation, however, developed the rhetoric and deployed the methods of the close-knit ensemble. Just like Fern Smith, whom Mark Evans cites as describing Volcano's 'early work' as 'very much in a way I suppose a gang' (quoted in Evans 2001: 136), Graham and Hoggett pitched Frantic Theatre as a band of outsiders⁷⁸, with their shows emphasising the company's youth, energy and shared membership of a particular generation of early twenty-something graduates raised on (largely imported, American) popular culture. Early marketing and indeed the content of the performances emphasised the youth of the company in a direct attempt to appeal to and 'inspire people like ourselves [...] people who wouldn't normally go to the theatre' (Graham speaking in the promotional video for 2001's *Underworld*⁷⁹). Hence their choice of an aggressive, physical adaptation of *Look Back in Anger* as the company's launch project. Not only did this employ techniques familiar from their work with Volcano, manipulating a classic text with explosive physicality, but crucially the use of such a pivotal and emblematic text meant that the fledgling

⁷⁶ At the time of writing, both companies receive regular Arts Council funding of over £200 000 per year. Information from the Arts Council website (Arts Council 2014).

⁷⁷ Franc Chamberlain summarises Michael Chekhov's attempts at a 'stable and long-lasting ensemble', which were largely thwarted but led nonetheless to a 'feeling of ensemble' (Chamberlain 2013: 90).

⁷⁸ Though the structures have changed, this rhetoric persists: 'We also liked the idea of being outsiders – of doing things on our own terms,' Graham says in a 2012 interview (Ideastap 2012).

⁷⁹ Available at <<http://www.franticassembly.co.uk/productions/underworld/experience/>> accessed 16 September 2013.

company could set out their distance from the (projected) ‘talcum powder headed Chekhov’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 1) which constituted for its founders the theatrical norm.⁸⁰

***Klub* style**

The subsequent large-scale production then, *Klub*, was intended very much as a companion piece for *Look Back in Anger*. It was created during a six-week rehearsal period during June and July 1995, meaning that the two plays could be performed in repertory at the Fringe and on a tour which started to gain the attention of the mainstream national theatre press. Augmenting the team as choreographer on this occasion was Stephen Kirkham, a founder member of Lea Anderson’s all-male dance troupe the Featherstonehaughs, with whom Hoggett had recently performed (in the spring 1995 tour of *The Featherstonehaughs Go Las Vegas*).

Like Volcano’s dance-inspired but text-based works⁸¹, *Klub* was a portmanteau piece, consisting of monologues (often delivered into a microphone), physical representations of everyday activities, more abstract use of contact improvisation-inspired leaps and catches, and occasional dialogue between the six performers. The theme of the hour-long performance involved various aspects of the experience of going clubbing, but this expanded out to include themes drawn from the lives of that generation of teenagers and twenty-somethings in the mid-1990s.

Crucially, it sees Frantic defining not only what they are in terms of their physical aesthetic, taking ‘the ingredients of mime, stand-up, dance and dialogue and whip[ping] them up into an exhilarating spectacle’ (Hajaj 1995) but – to a far greater extent – what they are *not*. The episodic nature of the performance, the apparent confessional truth of the ‘stand-up’, monologue-heavy format and the mediatisation generated by the use of a PA system to address the audience all mark the performers out as something other than actors. There are distinct overlaps with the devices employed by companies which might be described as ‘post-dramatic’, such as,

⁸⁰ A sign of the immediate impact made by Frantic Theatre’s first professional visit to the Fringe was that it brought them to the attention of Steven Berkoff, quoted as proclaiming on the BBC’s *Edinburgh Nights* programme: ‘Believe me it’s amazing... a fantastically physical piece of theatre’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 20). This is of course noteworthy also in terms of the Volcano link, as Smith and Davies, in forming that company, had drawn on Berkoff’s physical work as well as performing versions of his texts, as mentioned above (see page 72 above).

⁸¹ And indeed the work of Lea Anderson’s two dance troupes, the Featherstonehaughs and the Cholmondleys, though Anderson’s companies drew more on physicality than the verbal.

notably, Forced Entertainment. Indeed, these early productions share much common ground with those of the Sheffield-based company, including the manner of their creation, which I will examine shortly.

McPherson tried to pinpoint the particular rebellion of the Frantic generation as ‘one of passive withdrawal’ in which, ‘old and disillusioned before their time, the youth of Middle England have grown up and found they have nowhere to go but the dole queue’ (McPherson 1995). A sequence early in the performance sets up the notion of the ‘club’, youth space they (and the audience) occupy: ‘Outside this space is IMF, [...] BNP, [...] RSC’ (Frantic Assembly 1995). The generation depicted is politically *aware* (they are bombarded in the media by acronyms such as the IMF and BNP), but far from politically *engaged* (the realities behind these acronyms exist ‘outside this space’). And while outside the space the actors of the RSC ply their trade⁸², what is going on *in* this space is, it is implied, something different.

The script consists largely of such allusive and impressionistic direct address, often aiming, as above, for a rhyme or pun rather than coherence. Like many ‘purer’ dance theatre pieces (such as those of the Cholmondleys and the Featherstonehaughs), and a rich vein of ensemble-devised work, it is episodic rather than containing a continuous or cohesive narrative, and favours direct address of the audience over dialogue between characters. ‘There is no plot’, as McPherson noted (McPherson 1995). It is even (deliberately) questionable to what extent ‘characters’ are presented onstage: performers in all of the company’s earliest works (up until *Tiny Dynamite* in 2001) retain their own name, or a version thereof, in performance. This was later remarked upon by reviewers as an expected trope of the company: ‘Physical theatre company Frantic Assembly insists on actors using their own names and not having an interval’, states one review of *Underworld* (Ford 2001). Like many elements of the ‘violently energetic’ physicality of *Klub* (McPherson 1995), the use of performers’ own names is another link, through Volcano, to DV8.⁸³

Though the script for *Klub* (like that for the subsequent production, *Flesh*) was attributed to Hazel alone, these early pieces were developed through group work for

⁸² As does, according to the same section of text, Caryl Churchill – hardly the most conservative example of the old guard, but perhaps included in the list for her allusive chimes with Winston Churchill, who is also mentioned.

⁸³ In *Strange Fish* (1992), for instance, Nigel Charnock uses his own and other company members’ real names in the ‘party’ sequence.

which the writer himself set the tone. On the basis of stories contributed by all of the performers, Hazel ‘pilfered, reattributed and fantasised the creation of our performance personas’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4). This role, of eliciting and then fictionalising autobiographical material and other stories from the ensemble, is strikingly similar to that played by Etchells in some of Forced Entertainment’s creative processes. Hazel’s position within the company and contribution to the aesthetic in other ways evoke Etchells, and I will explore this further below.⁸⁴

The company followed up what had been a successful production of *Klub* with another similarly devised piece, *Flesh* (1996), which like the earlier one saw performances in Wales followed by a lengthy run in the Warehouse, Croydon, and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Again devised with a script credited to Hazel, the format for *Flesh* was similar to that of *Klub*. Here, four performers (Korina Biggs, Cait Davis, Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett) explored ‘all kinds of inter-related angles on body as commodity’ (Brennan 1996b). Again, text was spoken via microphones and interspersed with energetic movement routines. The stage design, like that for *Klub*, was minimal, though here the addition of a hospital trolley provided a mobile set element which was manipulated in various ways as a platform, obstacle or bed, with Graham at one point upending it and suspending himself (in some performances handcuffed) from its frame to deliver one of his monologues.

Though the choreography was again provided by a different practitioner, Christine Devaney of V-TOL Dance Company, the ensemble and the mode of the performance remained otherwise roughly the same. Another significant early collaborator, the Birmingham club DJ Andy Cleeton, returned to provide the soundtrack, as he would also for *Sell Out* (1998). It seems as though, while Hazel is credited with the ‘text’ for *Klub* and *Flesh*, the overall shape of the performance was developed by this wider group of collaborators. Graham is keen to emphasise their contribution, specifically in structuring the work: ‘Early discussions and projects with DJ Andy Cleeton taught us that good theatre is constructed exactly like a good DJ set, full of carefully planned highs and lows’ (Graham 2005: 10). Hoggett, too, more overtly stated that they used

⁸⁴ For example, I discuss his declared interest in ‘curatorship’ and continual re-writing work from within the group below from page 85.

the principles of a DJ set, taught to us when we made ‘Klub’, [...] not only in constructing the soundtracks but also in our arrangement of text and physical sequences as well as crafting openings and finales which are treated in isolation. (Hoggett quoted in Evans 2001: 141)

The structuring of Frantic’s pieces is often described by the company in terms borrowed from media other than the theatre. In 2005’s education pack for the revived (and revised) version of 1999’s *Hymns*, Graham writes:

A rule of thumb used in film is that a shot must change by 30% from the preceding shot if it is to be seen to be effective and keep the viewer interested. We feel this is a very good rule to observe in theatre too. (Graham 2005: 13)

So in Frantic’s rhetoric, the creation and structuring of the work is conducted on principles beyond the theatrical or dance-based, and deeply informed by pop culture. It has also been carried out in collaborative relationships, rather than dictated by a single writer or director: relationships from which Graham and Hoggett learnt as they went.

Autobiography and the creative actor

The abovementioned and roughly contemporaneous four-day residency *Terminus*, of which nothing survives in the Frantic archive bar the roughly photocopied programme, shows experimentation in the way in which Frantic projects were credited. Moreover, this programme’s description of *Terminus* as ‘[drawing] directly on the experiences of the performers along with work by Roger McGough, Peter Handke and Henry Normal’ neatly encapsulates the mixture of personal and literary sources for the material behind the Generation Trilogy as well as these shorter-form projects. In *Flesh*, the performers recounted apparently autobiographical tales of, for instance, performing sexual favours for drama teachers in return for letters of reference for drama school, or less literally ‘prostituting’ themselves to pantomime or soap opera in order to gain an Equity card or simply earn a wage. While Graham’s opening monologue proclaimed ‘what you see is what you get’, it is clear that the tales recounted are in some cases total fictions, and in others at least slightly fictionalised, exaggerated accounts. In the show, Hoggett’s character told the drama school story (in reality, Hoggett did not attend drama school). Likewise, Cait Davis found herself ‘bombarded with questions’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 26) during

post-show and bar discussions, given the conviction with which she recounted in *Klub* tales of her ‘babby’ having to stay with its grandmother while she went clubbing (or performed onstage) and in *Flesh* her former life earning money for sex. These were fictional inventions, but the use of performers’ own names, the apparent candour with which they delivered the monologues, and the form itself led to confusions, and even, according to Graham and Hoggett, a feeling among audience members that they had been ‘lied’ to (*ibid.*).

In Volcano’s rhetoric, Davies and Smith have often grappled with the notion of ‘authenticity’ in their form of physical theatre, reaching a ‘truth’ through reliance on physicalities which are personal to each performer, rather than on taught choreography and the invention of character.⁸⁵ It is clear that Frantic’s early performances, on the other hand (and *Flesh* more than most), drew energy from disrupting the notion of the authentic performer baring their soul before the audience. Yet when Davies writes of the ‘authentic body’ having ‘implications for the processes of theatre production themselves’ (Davies 2003: 2), it is easier to trace the inheritance. In this sense, the ‘onstage personae’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 26) in *Klub*, *Flesh* and *Zero* were derived from the performers rather than originating in a writer’s imagination. But they did so as the result of a group effort. So ‘it didn’t always follow that we kept our own stories – the final result usually saw our onstage personae being a mish-mash of pure fiction and the company’s collective individual experiences’ (*ibid.*).

This is liberating, creatively, but also perhaps indicative of the safety barrier beyond which the creators do not wish to penetrate. Davies writes of the ‘authentic’ rehearsal process as necessitating (self) destruction in order to achieve creation: ‘Within the rehearsal room, you had to blow something up – perhaps yourself – before you might find a fragment or shard of something from which you might begin to create’ (Davies 2003: 2). In more recent years, Volcano have gone on to explore ever more psychoanalytically-grounded ways of creating theatre on the basis of one’s own self, probing painful and personal memories in, for instance, Fern Smith’s

⁸⁵ Fern Smith recalls Nigel Charnock critiquing their movement work over the course of a lengthy tour: ‘No. The Movement’s getting too good ... is getting too dance-like’ (Smith quoted in Evans 2001: 140).

This Imaginary Woman.⁸⁶ Frantic Assembly, while examining some troubling psychological terrain⁸⁷, nonetheless demur from an overemphasis on self-destruction in the creative process. Govan, Nicholson and Normington map some ways devising companies explore the blurred ‘boundaries of art and life’ in their chapter on autobiographical performance (2007: 59-72). They include these early Frantic works alongside the likes of Forced Entertainment, Third Angel and Nigel Charnock, who, as mentioned above, was an early and profound influence on Graham and Hoggett as well as on Smith and Davies. Govan, Nicholson and Normington claim that in Frantic’s case ‘the autobiographical element of the work is used as a device to encourage engagement as the audience’s awareness of physical and emotional vulnerability in the performance is heightened’ (*ibid.*: 61).⁸⁸

Though Frantic at this phase in their career were playing with direct address and using their own names, self-revelation of the order claimed by Volcano was not the aim. The presence of Spencer Hazel as a writer, through whom the group’s semi-confessional material was channelled, provided another remove for the performers. Hazel’s above-mentioned declaration of an interest in ‘curatorship rather than creatorship’ (*Croydon Advertiser* 1995) introduces an interesting term. Beyond its application, as Hazel no doubt intends, to the ‘curatorship’ of content – verbal, physical, conceptual, sonic – for *Look Back in Anger*, *Klub* and *Flesh*, Graham and Hoggett clearly curated styles through deliberate choices of collaborators such as Kirkham, Carrascoso and Hazel himself.

Hazel was clearly more than the impassive scribe of the process, and even in the *Frantic Book*, he is described as starting to use the company’s own names in ‘the scripts that he was handing in at the beginning of rehearsals’ for *Klub* (Graham &

⁸⁶ See Smith (2005).

⁸⁷ For instance in the two productions I examine in my detailed case studies: 2006’s *pool (no water)* and 2007’s *Stockholm*. Graham and Hoggett took part in a panel discussion around the psychological territory explored in *Stockholm*, with psychoanalysts Mary Morgan and Philip Stokoe (Graham *et al.* 2008a). In discussing the creation of *pool (no water)*, Graham told me that ‘[w]hat we presenting on stage was nowhere near as dark as the actors got’ in rehearsals and development sessions (Graham 2008).

⁸⁸ Indeed, many companies, particularly those associated with movements of the avant-garde in the 1980s and 90s, cite instances of audience confusion such as those referred to with pride in the *Frantic Book*. An article by Lyn Gardner in the early 1990s quotes former Forced Entertainment member Huw Chadbourn on the ‘interesting confusions’ generated by ‘this blurring of fiction and reality’; he tells an anecdote very similar to Frantic’s, of audience members – even friends – interrogating performer Tamzin Griffin after her apparently autobiographical confessions in *Semblance*’s *Obituary* (Gardner 1993).

Hoggett 2009: 24). The sense that this was a continuous process, however, suggests not the production of a completed script as artefact for rehearsal (and, optionally, development), but the delivery of multiple texts both on the basis of and as an impetus for discussion and improvisation.

The encouragement of several, or indeed all, members of the creative team to be immersed in the piece as well as stepping back to gain an understanding of the whole is a clearly important element in Frantic's rhetoric, which gets shaded differently as time goes by. At this stage in their development, the members of the performing ensemble all contribute material (both physical and textual, as I will discuss below), while directors or choreographers are selected for their ability to step into the group rather than remaining outside looking in, as Hoggett explained in 1999: 'The choreographer as director always seems to work from within the piece rather than outside it but with the option of doing so if need be' (Hoggett quoted in Evans 2001: 136).

Hence it was important to work with choreographers – and by inference, dancer/performers – rather than with directors, both in order to achieve the desired results in the rehearsal process, and to enable Graham and Hoggett to develop their own skills as creative performers with a directorial eye. It seems clear that this was always the intention for the company; recently, Graham has advised would-be companies to

Be honest with yourself: do you want to form a company? Will that best serve your thought and ideas, or do you actually just want to perform? If you're setting up a company to facilitate yourself as a performer then you're in for a long, hard slog. (Ideastap 2012)

He also reiterates the 'lack of training' line, with a spin which points towards the (directorial/choreographic) creative ambition behind these early phases of the company:

myself, Steven and Vicky weren't performers. We weren't trained in dance or theatre – performing was just a necessity to make work, because we couldn't afford to pay other actors. (*ibid.*)

Through this combination of artistic ambitions and financial concerns (though Graham does not deny the pleasure he took in being onstage), the pair very quickly

became, to return to Murray and Keefe's defining characteristics of 'physical theatres', a model of the 'dancer-performer as author-creator' (Murray & Keefe 2007: 76). Furthermore, they looked for this investment and ability in their collaborators – the other cast members, the director/choreographers and the writer, Hazel – all of whom were still themselves active performers. Even the music was provided by a DJ rather than a composer, and hence by somebody actively engaged in a form of performance⁸⁹.

So the company's earliest shows were created in ways that encouraged group contributions to their text and imagery. In interview recently, Graham described the processes behind creating these specific shows as those of writing, using the terminology of 'writing as a group' – where 'writing' can, however, refer to physical as well as verbal processes: similar techniques were at play, in Graham's opinion,

whether as a group you were writing a physical scene or whether as a group you were creating some kind of text, or whether he [writer Spencer Hazel] was doing that all on his own, so we've always had a very malleable sense of writing. (Graham 2011a)

This compact statement is startling in its implications, and rare within the company's discussions of their work. Unpacking it suggests two useful corollaries. Firstly, the continuity of outlook over a nearly twenty-year span which it implies ('we've always had a very malleable sense of writing') suggests that the patterns formed at this very early stage have persisted and indeed been fundamental to Graham and Hoggett's later approach to creating productions together. Secondly, and even more crucially, this notion of 'writing' as a process which is malleable, and incorporates the physical, is one which, though subsumed in their rhetoric, is evocative and resonates throughout Frantic's work (and beyond, to the wider world of theatre which aligns itself with devising). Neither Graham nor Hoggett talks habitually about 'writing' the 'physical', yet this description of the mode of working with Spencer Hazel and the rest of the early collaborators ('as a group') seems apt.

⁸⁹ Moreover, DJs perform in front of one of the most responsive sorts of audience: if the crowd fails to be entertained by the DJ's set, their displeasure is usually evident from the empty dance floor.

Text, language and character in *Klub, Flesh and Zero*

So Graham and Hoggett absorbed physical approaches to theatre-making through collaboration with and in emulation of practitioners associated with Volcano, DV8 and V-TOL. Yet even from the company's earliest days, its artistic directors engaged in considerations of how this physical work was interwoven with textual elements. Some of their rhetoric may have been inherited, as was so much else, from Volcano: Paul Davies writes, in 'Physical Theatre and its Discontents', of 'the problem of the text, the author and the audience' (Davies 1997: 2). These are not problems he claims his company could solve satisfactorily, though importantly, their attempts 'to break through what we considered to be irrelevant patterns of performance and inherited patterns of response' made use of not just physicality, but 'movement *and* words' (*ibid.*; my emphasis).

Graham and Hoggett's concern that their own company would be seen as 'purely' physical – a dance-based company with 'nothing to say'⁹⁰ – can be read in very early interviews and other publicity.

The physical elements have to be anchored in the text. They have to express ideas that will complement what's being said in Spencer [Hazel]'s remarkable poetry, or through our characters. (Hoggett quoted in Brennan 1996a)

This quotation offers various angles by which I will begin to analyse Frantic's framing of their approach to text, language and character in these early productions. While asserting the linking of physicality and text, Hoggett brings us, on the face of it, back to a text/physicality dichotomy – the text as the basis of the physical – which apparently suggests the exact opposite of a group working together on physicality and text as interchangeable. Later in Frantic's history, Graham would claim that '[w]e have said many times that the text comes first' (Graham 2007: 7) – a claim he later suggested was 'overstated' (Graham 2008) for exactly the rhetorical purposes inferred above: that Frantic felt they were in danger of being seen as purely physical.

Hoggett's claim is in part driven by this desire to assert that the company is not merely presenting physical movement alongside the text as the substance of the

⁹⁰ This is one of the anxieties mentioned overtly in the troubled *Zero*, in which they fret at one point, 'I don't know if we've got anything to say' (Frantic Assembly 1998).

performance. The sequences were, however, often separate, both in performance and in development. Hoggett describes the research process for *Flesh* as something undertaken by himself, Graham and Hazel,⁹¹ with Christine Devaney only engaged as choreographer later in the development of the production: Brennan's article describes Christine Devaney 'arriv[ing] to fill in the bits of script that read "physical scene"' (Brennan 1996a).⁹²

Despite these apparent separations of different parts of the process, Graham and Hoggett's close work with a writer who was also one of the piece's performers (and who is also steeped in the traditions of the dance theatres which informed Frantic's early work) brings with it an inevitable blurring of distinctions between 'research', 'writing', 'choreography' and 'rehearsal'. Furthermore, Hoggett's statement above also reveals a further telling dichotomy: not that of the text/the physical, but that between the different types of *textual material* present in the first works created by Frantic. Hoggett's phrasing, unconsciously perhaps, sets up a distinction between the often abstract lyrical excursions of Hazel's 'poetry' and the more apparently introspective, less obviously 'written' monologues of 'our characters'.

The stylised language which Hoggett attributes to Hazel is picked up on in several reviews of these earliest pieces: the *Croydon Advertiser* (1995) suggests that 'the text aspires at times to a structured poetry'; McPherson (1995) called it 'snatches of dark street poetry'. It is most evident in the lengthy, alliterative, punning lists and soliloquies which in no way attempt to imitate naturalistic speech: the overture to *Klub*, which welcomes us to 'this bass, this space, this pace'; Scott's 'Generation X' monologue in the same production, which puns on words with the prefix 'ex-' and ends by suggesting that 'now only questions remain – a Generation Why after Generation X. We are an ex-generation'; or Cait Davis in *Flesh* describing a sex act in extended, tenuous metaphor: 'He spends his King's shilling and pence in my Harrods food hall'. The movement between this and more apparently 'honest', 'autobiographical' material is one of the aspects of Frantic's early output which most

⁹¹ 'We started doing research – interviewing rent boys, pimps. Spencer did the noble thing – went to Manchester and sat through the lap-dancing. And that's how we came to devise *Flesh*, really' (Brennan 1996a).

⁹² Issues of how different writers identify the spaces to be 'filled' with 'physical scenes' become important as the company begins to work with a variety of collaborators, as I examine below.

closely resembles the ongoing styles and concerns of Forced Entertainment.⁹³ Judah identified this in Frantic's work as the 'illusion of absolute honesty' (1998).

The second type of textual material – the less obviously 'written' and less like 'poetry' – is not as frequently remarked upon in contemporary reviews, but its effects are felt in audiences' confusion between performers and personas (or, in Hoggett's description, 'characters'). Graham much later described the use of direct address in performing speeches which were apparently autobiographical in nature as a 'non theatrical [*sic*] directness': 'This was a deliberately blurred line as we were presenting characters but through our own names and mannerisms [...]' (Graham 2006b: 15). All this constituted what Graham describes, in terms deeply reminiscent of Tim Etchells, as '[a]n attempt to remind the audience they were very much part of an event and were potentially being addressed by personalities rather than characters' (*ibid.*).⁹⁴ Graham's later comments set up a division between these 'non theatrical' early productions and later moves towards stronger narrative, driven by characters in dialogue.

In all three early productions there are also moments which demonstrate an interest in the power of the spoken word to conjure (sometimes impossible) imagery in the minds of audience members, which is a perhaps slightly unexpected strand in the aggressively 'physical' theatre company. Yet in the humorously overwritten sexual metaphors cited above, and more so in *Zero*'s imaginings of where each performer would be as they rung in the New Year of the new millennium ('sitting on a cloud [...] eating cake with the angels'), the company explores the dropping of any physical representation of characters or situation in order to 'let all the story-making stuff go on in the minds of the viewer', as Tim Etchells has described it (quoted in Kalb 2008b). This is certainly an ongoing strand in many of Forced Entertainment's works, and hence another similarity between these two case companies.

⁹³ The flow between and commingling of the two modes is characteristic of the work of Etchells and company, with many of Forced Entertainment's longer-form pieces blurring the lines between character and performer while maintaining elements of the (self-consciously) 'written', of self-declared 'writtness'. See, for instance, 1995's *Nights in this City*, in which a tour guide shifts between fantastical descriptions of an imagined city and apparent mental breakdown, and 1994's *Speak Bitterness*, which I examine in detail later.

⁹⁴ Etchells talks of 'personas' which are credited with (or 'blamed' for) the creation and performance of the show (Heathfield *et al.* 2004), and of his interest in situations in which performers are 'not representing something but going through something' (Etchells 1999a: 49).

Though there are numerous such overlaps and resemblances with both Forced Entertainment and Volcano at this early stage of Frantic's development, a gap quickly begins to open up between them in terms of the psychological and aesthetic aims of each company. The early Frantic style ('direct address, here and now, warts and all', Frantic Assembly 2012: 4) clearly drew on Hoggett and Graham's experiences with Volcano, and on a performance mode other than that of narrative and dialogue. Huttera, writing of *Manifesto*, referred to that performance's cast as made up of 'more action performers than actors in the conventional sense' (Huttera 1994), a description apt still of *Klub*, *Flesh* and *Zero*. In retaining their own names in performance, this impression of 'non-actors' (or actors in some non-'conventional' sense, at least) is heightened. But Graham and Hoggett have observed that the choice to do this was more to do with difficulties in settling on alternative names for the 'characters' they were portraying. This claim is part of their characteristic mitigation of their professional status as noted above,⁹⁵ but the difficulties they identify were perhaps inevitable, given that the pieces were conceived '[w]ithout the particulars of period or setting' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 24), hence making the choice of names arbitrary. In keeping with the 'anti-theatrical' rhetoric, though, the use (initiated by Hazel) of the performers' own names is described as creating a 'shocking sense of "nowness"', and said to 'knock you [i.e. the performer] out of the most fuggy actorly daze' (*ibid.*).

However, this (reaching its apotheosis in *Zero*) is as far as Graham and Hoggett go with the rhetoric of non-acting: nowhere do they claim that these approaches had profound psychological effects on themselves, other than the effect of avoiding trite, 'theatrical' acting. Though the productions have continued to draw upon the artistic directors' autobiographies and those of their acquaintances for their material, Graham and Hoggett have never been overtly interested in breaking down (or 'blowing up') the performer in the quest for that 'shard' of creativity (Davies 2003: 2), as in Volcano's above-discussed rhetorics.

It is perhaps significant that the company's interest in this 'authentic' aspect of their performance began to wane yet further shortly after the departure of Spencer Hazel following their collaboration on *Flesh*. It is, of course, impossible to ascertain

⁹⁵ See page 62.

exactly what Hazel, as the first writer with whom Graham and Hoggett collaborated, brought to the process without having witnessed that process as it occurred. No video footage was taken or is available from these early rehearsals, although some of the descriptions of those involved are, as seen, somewhat revelatory of his contribution. Furthermore, there is the case of *Zero*, which was ‘devised by the company’ after Hazel’s somewhat acrimonious split with Frantic. Little is openly acknowledged about the writer’s exit from the company, though the online *Guide to Frantic Assembly* (2012) indicates that the departure was unexpected: *Zero* was ‘written and devised by the company [...]’. This process was a necessity, as we were without a writer in the middle of rehearsals’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4).

Writing without a writer: *Zero*

In terms of staging and structure this production has much in common with the earlier shows. Each play in the trilogy has a bare set with one major element: in *Klub* there are rostra to vault; *Flesh* has a hospital bed on wheels; *Zero*’s central element is a Wendy house, from which the entire cast improbably bursts at the opening of the show. *Zero*, like its forerunners, is structured in largely self-contained scenes which could be re-ordered and organised in a variety of ways without changing any dramatic elements: emotional and technical build is more crucial to the structuring of the piece than narrative. The order was far from random, though – Graham and Hoggett have referred to the analogy and example of the DJ’s set in building climaxes and moments of recovery (for the audience as much as for the performers). David Mamet, writing about screenplays but with reference to the theatre and other media, makes the distinction between the dramatic and the non-dramatic:

The circus, the vaudeville, and, indeed, performance art please through the presentation of individually complete, intellectually empty effects (tricks, turns), such that the progress, one to the next, mimics the emotional journey undergone by the listener involved in the progression of an actual drama. The work of arranging the circus, vaudeville, or burlesque turns in the best possible order is called ‘routining,’ a most revealing term meaning ‘optimally ordering the arbitrary.’ (Mamet 2008: 130)

Though this is a disparaging view of the work of the circus ringmaster, the description ‘optimally ordering the arbitrary’ rings true of the processes of

structuring at work in Frantic's early productions.⁹⁶ 'Non-dramatic' may in fact be a useful gloss (if stripped of the sometimes demeaning connotations with which Mamet – the dramatist – occasionally imbues it) for this aspect of what Graham and Hoggett refer to as non-theatricality.

This approach does not change immediately upon Hazel's departure. Notes and script fragments for *Zero* which remain in the Frantic archive reveal scene headings of the kind later described by the company as 'merely functional [...] They were our code or shorthand' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 58), and which serve as mnemonics when structuring the performance. These headings – as opposed to scene numbers or act divisions – have been a characteristic of the company's process since these early moments, and in later years have become one of the ways in which Graham and Hoggett seek to create a 'shared language' with their collaborators.

Zero's theme of pre-millennial anxiety, and the difficulties encountered with Hazel's sudden departure, culminated in a less satisfactory whole than the preceding productions – a *What's On* review called it the trilogy's 'weakest link' (McPherson 1998). It is certainly noticeable that the structure is weaker, with diffuse physical and textual sketches exploring a number of 'anxieties', but with a less coherent throughline than the previous pieces.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the most significant and repeated anxiety explored by the production was that of the performer uncertain of the point they are making. At one point, less than halfway through the show, Graham is revealed within the Wendy house reading a sheaf of papers – the script – by torchlight. 'That's about all there is', he says. Shortly thereafter he tells us: 'Whenever I get a new script, I like to throw it up in the air and see how it lands' (Frantic Assembly 1998). While not necessarily indicative of the company's dramaturgical approach, these moments certainly point to anxieties over generating and structuring material, and in its self-reflexive nature the piece as a whole shows concerns that the company would 'run out of things to say'. Such sequences are even more inward-looking than the subtler acknowledgements of the dramatic contract in *Klub* and *Flesh*. The company read out lists of 'resolutions from the rehearsal process [...] for a scene which never happened' under bare working lights. Graham uses a mirror to reflect a spotlight around the audience, recalling the

⁹⁶ And, indeed, much of Forced Entertainment's output.

⁹⁷ Though *Klub* and *Flesh* also faced some criticisms of their 'wandering thread' (Kingston 1996).

intimidating stares at the beginning of *Flesh*; however, where in that production this deliberately set up an environment of confrontation through the gaze, here Graham simply remarks jovially on the audience members whose eyes he catches – ‘Hello... you look almost exactly like her!’ At one point Hoggett confides in us ‘there are times in this show when I don’t have much to do’, and in another sequence, an extravagantly ‘emotional’ piece of music is played as the cast dolefully strew flowers around the stage and auditorium, only to be interrupted by Graham telling them furiously that they’ve launched the scene prematurely without him, and asking his fellow performers, ‘Did you enjoy it? Good, because you’re going to do it again.’⁹⁸

As has been discussed, Graham and Hoggett are open about the fictionalised use they and the rest of the performers made of their histories in generating material for *Klub*, *Flesh* and *Zero*. In *Zero*, the group reached some form of crisis point, and the production delved into ever more self-referential territory. Early in the performance, Georgina Lamb delivers a monologue directly to the audience (this time without amplification through a microphone, but otherwise similar to those in *Klub* and *Flesh*, if apparently more conversational). In it she speaks of how

I sometimes get these moments when everything seems a bit different. Scott becomes Steve and Steve becomes Scott... We blend, you know. Children of Frantic. (Frantic Assembly 1998)

Furthermore, without wishing to succumb to the fallacy which I have been attempting to debunk elsewhere, namely the false assumption that these monologues are presenting a ‘truthful’ account rather than the mere impression of autobiography, there is something revelatory about the voiceover recording incorporated into *Zero* in which Graham and Hoggett are heard discussing their burgeoning friendship and working relationship: ‘Our senses of humour merged’, says Graham; ‘I wasn’t just me, I was half of a team’, adds Hoggett. This is reminiscent of several later comments made by interviewers or by writers invited to work with the pair: Ravenhill, for instance, describes how ‘they never seem to disagree; they often finish each other’s sentences’, (Ravenhill 2006a) and Jane Edwardes echoes this: ‘The pair often finish each other’s sentences and hardly ever fight’ (Edwardes 2006). Their choice, even at this early stage of the company, to include references such as the

⁹⁸ Where Forced Entertainment might have followed through and repeated the sequence, Frantic, ever favouring forward momentum over conceptual constraints, simply move on to another scene.

above in the text of the play suggests that in the absence of the writer (and perhaps faced with a shorter deadline and a more turbulent process), the characters were less ‘written’ than ever, and the structure consequently more meandering.

In these ways, the performance text itself threw a new focus on the processes of its own creation. The material surrounding the performance – its programme and the later documentation of the show in company materials⁹⁹ – also emphasises its development in group creative processes. And alongside this, the production also sees the overt introduction of a new variation in the rhetoric in Frantic’s self-told history: that of the collective genesis from within the company of the driving ideas *behind* the show. The idea behind *Zero*, it is claimed, arose from conversations the group had about the impending millennium ‘as we toured *Klub* around Ecuador’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 8). In attempting to characterise a ‘Frantic artistic process’, Scott Graham claims that

one of the most important and defining features of our artistic process is that the initial ideas come from us. Even if we work with a writer, that writer is often engaged long after the genesis of the idea and is invited to embrace and expand that idea. (*ibid.*)

Finally, producing *Zero* and reviving *Klub* and *Flesh* alongside it as a ‘trilogy’ provided a canny and satisfying way for the company’s artistic directors to seal off this earliest phase of the Frantic story, and to begin a new project with a relatively clean slate, having built up experience and audiences throughout the UK and abroad. In collaborating on 1998’s *Sell Out* with Michael Wynne, who was already establishing himself as a respected (albeit still up-and-coming) playwright, Frantic openly sought to ‘take the step towards a stronger narrative structure’ (Graham 2005: 4). In interview, Graham recently described the move as one in which the company ‘started working with proper writers’ (Graham 2011a). He hesitates when he uses the term, and suggests all due deference to Hazel, but the implication is that Frantic aspired to work with career writers who cared more for the craft of play *wrighting* than for ‘curatorship’ of the kind exercised by Volcano and the like. In fact, Graham’s choice of phrase reveals more about Hazel’s *desired* role in the process than a status enforced upon him or the quality of his contribution. Interested more in

⁹⁹ See Frantic Assembly 2012: 4.

collaborative and experimental practices, he did not aspire to status as a ‘proper’ writer, and this was not the space marked out for him in the creative process.¹⁰⁰

The sealing-off of the earliest productions enabled Frantic to envisage the subsequent collaborations as something different: again, the company defined themselves in opposition to what went before, with the ‘Next!’ mentality to which reference has already been made (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 3). So as soon as *Zero* had wrapped up the first phase of the company’s history, representing a rare attempt to devise without input from a named writer,¹⁰¹ Graham and Hoggett moved towards work with ‘proper’ writers – but also towards a more happy relationship with narrative forms. Though the influence and impact of Volcano Theatre on their work is clear, the rejection of the literary tradition (or ‘distrust of words’, Heddon & Milling 2006: 6) which is sometimes claimed by companies or asserted by critics as an integral factor in devising processes has never been a prominent feature of the company’s rhetoric.

¹⁰⁰ Hazel went on to create several productions with his new company 20:21 Performance, working with Cait Davis on at least one occasion (UK Theatre Web 2013).

¹⁰¹ Not until 2008’s production of *Othello* and the 2011 co-production with National Theatre Wales, *Little Dogs*, would major Frantic productions again be created without a writer’s input, though 2002’s *Heavenly* was written by Graham, Hoggett and Liam Steel after the intended collaboration with Gary Owen (who is credited with the original story) fell through. Both of the later shows made at least some use of the original texts (Shakespeare’s and Dylan Thomas’s) as support for the devising process, whereas *Klub*, *Flesh* and *Zero* had no overt textual antecedents, citing only ‘inspirations’ including films, music, and, occasionally, written works such as Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel *Generation X* for *Klub*.

Towards the ‘proper’ play

The Generation Trilogy brought more press attention and cemented the company’s growing relationship with Battersea Arts Centre and other London-based institutions. Graham and Hoggett describe meeting recently-instated BAC artistic director Tom Morris during their performances at the Croydon Warehouse (Frantic Assembly 2012: 9); Morris subsequently booked *Klub* in at BAC during its second tour, in late 1996, with the whole Trilogy in 1998 given a two-week run in the main space. *Sell Out* in 1999 got them into the West End, at the New Ambassadors Theatre, and they then took *Hymns* into the 500-seat Lyric Hammersmith, another theatre with which the company has developed a long-standing relationship.

As explored above, Frantic had worked to create, through a combination of disposition, influence, and canny marketing, a recognisable style: that of ‘warts and all’ confessional – or pseudo-confessional – direct address (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4) coupled with Volcano- and DV8-inspired athleticism, loud contemporary soundtracks, and a lack of concern for conventional narrative forms. Morris, in 1999, spoke of his initial impression that the company ‘seemed to have invented a form of performance that was utterly uncomplicated and immediately engaging’ (quoted in Cavendish 1999). There was also a concomitant unconventional approach to character, which, as in the work of DV8 and Volcano, did not drive narrative but functioned as flexible frameworks for text which mostly took the form of monologues. Spencer Hazel was a fundamental member of the early company, credited in later years as ‘the driving force behind the new performance style’, and though ‘[a]s a writer he was fascinatingly anti-script,’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4) the figure of the writer appears as crucial to these early processes as the other collaborators from whom Graham and Hoggett were learning skills of stagecraft, choreography and direction.

It is through these collaborations and connections that Frantic’s artistic directors forged their methods. The development closely resembles that ascribed to devising companies by Heddon and Milling, for them exemplified by Australia’s Legs on the Wall (founded 1984), in whose practice ‘performers controlled the early process, bringing in directors and writers when necessary’ (Heddon & Milling 2006: 166).

Graham and Hoggett from the outset had an ‘interest in devising our own work’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 3) but, tellingly, they encouraged the investment, in performance terms, of each performer in the entirety of the finished show, even down to a technical awareness which meant that the ideal for Graham was for performers to be able to deal with lights blowing and other unexpected alterations from performance to performance: ‘[...] you were aware of the ingredients that went together to make this show’ (Graham 2011a). While the first phase of the company saw Graham and Hoggett working with a regular writing collaborator who might indeed be seen as a fellow founding member of the ensemble, the subsequent post-Hazel period saw the company developing links with a series of young, up-and-coming writers, and gaining insight through these collaborations into what they sought in a playwright, and what they themselves had to offer.

I do not intend to analyse each play in depth, but wish to pick up certain key developments for the company, either in their output itself or in the process which created and rhetoric which surrounds the work. The key productions explored here are *Sell Out* (which immediately followed the tour of the united Generation Trilogy), and *Hymns*, though I will indicate other key developments between 1999 and 2005. It would be too schematic to suggest that each production will neatly illustrate a different aspect of the company’s development, of course, but each does provide certain pointers both forward and back in this regard. Institutional links also flourished, as indicated above; as the company has said, ‘one thing we have always been able to do is talk a good game’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4).

Sell Out

Sell Out, on which Graham and Hoggett collaborated with Michael Wynne, can be seen in many ways as a half-way house production between the work with Spencer Hazel and the company’s later shows. The move towards a ‘stronger narrative structure’ claimed by Graham (2005: 4) is indeed a discernible pattern in this and subsequent productions, though as contemporary reviews identified, *Sell Out* only represented a partial step in this direction: ‘The story is schematic and the characters often seem matchstick-thin, but this hardly matters, since the piece achieves most of its impact through some remarkable, high-powered choreography’ (Gross 1999). The play again set out to deal with contemporary issues on a social rather than global scale – in this case exploring a close-knit group of friends in their early twenties

whose closeness is threatened by rumour, argument and the breakup of one of the relationships involved.

Hinting towards the flimsiness of the narrative, Wynne's '1st draft/work in progress' dated 26 July 1998 is whimsically subtitled 'Four characters in search of an idea: Kate, Ansti, Stephen, Scot' (Wynne 1998a). These characters were portrayed by Cait Davis, Anstey Thomas, Steven Hoggett and Scott Graham, so on stage the Frantic tradition by which performers kept their own names was maintained. But Wynne slyly adopted alternative spellings in the scripts he delivered to the cast, pointing to an attempted – at least partial – move away from autobiography. Chris O'Connell's script for 1999's *Hymns* also drew its characters' names from the performers in the original production; however, this too was complicated by the recasting which took place for the show's revival in 2005, which saw Karl Sullivan return to play the role of Karl but all other performers recast, with Steven Hoggett switching to play the role originated by (and named after) Scott Graham, and the other roles filled by new performers who, obviously, did not share the names of the characters.

The naming of *Sell Out*'s characters after its actors suggests the play's roots in devising and, more precisely, the fact that the cast was assembled before a concrete script was created; as Wynne's note suggests, the characters arrived before the 'idea'. The method for creating these characters again drew on the autobiographical, with Wynne creating questionnaires for the four performers to fill in, based on their personal experience. Graham and Hoggett recall the 'depth of spite and general nastiness' which was revealed in these materials (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 220). 'Inter-company tension' at the end of the long process of touring (specifically during the *Zero* tour) is also cited as a generative spark for the piece, and doubtless fed into the spur-of-the-moment decision, faced with a blank Arts Council funding application and an impending deadline, to give the overview of the (at that point unwritten) play as 'an argument between friends gets out of hand' (*ibid.*). Wynne's use of the questionnaires was a canny fit with the company's pre-existent devising methods, and Graham and Hoggett explain their continued use of the technique in the workshop and residency productions the company has created as part of its educational work since. The questionnaire has hence become part of a replicable, semi-official 'Frantic method' as rolled out in workshops, and Graham also refers to

the occasional use of the technique in their own later professional productions, such as *pool (no water)* (Graham 2006b: 10).

Wynne hence sought to incorporate personal material from the cast (as Hazel had in the company's preceding productions) while working to a brief involving a stronger narrative basis – rather than a purely thematic one – for the production. His style also represented a step away from the free-associating poetry of Spencer Hazel's influence. Wynne had begun to establish a reputation as a chronicler of common folk with *The Knocky* (1995),¹⁰² and the characters in *Sell Out*, though often expressing themselves through lengthy, pseudo-confessional monologue, were not given fantastical, lyrical and associative flights as Hazel's texts and that of *Zero* had tended to do; reviews at the time referred to the text as 'minimal' (Spencer 1999) and 'spare' (Clapp 1999).

There was continuity, however. For a start, the play retained the lack of interval and 60- to 90-minute running time which has remained the framework for almost all of Frantic's productions to date. Cavendish (1998), reviewing the production on its initial run, cites *Sell Out*'s programme note on the way that its scenes are named and arranged, like a 'playlist' and much like the work-in-progress scene titles observed for *Zero* and the earlier productions. He concludes that the play spelled 'death to stuffy 3-acters' (Cavendish 1998). A comparison between several early iterations of the script preserved in the Frantic archive and the play as performed also suggests the retention to some degree of the episodic formula of earlier shows, as some textual scenes were reshuffled, or replaced in some cases by purely physical sequences, as I examine below. As before, physical and textual sequences were developed based around a central idea (here a relatively vaguely defined one, as Wynne's note and the Arts Council application indicate), and through discussions (and in this case questionnaires) involving the cast and other creative members of what I've been terming the 'ensemble'. Frantic were evolving methods whereby they ran development work and exercises based on themes, scenes and (latterly) plot events which the creative team felt may be important to the narrative or thematic flow of the piece at some stage, though this flow – in the early work – was rarely

¹⁰² For example, as De Jong put it in his review of *The Knocky*, 'Wynne's main business is to celebrate life on the Birkenhead estate, and its characters jauntily kicking against the pricks' (De Jong 1995: 50).

clear at the outset of the devising process. An attempt is then made to arrange these scenes, in collaboration with the writer, into a sequence which will prove optimal in terms of narrative or thematic development.

So no massive methodological or stylistic changes are immediately apparent in the collaboration with Wynne, despite the extent to which Graham and Hoggett have sought at various junctures to present this production as a new direction for their company. The monologue form was retained for large tracts of the production, as mentioned. As Graham recalls,

Even when we played characters, we still had the direct address. [...] [I]t was our defining feature really, so that first show that lost direct address [i.e. *Sell Out*] actually was half and half. (Graham 2011a)

The play hence still included numerous and frequent monologues, with group physical scenes often flowing, in performance, into sequences of direct address. The visual aesthetic would also have been familiar to the growing audiences who had seen previous Frantic work. It was still designed for the purposes of touring small to mid-scale venues, as the support of the British Council enabled the company to take the show to new territories both at home and abroad: to ‘Finland, France, Zimbabwe, Lebanon, Syria and Ireland’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 11). All of the shows up to and including this point relied on the in-house team for their simple, tourable designs, with Hoggett and Graham credited with the design for *Sell Out*. This production’s aesthetic was clearly indebted to DV8’s work: the use of a mobile, prism-based staircase-like object for performers to clamber over, under and through as it is manipulated by other cast members is strongly reminiscent of the mobile bench in DV8’s *Strange Fish*. Like the preceding shows, the stage remained uncluttered, free of set or backdrops except for this single mobile and versatile element.

At this stage, though, the company employed a professional lighting designer, Natasha Chivers, for the first time, to light the show suitably for the larger, more demanding venues which their tour began to take in. So as well as ‘proper writers’, there begins with *Sell Out* a move towards ‘proper’ practitioners in other areas too. From the origins in unpaid or poorly-paid performers drawn in part from friends or acquaintances (the Frantic online resource pack credits Korina Biggs’s ‘generosity’

for rehearsing *Look Back in Anger* for no wage), the company began to pay and audition performers (Frantic Assembly 2012: 4). *Hymns* (1999) and *Underworld* (2001) both saw a characteristic doubling-up of the director/designer role (Liam Steel for the former and Graham and Hoggett again for the latter), but finding this an increasingly stressful, unfulfilling task, and with the more and more ambitious nature of their stagecraft, the pair decided that for subsequent productions '[w]e HAD to find the money to engage a designer...' (Frantic Assembly 2012: 17).¹⁰³

So in this way, the company, having begun to work with 'proper writers', was also embracing more standardised industry processes of the compartmentalisation of expertises. This was crucial, as they suggest, to the company's growing ambition and scale, but it is important to remember that this is overlaid upon a sense of pride in a shared control over or grasp of all aspects of their stagecraft, from ownership of the choreography and performance to an understanding of the lighting design and operation. This remains part of the company rhetoric to this day. The company's online guide explains the importance of designers' presence in the earliest phases of a production:

[W]e do our best to have our designer involved in the research and development sessions. We want them to absorb as much of the process as possible, to comment on movement ideas, observe the potential character work and get a feel for the aims of the project. [...] Having as many of your creatives as possible around from the start of research and development can prevent some of these clashes as everyone is on the same page and can see how their skills can fit together. (Frantic Assembly 2012: 17)

This pertains to the position of the writer in the project as well. The company's processes and structures had clearly shifted, in that there was no longer a writer constantly present in the rehearsal room, performing as well as responding immediately to produce text for the following day's rehearsal and development, as Hazel had done (and as Tim Etchells did at first for Forced Entertainment). Though writers have been invited to Frantic's auditions (although not in the case of *Sell Out*), development processes and in most cases rehearsals, there was never a question that

¹⁰³ 'Designing and sourcing the set for *Underworld* literally made us ill. It felt uninspired and we were never sure whether we were making terrible mistakes. [...] [T]he experience taught us that we never wanted to be in that situation again' (Frantic Assembly 2012: 17).

the likes of Michael Wynne, Chris O'Connell, Abi Morgan or Bryony Lavery might speak on behalf of Frantic as Hazel had.

This results in a further move towards the dynamic laid out by Heddon and Milling and cited earlier, in which 'performers controlled the early process, bringing in directors and writers when necessary' (2006: 166). As a performer himself, and a more regular member of the company, Hazel had been in a different relation to the process and the other members of the group. But on Hazel's departure, the creative contract with the writer was re-envisaged to some extent. In addition to this, the terms on which the performers were engaged were adjusted, with the company hiring and paying people 'properly for the job they had been hired for' (Frantic Assembly 2012: 5). This was doubtless laudable, and necessary for the growth of the company, but these alterations to the working relationships had the unintended consequence that 'we felt the sense of "troupe" dissipate' (*ibid.*).

Yet while there was a move away from the ensemble *per se* – and the writer as part of that – as the company moved towards employing writers situated outside the group of performers, Graham and Hoggett continued to solicit the writer's input in ways which go beyond the creation of text for performance. Bryony Lavery describes how she was invited to casting meetings for *Stockholm* and *Beautiful Burnout*.¹⁰⁴ Wynne's involvement with *Sell Out* contains indications of the various ways that a collaborative writing process was encouraged. As mentioned, Wynne sought inspiration and raw material from questionnaires distributed to the cast, with Graham and Hoggett in this way ceding some control of the processes of generating performance material to him. Furthermore, his cover letter to a draft dated 10 August 1998 – still a work in progress – refers to his '[excitement] that the staircase will be ready this week' (Wynne 1998b), showing an involvement in the design and an awareness of at least some of Graham and Hoggett's intentions for the rehearsal of the then unfinished script. The letter also includes suggestions that certain scenes as written are 'not working' or 'repetitive', but, he adds, 'I think that can be solved in the physical work' (*ibid.*). Wynne's embracing of the potential offered by the physically-interested nature of Graham and Hoggett's approach is clear here, and is doubtless one of the attractions which led the pair to work with him again, for 2005's

¹⁰⁴ 'I went to most of the castings of everything, but mostly I let them do it, because I think they get it right' (Lavery 2011b).

Dirty Wonderland. One suggestion made by Wynne hints at this aptitude for work with the company and is strongly redolent of some of Lavery's later comments. Wynne writes: 'The second birthday I think could be maybe done without words' (*ibid.*). Graham, over ten years later (and discussing a different collaboration – that with Lavery on *Stockholm*), approvingly quotes Lavery in suggesting that all writers – or perhaps all those in whom he is interested – 'aspire to write silence' (Graham 2008).

The above-mentioned questionnaires, however – along with the fact that Wynne spent much more time than Hazel had away from the rehearsal room, sending his script revisions by fax to the company – act as a good indicator of the gradual but increasingly significant reconfiguration of the writer/ensemble relationship. This recasts the performers more firmly as generators of raw material for shaping by another hand (or number of hands, taking Graham and Hoggett's continuing dialogue with the writer into account). The undercurrents around Hazel's involvement with the company were much more those of collaborative research and, explicitly, 'devising': Hoggett's aforementioned explanation of the process behind *Flesh* in 1996 talks of the interviews and research carried out *by the company*, and 'that's how we came to devise *Flesh*, really' (Brennan 1996a).

Hence Wynne's confidence in suggesting the removal of the verbal from a scene he had written suggests the closeness of the writer to the physical processes of the rehearsal room, but his position as a 'proper writer' outside the company represents a significant shift to the compartmentalisation of creative processes. Nonetheless, a relationship had been set up, developing from the close integration of Hazel in the ensemble, whereby the writer felt able to make such a suggestion. Not only does the trope of physicality overpowering the verbal repeat itself through Frantic's work, but this openness and vision becomes a motif in what the company say they are looking for in a writer: somebody who can envisage possibilities such as these without dictating the way in which such possibilities might be embodied.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ An extreme counter-example, of a writer working in contrasting ways, might be that of Beckett, for whose theatre the presence and movement (or deliberately restricted movement) of the physical body onstage is deeply important, but in whose writing may be witnessed time and again the attempt to control as closely as possible these physical theatrical elements. 'Beckett's work [...] operates with the same precision that a choreographer might use for making dance' (Keefe & Murray 2007: 6).

Hymns and physicality

Just as Graham and Hoggett began to employ writers such as Wynne who were already embarked upon careers of some pedigree, they also developed collaborations with choreographer-directors of increasing stature. These saw not only an increase in narrative and structural interest on the part of the company's artistic directors, but also an evolution of the physical techniques adopted from Volcano. The company also continued a related nuancing of the ways in which 'the physical' is described in their process, some of which have been explored above. *Hymns*, first staged in 1999 and the company's first collaboration with choreographer and director Liam Steel, provides an apt moment for an examination of the development of physical techniques in Graham and Hoggett's devising processes.

Steel was a core member of DV8 from 1992 to 2000, who also performed in Volcano's 1993 *L.O.V.E.*, directed by Nigel Charnock. At the time of *Hymns*'s first tour, Graham attributed their decision to work with Steel to their aspirations for the show: 'This show was harder to create and we really needed the director on the outside' (Dibdin 1999). Though Graham and Hoggett had met Steel a few years previously, and had been mulling the idea of an all-male show about how men cope with bereavement 'for several years' (Graham 2005: 4), it was Steel's availability and the company's confidence after the success of the Generation Trilogy and *Sell Out* that meant that in 1999 they could approach the production in earnest. This marks a distinct contrast from the at times hurried and *ad hoc* development of ideas for the earlier shows. From this point onwards, it becomes a common element of Graham and Hoggett's discussion of their work that they claim ownership themselves (as a unit) for the initial idea behind each production, and assert the lengthy development and discussion process that this basis goes through before the engagement of a writer, cast or (in this case) director. This is in part essential, due to the company's expansion into larger venues and support frameworks: the award of a three-year London Arts grant in 2002 sees the official beginning of the three-year artistic plan within which, Graham explains, the company works.¹⁰⁶ Hoggett and

Worthen examines Beckett in some depth, arguing that his plays 'train a disciplined attention to the interplay between dramatic writing and the material stage' (Worthen 2010: 193).

¹⁰⁶ A *Time Out* article, 'Independent means', from January 2002 reports that Frantic had been one of eleven companies to receive the grant, given as £55 000 in 2002, rising to £60 000 in 2003 and 2004 (*Time Out* 2002). Since this, the company has received continued funding from the Arts Council, on

Graham had of course had significant input into the genesis and development of the earlier productions, as explored above, but the initial ideas had generally been attributed to the ‘troupe’ – the group of regular collaborators which was now becoming dispersed.

This sense of the ‘troupe’ dissipating was arguably another factor in the production of *Hymns* at this particular time: in the earlier years of the company, the presence of the women (particularly Cait Davis and Korina Biggs) as regular performers and contributors to the development sessions certainly shaped the composition of *Klub*, *Flesh* and *Zero*. It would, in those years, have seemed odd for Graham and Hoggett to wilfully omit the women from the cast, but such a move was made possible by the company’s newly professional status, and ‘[p]aying proper wages meant that we could look further afield for performers’ (Frantic Assembly 2012: 5).

Graham also felt that he and Hoggett were physically more prepared for the collaboration with Steel, having trained and extended their physique and skills over the preceding years:

This is the only time it has been able to happen – which is probably just as well, because he has worked us really hard. We might not have been ready for him a few years ago! (Graham quoted in Dibdin 1999)

The importance of physical development and forward momentum is retained in more recent rhetorics: in the *Frantic Book*, Graham and Hoggett stress the importance of having morning warm-ups for physical work in which numbers of press-ups or other exercises are always increased from day to day: ‘One more press-up is progress’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 97). This mentality of physical training overlaps with the idea of motivating the cast on a personal level: ‘It charts an improvement and it is also a promise of what we are going to achieve together’ (*ibid.*).

Hymns was certainly an audacious production, showcasing new feats of athleticism. The towering ladders and simple table and chairs, imaginatively employed in Steel’s choreography, enabled a development in the company’s aesthetic which took in heights, drops and leaps of breathtaking physicality. Yet while this movement work introduced Graham and Hoggett to new techniques and possibilities (notably

a similar three-year cycle. Graham in interview (2008) speaks of the three-year artistic plan. Other information from the Arts Council website (2014).

reworked in the use of extreme, precarious heights in both *pool (no water)* and *Stockholm*), perhaps the most significant set of concerns introduced to the company by Steel was one of greater subtlety. DV8's *Enter Achilles* (1995), in which Steel had performed, was a direct influence on Frantic's attempt in *Hymns* to create 'an eloquent production about inarticulacy' (Graham 2005: 5), set in a similar boozy world of a group of 'lads' left to their own devices. DV8 tended at that time to focus much less on the verbal than Frantic, but their devising of physical material to convey narratives of sexuality, individuality and group dynamics seems powerfully to inflect Frantic's rhetorics of physicality being – at times at least – 'the principal communicator to the audience' (*ibid.*: 5). For instance, in *Hymns*, the character of Scott tells jokes until he's drowned out by the swelling music, in a variation on the theme of repeated verbal text replaced by purely physical moves: as in *Sell Out*'s birthday scene, the audience knows what the character is saying – or doing – with his words, so it becomes possible to remove them from the scene altogether.

That Steel is responsible for the introduction of several recurrent tropes to Graham and Hoggett's approach to physicality as 'the principal communicator' is evidenced by his demonstration and discussion of techniques elsewhere. In 2006, Steel contributed interview and workshop material to the DVD *Creating Physical Theatre – The Body in Performance* (Goat Island *et al.* 2006a), much of which echoes Graham's and Hoggett's own outlining of their work. For instance, Steel starts from the principle that '85 to 90 per cent of our communication is non-verbal [...] but we don't think about it' (*ibid.*).¹⁰⁷ Breaking scenes down to their 'essence', and building choreography from the performer's individual and 'natural gesture', Steel says that rather than imposing choreography on text (or vice versa), 'it's a matter of marrying that text and that movement together so that essentially there is a play on stage but there's also a full dance piece on stage' (*ibid.*). While the interest in the expressivity of silence is familiar from Graham and Hoggett's earlier work with Wynne, the concept of developing the physical and verbal material as simultaneously as possible seems new, given Hoggett's above-cited consideration of physical elements complementing the verbal 'poetry'. Working with experienced writers and a

¹⁰⁷ This is another very clear link back to Lecoq's emphasis on 'natural' gesture and unconscious physical impulse, though neither Steel nor Frantic openly claims any such heritage. Lecoq makes several statements of the kind Steel works from here, for instance: 'All of us express ourselves – unconsciously or not, with or without the desire to communicate – by means of gesture' (Lecoq 2006: 6).

director/choreographer who was verbally alert but physically demanding is posited by the company – both at the time and since – as placing Hoggett and Graham at the nexus between the verbal and the physical. Hoggett told Cooper in interview about *Hymns* that ‘[t]hese people [Steel and writer Chris O’Connell] pull us different ways, and demand different things of us, but at the end of the day it’s all for the good’ (Cooper 1999).

The writer, Chris O’Connell, was a relatively unknown playwright who had nevertheless, like Wynne, seen successes already. O’Connell, more along the lines followed by Graham and Hoggett, had co-founded Theatre Absolute in Coventry in 1992 with the aim, in part, of staging his own work. At the time Hoggett and Graham approached him, O’Connell was beginning to attract the attention of larger new writing organisations such as Paines Plough; he was their writer-in-residence from 1999 to 2000. Graham describes some of the lessons learnt from their experience of working with O’Connell:

He initially bent over backwards to write a physical show. [He] compromised himself horribly in that he set it in the house of the guy who’d died, and he was a circus performer, or a street performer, and all of the tools of his trade were around. And we asked him ‘Why have you done that?’ ‘To give you physicality,’ [he replied.] ‘Stuff to play with’. (Graham 2008)¹⁰⁸

In Graham’s account, they assured the writer that such excuses were unnecessary to the process: ‘The physicality’s in the gaps. It’s in all the things the boys want to say and can’t say’ (*ibid.*). Here is one indication of the – perhaps relatively young, but nonetheless experienced – writer coming to the process with expectations about what is needed of a writer working with a Physical Theatre company, and ‘pulling’ in a certain direction. Since this experience, Graham has stressed time and again the crucial role of the ‘eloquence of silence’ (*ibid.*) in creating a successful collaboration between the verbal and the physical:

As much as we love the big physicality, we know that it’s going to be the flutter of an eyelid that’s going to rip your heart out, and it’s about earning those moments. (Graham 2011a)

¹⁰⁸ O’Connell also recalls, in his ‘writer’s note’ to the 2005 edition of the text, ‘I was perplexed, to say the least, as to how I could write a play for four ridiculously fit guys who were going to throw themselves around a stage’ (O’Connell 2005: 12).

Towards compartmentalisation

Hymns was also, in Graham's assessment, a 'big step forward' simply because for the first time 'someone else [Liam Steel] came in and directed it' (Graham 2011a). Though in the earlier stages of the company they had brought choreographers in, as mentioned, the main responsibility for running the rehearsal room remained with Graham and Hoggett. As company directors, they had leadership both over company policy decisions and in rehearsals, though it was only with *Sell Out* that they began to describe themselves as the 'directors' of the piece. Bringing the more experienced Liam Steel in to direct and choreograph provided a new realm of movement possibilities¹⁰⁹ and a new directorial expertise, but also a different 'division of labour'¹¹⁰ – more clearly demarcated compartmentalisation, with the performers for the first time distinctly separated from the director. Graham speaks of his and Hoggett's relief at being able to concentrate (at times) on their performance alone, and states one consequence of this as being that 'it was with [...] *Hymns* that we really began to tackle the idea of creating a physical character' (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 36). Hoggett, at the time, claimed that '*Hymns* requires acting with a capital A, and we have to rely solely on the text to keep people's attention' (Cooper 1999). Yet it is important to recall that they are still credited with the 'co-direction' of the piece; they retained (and exercised) the right to contribute to the show at that more privileged level of the group's hierarchy. Indeed, the attribution of authorship is subtly blurred in subsequent explanations of the process: the information pack on *Hymns* states that '[w]orking with Chris we set ourselves the difficult task of making an eloquent production about inarticulacy' (Graham 2005: 5). The company's praise for the writer's 'trust' in the process contains an undercurrent in which can be read the sharing of creative responsibility:

We are indebted to Chris's bravery, vision and trust in creating a script for this production. It was great to work with a writer committed to writing for theatrical possibilities rather than the printed page. (*ibid.*)

Graham and Hoggett identify a literary bias in assessments of British theatre: 'This is a great risk for a writer. More and more theatre productions are reviewed as literary events first and theatrical events second' (*ibid.*). While it may seem counterintuitive

¹⁰⁹ 'His choreography was much more advanced, much more demanding than we were capable of creating' (Graham 2011a).

¹¹⁰ Returning to Shank's (1969: 9) and Davies's (2003: 2) vocabulary.

to argue that Frantic are exemplary of a compartmentalised form of authorship in devised theatre, even while their rhetorics are blurring the lines between the generation, shaping and performance of both physical and verbal material, the authorship of *Hymns* is described by Graham and Hoggett as one in which they had a large degree of control. They contributed the initial idea, co-directed the movement and text work, and mentored O'Connell in creating a verbal text that would allow for the possibilities of the physical.

It is also in talking of this production that Graham and Hoggett first remark upon the organisational difficulties created by the previous lack of compartmentalisation. The fact that they performed in their own shows as well as helping to set up and dismantle set when on tour meant that the usual 'post-show bar' discussions enabling practitioners to forge links with others, including all-important producers and theatre management, were difficult for them. Furthermore,

[w]e felt there may even have been a reluctance to take us seriously, as we could mostly be seen during production days with our legs sticking out from under the set or wearing costumes as the show was teched around us. Any resident artistic directors at these venues would have seen us as two technicians or two actors. (Frantic Assembly 2012: 6)

A move away from performing was hence considered crucial in order to pursue the aim to 'promote ourselves as directors' (*ibid.*) among larger players in the industry. On the other hand, it must be noted that Graham, Hoggett and Middleton's energy and ability to charm such industry players had in fact already led to some useful relationships with producers and other patrons, such as Tom Morris at BAC and Sonia Friedman at the New Ambassadors.

I think there's an ethos with which we run the company which is about being open and friendly – we used to call it 'nicing the shit out of people.' [...] If you're going to be asking somebody to work a fourteen-hour day on your show, you'd better be nice about it, and grateful. And I think that's really helped people help us. (Graham 2011a)

Graham and Hoggett were hence keen to begin more clearly depicting themselves primarily as the directors and originators of the production, even if they continued in the performance roles in which they began the company. The compartmentalisation of this role was taken even further in the subsequent production, *Underworld*, an all-

female show intended as a companion piece to *Hymns*.¹¹¹ Though Graham and Hoggett returned to performance in 2001's *Tiny Dynamite* and 2002's *Heavenly*, these would be the final times that they would perform as well as direct, and both involved more experienced co-directors (Vicky Featherstone and Liam Steel, respectively).

Yet while the employment of Steel on *Hymns* set up a clearer compartmentalisation of directorial responsibilities as the model towards which Graham and Hoggett were moving, the continued presence of Graham and Hoggett as both instigators of the piece and performers meant that this division was by no means complete: Steel was at pains to report at the time that '[Graham and Hoggett have] been involved in the decision-making process from start to finish' (Cavendish 1999). In fact, I certainly do not wish to suggest that the division of directorial, writing and performance functions is complete in the current working processes of the company, nor that it is or was an aim for Graham and Hoggett. Rather, the company's emphasis on collaboration and the allied rhetoric of a process involving different specialists taking an interest in multiple aspects of a production's development stems from the earliest forms of Frantic's creativity, while existing in tension with the drive of the artistic directors towards their own vision and the development of their own skills at the helm of the company. For these reasons I argue that Frantic's (current) processes represent a form of what I have been calling *compartmentalised* authorship. Through examination of more recent productions, with a particular focus on 2006's *pool (no water)* and 2007's *Stockholm*, I will examine further what this means in terms of Graham and Hoggett's creative processes, including various overlapping notions of research and development, choreography, direction and writing.

¹¹¹ Working titles for the piece were *Dust* (Evans 2001) and *Hearse* (Judah 1999).

From *Hymns* to *pool (no water)* – ‘new writing’ and movement work

Following *Hymns*, Graham and Hoggett moved on to work in relationships with increasingly well-established practitioners, producers and companies, co-producing under the Frantic banner with Paines Plough (beginning with 2001’s *Tiny Dynamite*, for which Abi Morgan was the writer and Vicky Featherstone the pair’s co-director) and Graeae (2004’s *On Blindness*, also a co-production with Paines Plough and ‘directed by Vicky Featherstone, Scott Graham, Steven Hoggett and Jenny Sealey’). For *Tiny Dynamite*, as for *Hymns*, Graham and Hoggett are credited as providing ‘co-direction’, and this later collaboration undoubtedly marks another stage in the pair’s move into taking full responsibility for the movement work within Frantic shows: while they had been under Steel’s instruction for *Hymns*, no other choreographers are credited with the movement work for *Tiny Dynamite*, and the company has employed choreographers from outside only once more to date, on 2002’s *Peep Show*.¹¹²

Hoggett in particular began to build up a CV of movement direction work for other companies (with, notably, two productions for Paines Plough: 2004’s *The Straits* and 2005’s *Mercury Fur*, both directed by John Tiffany¹¹³). He and Graham also began to take on more choreographic employment together on behalf of Frantic Assembly, as the company’s reputation grew. In 2005, they worked as movement directors under the direction of Laurie Sansom in a Stephen Joseph Theatre production of *Villette*. They also took on direction of the largest-scale production yet attempted by Frantic, as they won a commission for a site-specific piece performed at the disused Grand Ocean Hotel in Saltdean as part of the Brighton Festival. The piece, *Dirty Wonderland*, featured a cast of nine regular collaborators as well as around two dozen students from the BRIT School for Performing Arts and Technology. This 45-minute promenade performance was put together in a tight three-week rehearsal

¹¹² *Peep Show* was a more complex proposition all round, as it is the only Frantic Assembly ‘musical’ thus far, the company and Isabel Wright crafting its story around existing songs by the band Lamb [sic].

¹¹³ Both were commissioned by Vicky Featherstone, then artistic director of Paines Plough. *Black Watch* (2006) was also directed by Tiffany, commissioned by Featherstone, the newly-appointed artistic director of the National Theatre of Scotland, and scripted by Gregory Burke, who wrote *The Straits*. Tiffany and Hoggett speak about their friendship and working relationship in Rhiannon Harries’s 2010 interview for the *Independent*’s ‘How We Met’ series of articles.

process, with the final text ‘scripted by Michael Wynne and devised by the Company’ (Frantic Assembly 2013¹¹⁴).

As Graham and Hoggett took on more movement work outside their own company, they shifted their public rhetoric again, reflecting a desire to be seen as a company working with text, rather than as choreographers for hire. Speaking in 2001 of their association with Paines Plough, Graham claimed that ‘[w]riting is something we’re more and more interested in. It’s strange that we keep being referred to as a dance company’ (Logan 2001).

The alignment of the company with Paines Plough, and the work with Vicky Featherstone in particular, introduced new techniques to the pair’s directorial toolkit, which again they link with notions of character. In the *Frantic Book*, Graham and Hoggett write that ‘[w]orking with Vicky Featherstone was the first time we were permitted the freedom to think in detail about our performance and character work’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 205), whereas *Hymns*, with Liam Steel as co-director, had enabled them to ‘tackle the idea of creating a physical character’ for the first time (*ibid.*: 36). The exercise in the *Frantic Book* credited to Featherstone (*ibid.*: 205-7) is one examining the natural rhythms of a text, physicalising the perceived ‘warmth’ or otherwise behind a character’s line to open debate as to ‘the implications of single words and their intentions’ (*ibid.*: 207), and to visualise the ‘pattern’ of the scene. Deeply significant is the fact that the vast majority of the examples described in the book are taken from or at least based on exercises which Graham and Hoggett tried out for the first time *as performers*. The examples in the *Frantic Book* move from the more schematic physical choreographies of *Klub*¹¹⁵ to the text-based and psychologically-motivated explorations described for *Hymns* and *Tiny Dynamite*. Hence their collaborations have led to a continuous development, through practical engagement, of areas of Graham’s and Hoggett’s skill-sets engaging with both the physical and the verbal.

¹¹⁴ This information is from <<http://www.franticassembly.co.uk/productions/dirty-wonderland/>> (accessed 16 September 2013).

¹¹⁵ The exercise ‘Exhaustion’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 75-78) describes the creation of ‘a Frantic landmark’ in collaboration with Stephen Kirkham, which is notated in the form of a series of ‘stacks’ (falls to the ground) and ‘catches’ (attempts to prevent the ‘stack’); ‘Lovebench’, also from *Klub*’s development, describes the creation of ‘string[s] of material’ coupled again with schematic, sequential alterations as individuals move from one group to another (*ibid.*: 79-82).

pool (no water)

Following this examination of Graham and Hoggett's developing rhetorics and techniques through their collaborations with directors, writers and choreographers, and the shifts in the styles adopted by Frantic Assembly, the productions embarked upon from 2005 onwards provide informative cases by which to examine their developing attitudes to the writer's role in the process. I will focus on *pool (no water)* (2006) and *Stockholm* (2007), though I also intend to signal their ongoing rhetoric and approach to text in their productions to date. Grouping these two plays together in this way risks artificially separating them from the company's preceding productions, when in fact I wish to emphasise the continuities between the earlier works and these, and highlight the foundations laid previously for ways of creating – and of talking about – these later works. In some ways, *pool (no water)* projects back (most clearly of the more recent works) to the earliest phases of the company's history, though there are several important differences between that show and the earlier productions. Before examining this production's creation in detail, I will analyse the roughly contemporaneous emergence of a new framing of the company's creative processes, which built on the ensemble-led generation of text and physicality of their earliest works.

R&D and 'scratch' culture

According to the company's official rhetoric, *pool (no water)* marks the appearance of a new strand in Frantic's approach, as, with the support of the National Theatre Studio, 'we found ourselves in the rehearsal room embarking on research and development for the first time' (Graham 2006b: 4). This is crucial to a consideration of *pool (no water)*, *Stockholm* and later works for at least two reasons. Firstly, the support – in the form of relatively pressure-free development time in the rehearsal rooms at the NT Studio – is a marker of the newly elevated spheres in which the company was operating, though it is, again, a form of patronage recognisable in earlier close ties with BAC and, before that, Swansea's Taliesin Arts Centre. Secondly, in the light of the discussion of Frantic's collaborative approaches, which since the earliest productions have involved performers in the development of the textual and physical content of the work, it is worthwhile considering why Graham chooses to outline the sessions in the NT Studio as the first ever 'research and

development’ process for the company. Graham frequently links ideas of ‘research and development’ with the ‘scratch’ development of new work, and I will here examine the uses of these terms in Frantic’s rhetorics.

The producer Tom Morris, whose links with the company are mentioned above, had developed a strong tradition of the ‘scratch programme’ in his time as artistic director of Battersea Arts Centre from 1995 to 2004. He nurtured a culture in which companies were encouraged to present work-in-progress showings of early ideas or developmental works, with feedback encouraged either through official talk-back sessions or, more commonly, discussions over drinks in the bar.¹¹⁶ In December 2003, Frantic presented a ‘Frantic Scratch’ at BAC, which makes Graham’s professed ‘suspicion of the scratch culture’ (Graham 2006b: 4) and claim that the development of *pool (no water)* involved new processes seem odd. In 2006, for instance, he told Nina Steiger that he firmly believed that ‘[t]heatre exists between the performers, lighting, the audience, the music and that moment on that day [...]’ and that Frantic ‘don’t believe theatre exists in a rehearsal room’ (Steiger 2006: 314). Exercises and exploration in the rehearsal room should work directly towards a performance for the public, not merely functioning as *études* for the benefit of the practitioners involved. Graham’s 2006 education pack for *pool (no water)* explains that

I remember a performer, years ago, talking about how her collective never really made work to be seen and considered themselves a theatre laboratory. This made my blood boil. (Graham 2006b: 4)

This explicit interest in the exchange between performers and audiences was noted by critics in the early shows *Klub* (‘terrifically enjoyable theatre that really *engages* with an audience’ (Hajaj 1995; emphasis in the original)) and *Flesh* (‘There’s a hint of cruising – them eyeing us up and vice versa [...] It’s all part of the transaction – us paying, them performing’ (Brennan 1996b)). Scratch work does usually involve an audience, but Graham apparently conflates this way of working with that of

¹¹⁶ ‘Scratch’ theatre has been familiar, if not common, in British theatre since at least the late 1980s: Rob Ritchie mentions the term in a manner which suggests its familiarity to the other panellists at the *New Theatre Quarterly* Symposium in May 1988 (NTQ Symposium 1989: 5).

‘theatre laboratories’ and with research and development,¹¹⁷ and these claims suggest attitudes to devising that are aimed at nuancing the ways in which the company is perceived.

The *Frantic Book* clearly reveals this awareness of preconceptions around ‘devising’, in a statement that (presumably unwittingly) argues against one of Heddon and Milling’s key attempted definitions of the term:

It is possible to imagine that devising implies that we have gone into a room with nothing and tried to make a start from scratch. This is not the case. It may take years for an idea to get into the rehearsal room and before it does it has been batted back and forth between the directors, reshaped and presented to producers and other collaborators. It has been presented to a writer too, who may be engaged to create a full draft for the first day of rehearsal. That script becomes the launch pad and inspiration for most of the devising process. (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 5)

As I have argued,¹¹⁸ any suggestion that devising can be defined as a process beginning without a text is problematic, and *Frantic*’s shifting portrayal of what devising is, and when it begins, is symptomatic of a pragmatic approach which seeks to massage the perception of the company in the public eye, rather than aiming to create a watertight definition of a set of related processes which are in many ways different every time.

It is common in the industry to describe such processes such as those outlined by Graham and Hoggett as a Research and Development (‘R&D’) phase,¹¹⁹ but Graham is, at least at first, wary of using this label. In the resource pack for *Stockholm*, the term does not appear: the work carried out at the National Theatre Studio is described as ‘development sessions’ or ‘development workshops’ (Graham 2007: 7, 9, 18). This was clearly a conscious choice in depicting these processes. In conversation, Graham refers to these sessions using the common shorthand: ‘most of [the stage directions in the finished script] weren’t out of Bryony’s mind but were actually her notating what had been done and achieved in R&D’ (Graham 2008).

¹¹⁷ In the *pool (no water)* education pack (Graham 2006b), he writes of the abovementioned ‘theatre laboratory’ culture as the root of his ‘suspicion about Research and Development. That and the fact that the company has never been able to afford it’ (*ibid.*: 4).

¹¹⁸ See, in particular, the discussion from page 27 above.

¹¹⁹ The term is used by Heddon and Milling (2006: 167), quoting Debra Iris Batton of Legs on the Wall but expanding on the phrase as well; Govan, Nicholson and Normington also refer to several companies as being engaged in ‘research and development’ phases (2007: 134 & 153, for instance).

Furthermore, in internal uses, such as on the labels of the video cassettes which were used to record some sections of the workshops, the same abbreviation is used.

In the *Frantic Book*, however, the company publicly acknowledges the support of BAC and the National Theatre Studio as leading to a process which is ‘much more like the preconception of devising’ (2009: 5). And, unlike in the *Stockholm* resource pack, the *Frantic Book* and the online *Guide to Frantic Assembly* (both more recent than the *Stockholm* pack) see the company being less cautious in its terminology, and switching between the terms ‘research’, ‘development’, and ‘research and development’. In asserting the variety of approaches in such work, this particular elaboration of their recent processes also suggests an odd, arguably false dichotomy between ‘physical’ and ‘story’ or ‘textual’ work:

This research and development can be physically led, or it could be about developing story and text. We might explore character work either textually or physically [...] (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 5)

The overwhelming impression of the processes behind *Stockholm* – particularly the first workshops at the National Theatre Studio – is that ‘physically led’ work was used both in ‘developing story and text’ and to ‘explore character work’, in ways which will be examined below. The above description of their ‘research and development’ work seems one of a number of attempts, characteristic of the company’s rhetoric, to distance the depiction of their processes from assumptions that Graham and Hoggett merely create the movement and visual imagery to accompany (or as a stimulus for) a writer’s text. Here, again, we see efforts to distance the company’s work from the previously-cited (posited) preconceptions of physical devising companies: to stress the extent to which Frantic contribute more than physicality, in a process which does not start with them going ‘into a room with nothing’ (*ibid.*).

The aforementioned, and associated, anxieties about the significance of writing¹²⁰ surface in relation to R&D as well. In the *Stockholm* resource pack, Graham claims

¹²⁰ ‘Writing is something we’re more and more interested in. It’s strange that we keep being referred to as a dance company’ (Graham in Logan 2001).

that ‘we have said many times that the text comes first in our rehearsal processes’¹²¹ (Graham 2007: 7). In fact, when questioned on this point, Graham is quick to admit that the company had rhetorical aims behind the statement.

I felt that [...] was overstated by us. Maybe to make a point [...]. I think when people imagine a physical, devising company, they imagine we just go into a room and throw shapes, and see what comes out of that, and a writer [just says] ‘yeah’ – and it isn’t really like that. (Graham 2008)

A brief survey of other resource packs and interview material quickly throws up numerous similar contradictions, which reveal Frantic as astute manipulators of their public image, while still genuinely, it seems, trying to put their finger on a somewhat ineffable set of processes.¹²² There is little to distinguish the processes behind 2002’s *Peepshow*, for instance, from that of a ‘research and development’ period: ‘before the script was written we had the show’s synopsis, the title, the poster image, character names, ideas for choreography, lighting, the songs were also in place’ (Graham & Quelch 2002: 7). Work had already taken place on movement for the show, and, if the character names were established at this point, we can conclude that the performers had already been selected: as in many of the earlier Frantic shows, the characters in *Peepshow* are named after the actors who played them. So with *Peepshow*, for instance, ‘[w]e were still working towards a rehearsal draft at the start of rehearsals’ (*ibid.*: 8). This – noting also the use of ‘we’, democratising the writing process – gives the lie to, or at least nuances, Graham’s later claim that in working with Ravenhill, ‘we found ourselves in the rehearsal room embarking on research and development for the first time’ (Graham 2006b: 4). It might be ventured that the notion of ‘research and development’ in Frantic’s rhetoric around *pool (no water)* primarily represents a process of rehearsing without a concrete performance in mind – almost an ‘audition’ for the working relationship with Ravenhill.

Graham thus claims that the company’s increased profile and connections with both Paines Plough (where Ravenhill had been Literary Director) and the National

¹²¹ *Stockholm* is held up as itself an exception to this. The quotation in full is: ‘We have said many times that the text comes first in our rehearsal processes but *Stockholm* was an example of movement inspiring text first and then vice versa’ (Graham 2007: 7).

¹²² This attempt is exemplified in the *Frantic Book*, where Graham and Hoggett seek to credit individual practitioners for the examples they have contributed to Frantic’s ongoing practice. In several cases they name the exercise or technique after the director or choreographer who introduced it to Graham and Hoggett’s practice.

Theatre meant that for the first time they were able to begin the project on the pure strength of the collaboration, as merely the opportunity to ‘just go into a room’ together, without a particular theatrical end-product in mind:

The reason for going into the rehearsal room was the fact that we wanted to work together. We wanted to throw out a process, see what would happen, just going into a room. (Graham 2008)

This, perhaps, is at the heart of Graham’s careful distinction, around 2006-7, between ‘scratch’ or ‘research and development’ and the kinds of ‘devising’ work they had thus far been embarked upon: the fact that the establishment of the collaboration with the writer here predated the genesis of the idea behind the production. In other words, the ‘beginning’ of the production was much closer to that which Heddon and Milling suggest is typical of devising processes.

The writer’s response and the anxiety of authority

Mark Ravenhill wrote an article for the *Guardian* on the creation of the play, which is complimentary of Graham and Hoggett’s approach but reveals some of his expectations going into the process. These doubtless inflected the experience of the company in the initial development of the work. He agrees with Graham’s account of the genesis of the piece: ‘We started with nothing’ (Ravenhill 2006a). The subsequent work in the week’s development (in January 2005) was mostly on movement. Ravenhill says he ‘went away in the evenings and wrote scenes, and we tried putting them together. At the end of the week, I looked at what I’d done – and realised it wasn’t any good’ (*ibid.*). In Ravenhill’s account, it was only then that he asked Graham and Hoggett for any ‘new starting points, any material you’ve always wanted to use?’ (*ibid.*). They presented him with a book of Nan Goldin photographs which they had used as inspiration for some of the imagery in *Dirty Wonderland*, and from then on, ‘the play came pretty easily’ (*ibid.*). A first draft was tested at the National Theatre Studio workshops over a ‘couple of weeks’ in summer 2005, and the first full rehearsal draft was delivered, according to Hoggett’s picturesque version of the tale, ‘in Leicester Square on Christmas Eve 2005, backdropped by a young gospel choir from Lewisham’ (in Graham 2006b: 24). In 2006 there was a five-week rehearsal period leading to the play’s premiere in September.

In entering into the collaboration, Ravenhill ‘had wrongly assumed that in the world of physical theatre, the writer would pretty much have to fend for him- or herself, while the director got on with creating physical shapes’ (Ravenhill 2006a) – perhaps the source, or at least a reinforcement, of Graham’s anxieties in emphasising that this is not the prime role he and Hoggett fulfilled in the rehearsal room. As mentioned earlier, though, Ravenhill in fact found the pair ‘avid scrutinisers of a piece of writing’ (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, his article is revelatory of a distance, in his assessment, between the textual and the physical material – between the text and the play itself, arguably. ‘I’ve never been a huge fan of physical theatre,’ he goes on to state. ‘Often the physical bit isn’t as exciting as sport or dance, and the theatre bit isn’t as substantial as a good play’ (*ibid.*). This is tongue-in-cheek but nevertheless suggests a framing of the work in which compartmentalisation between ‘the physical bit’ and ‘the theatre bit’ is almost total. Graham supports this assessment of the division in the creative process here:

[W]hen it came to the writing, Mark felt inspired by the [physical] processes but the writing was a very singular vision and there was no way into that. And actually, we ended up with a script that I feel we had no way into, once it was completed. As much as I like the script, it’s a very difficult one to work with, and it could easily have been a radio play. (Graham 2011a)

The text as delivered was indeed dense and lacking in the evident ‘gaps’ which elsewhere Graham and Hoggett had found productive in writers’ work. It had no stage directions, scene demarcations or delineations of character – no non-speech matter whatsoever.¹²³ Perhaps the fundamental clash between the physical and the verbal arises here because, while Ravenhill was ‘inspired by the processes’, he was writing with the notion of simultaneous action and speech in mind, whereas Graham and Hoggett’s conception of physicality requires the aforementioned ‘gaps’ – the space in which the physical *replaces* the verbal in conveying meaning or emotion, or even, as suggested earlier, ‘physical character’. Graham and Hoggett, in rehearsals, did distribute the lines (arbitrarily at first) and break the text into ‘scenes’, as revealed in the production’s information pack (Graham 2006b: 17-20). However, Ravenhill’s writing contains a striking forward momentum, with a large proportion

¹²³ There are formal similarities to works such as Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) and, particularly, to Sarah Kane’s later plays, which led some reviewers, such as John Peter, to ‘wonder[...] if part of Ravenhill’s inspiration came from the tragic death of Sarah Kane’ (Peter 2006).

of the lines – even those potentially marking a new ‘scene’ – beginning ‘And’ or ‘But’.¹²⁴ This helped to generate what Hutera described this as the play’s ‘coarse poetry and [...] headlong, contrapuntal rhythm’ (Hutera 2006).

The division of textual and physical elements may have been emphasised by the approach in the rehearsal room, which saw mornings taken up with the building of physical strength through repeated exercises, and afternoons working on the text. For much of the first week, this latter work was stationary, and Graham and Hoggett’s anxieties are suggested by entries in Graham’s rehearsal diary, for instance on day four stating that such work

is crucial but Steven and I are becoming increasingly aware that we have not got anything up on its feet yet. This is fine, we are sure, but still ... it would be nice to have something to show by the end of the week. (Graham 2006a; Day Four)¹²⁵

Graham’s diary also suggests that Ravenhill’s presence in the rehearsal room for the ‘first few weeks’ of the process was welcome but a source of anxiety for the directors: he ‘always exudes such a confidence’, and working with a writer of his reputation is ‘thrilling’ and ‘extremely satisfying’, but

I have to admit it was a lot easier before Mark came into the room. I am now very aware of not trying to speak for him. I am also suddenly totally aware that I am running the risk of him saying, ‘Well, actually, that is not what I meant at all.’ (*ibid.*)

In this process, where the original idea was, uncharacteristically, not clearly generated by Graham and Hoggett, they found themselves in a rare situation in which they felt open to correction by the writer in the room – that they may be accused of traducing the original intentions for the text. That this is rare to the directors is indicated by Graham’s own comment elsewhere in his rehearsal diary:

[I]t is a very strange thing to disagree with a writer about what his characters would do or would want! It does make you ask yourself ‘with what authority do I say this?’ (Graham 2006a; Day 6)

¹²⁴ For instance, of the fourteen lines on page 24 of the published text, ten begin with ‘And’ or ‘But’. The next page, potentially distinguished as a separate scene, nonetheless flows forward, opening with the line ‘Then one day she’ (Ravenhill 2006b: 24-5).

¹²⁵ Rather than refer to individual webpage addresses for this online ‘personal rehearsal diary’, I have made reference to the relevant daily entry; all of these can then be accessed via the address listed under Graham 2006a.

This question of authority seems at the heart of Graham and Hoggett's difficulties in this particular process, as the research and development phase, 'starting from nothing', made impossible the habitual compartmentalisation of authority under the company's usual methods. This anxiety of authority, or of faithfulness to a text, is hence new to the pair. Their earliest performances, developed through the ensemble writing of 'performance personas' (Graham & Hoggett 2012: 4) closely related to the performers themselves, ensured an 'authenticity' which meant that questions of this nature had not, it seems from Graham's rehearsal diary, concerned him before this point.

These issues hence compounded the further difficulties of physicality the directors felt when faced with the text: Graham's above assessment that it 'could easily have been a radio play' (Graham 2011a). However, Ravenhill's response to the challenge of working with the company – in other words, the text he delivered to them – does show signs of his attempts to suggest physicality, or non-naturalistic ways of representing the story, though perhaps not in the ways Graham and Hoggett were used to seeking them. These are not to be found through stage directions – in other words not in the 'gaps' – but through the spoken text itself. More than any previous text written by Ravenhill, *pool (no water)* is peppered with repeated phrases and verbal tics. Early in the play he gives the line 'it's fantastic fantastic fantastic fantastic' (Ravenhill 2006b: 3), and the word 'fantastic' crops up again and again throughout the text. This suggests a writer envisaging a non-naturalistic playing style, albeit perhaps not a specific stylisation or actual movement work he had witnessed in the earlier research and development sessions. The production bears witness that Graham and Hoggett (and the cast) made a conscious decision in fact to naturalise the moments of repetition and stuttering (for instance the mentions of 'hah-hah-heroin' or a 'digi-digi-digi-digi-cam'). All four actors displayed insecurities with the text's most obviously heightened or playful language, ignoring the text's invitations to lengthen vowel sounds such as 'the pooooooooooooool' (Ravenhill 2006b: 4) or 'the machines that inhale and beeeep' (*ibid.*: 13).¹²⁶

The production, though a difficult process for the company, was by no means a failure. Ravenhill, Graham and Hoggett at times managed to cut to the heart of the

¹²⁶ As with other earlier Frantic works, I viewed the performance video kept in the company offices (Frantic Assembly 2006); I viewed *Stockholm* and subsequent works in person.

meaning and mood behind the text, in ways exemplified in past collaborations. At one point during rehearsals, Ravenhill suggested a change to the ending, in which the artist who is the (largely absent) focus of the story finally gets to denounce the main characters' actions. Graham describes this as 'a shock', and disagreed with the move:

Mark says that this is what [the characters] have been waiting for ... her to say these words. I respond that I do not believe that they are waiting for this information from her voice. I believe that they are wanting to see it from her face, from a look. The face that only offers an absent smile. (Graham 2006a; Day 6)

Here, as witnessed throughout Frantic's output at least since *Sell Out*, Graham is suggesting the use of silence and physicality in place of words the playwright has crafted. This anxiety also highlights the difficulties of ownership of the text when Graham and Hoggett cannot claim authority over its initial 'intention'.

However, Ravenhill was a more willing compromiser than Graham at first imagined, and the team agreed on several cuts and transpositions in the text. For instance, in the performance script (preserved in the Frantic archives), there is a line which was eventually cut from both performance and the published playtext:

Somewhere inside us there is sobbing – won't come out, can't get it out but you can feel it there – sobbing sobbing sobbing sobbing.¹²⁷

In the final production, this sensation was instead explored with simple physicality rather than through verbal means, in an effective moment around the Group's first visit to the hospital to visit their friend: Leah Muller sobbed (seemingly) uncontrollably. Her sobbing came to an abrupt halt, after which she could be seen trying – and failing – to force the tears back. While this was not developed into any form of stylised or 'dance' physicality, the moment is exemplary of Graham and Hoggett's interest and faith in non-verbal communication as potentially more powerful, at chosen moments, than the verbal.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ From 'CSM' (Company Stage Manager) folder, marked as 'Cut 17.8.06'.

¹²⁸ Here we see a bold example of what practitioners and critics have called physical theatre's belief in the 'somatic impulse' (Callery 2001: 4) or 'progressive devaluation of language and [...] move towards a non-verbal idiom' (Sánchez-Colberg 1996: 40).

‘Performer blindness’

In describing their work with the actors in *pool (no water)*, Graham’s terminology, unusually, seems frequently to be that of division rather than ensemble. The division of the show’s development into an early scratch performance and then later development processes – with a different cast – meant that at times they felt the need to teach the company choreography ‘from the front of the room’, something that in the *Frantic Book* they claim they never do (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 7). Their stated preference is to set ‘tasks’ which develop moves ‘from what the performers find they are capable of’ (*ibid.*), and Graham describes his discomfort at the prospect of imposing choreography developed by others (at the National Theatre Studio development workshops) on the piece’s performers.

The scene on the footage is almost exactly how we want it but we feel really strange showing it to our performers and effectively saying ‘this is how it is done’. (Graham 2006a; Day 13)

Even the nature of the task-based creation of physical material, though, while posited as liberating, nonetheless can be seen as involving such separation. Graham reflects on the way that he and Hoggett like to encourage the surprises and creativity which arise when ‘you instruct your cast on a simple brief and do not ask them to make up moves for a certain part of the show’ (Graham 2006a; Day 8). Wendy Cope usefully employed the term ‘performer blindness’ (Cope 2010: 54) in describing Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui’s rehearsal process, and this concept seems neatly to describe this aspect of Graham and Hoggett’s technique.¹²⁹ Cope’s interviews suggest the ways in which Cherkaoui’s methods left his performers in a ‘state of not-knowing’ (*ibid.*: 50), which according to her investigations suited some but by no means all of them.

Similarly, Graham and Hoggett seek to elicit material from the company without granting a full overview of the project. Graham’s rehearsal diaries reveal numerous examples of physical exercises whose purposes are not revealed to the performers until later (if at all): ‘[...] they start recapping the extended (drug-fuelled but they don’t know that yet) physical scene [...]’ (Graham 2006a; Day 15); ‘Once we had this [physical material] we told them which section we were thinking about for these

¹²⁹ Cope’s precise use of the phrase focuses on the deliberate segregation of performers from each other in developing material simultaneously, under the guidance of Cherkaoui, to create a ‘palimpsest-like composition’ (*ibid.*); this is slightly different from *Frantic*’s methods described here. However, there are several notable similarities and the term is a useful one, as I will indicate.

moves' (*ibid.*: Day 12). This is a continuing feature of the directors' techniques, marking these more recent shows further apart from the ensemble mentality of the early company. In discussion about 2011's *Lovesong*, as well, Graham mentioned the 'devising' of choreography which would ultimately be used in duets (and trios) on the bed: they began with 'very simple tasks, away from the bed', with the actors not informed until later of the ultimate function or context of the choreography they were creating (Graham *et al.* 2011).

This applies to the pair's development of physicality in tandem with character work as well. Graham also describes their first use, in *pool (no water)*, of a rehearsal room technique in which the directors lead a performer to believe they are to be interviewed in a set-up similar to familiar 'hotseating' exercises of the Stanislavskian inheritance, leaving a camera rolling in tight focus on them as interminable technical hitches and delays postpone the beginning of the 'interview' proper. In fact, no such interview takes place or is ever planned, the exercise intended rather as a way of showing the performer his or her own most intimate twitches and tics of annoyance, impatience, boredom and attendance, as the tape of this 'pre interview' state is then played back to the actor (Graham 2007: 7).

Lastly, the use of the questionnaire as a means of eliciting performer input has been discussed above,¹³⁰ and Graham writes of the technique in rehearsing *pool (no water)*:

It has some loaded questions directly related to the themes we want to explore and it has some seemingly innocuous questions that also subtly lead us to that darker place (Graham 2006b: 10).

It is clear that the questionnaire not only grants power to those who are allowed to read the answers, but also that, as Graham describes, it seeks to guide those answers in particular ways, prioritising the aesthetic choices of those who are privileged with the overview of its purpose.

This is a model in which performers are not given the whole picture, in which the director(s) (or, in Wynne's case at least, writer) is in charge of the elicitation and development of material and responsible for guiding the mental state of the

¹³⁰ See page 99.

performer – one under which performers are kept in ‘blindness’, rather than the image of the empowered ‘dancer-performer as author-creator’ described by Murray and Keefe (2007: 76) and representative of Graham and Hoggett’s earlier practice. While the term ‘performer blindness’ may suggest an unnecessarily harsh reading of a phenomenon designed after all to ‘liberat[e] the performer from the demands of making the overall show’ (Graham 2006a; Day 10), it is a useful notion which reinterprets, and tempers, such rhetorics of collective collaboration.

Frantic and Ravenhill’s *pool (no water)* thus harked back to methods and aesthetics from the company’s earliest history, but also introduced a new compartmentalisation of directors and performers, described here in terms of ‘performer blindness’. This was in part inevitable given the change in Graham and Hoggett’s positioning within the process over the intervening decade. They clearly also felt exposed by the idea of entering an open-ended R&D process with a writer as well-known (and controversial) as Ravenhill, though all three practitioners have since described their respect for the others and stated their pride at the production which resulted. Lastly, the experience helped to shape further the idea of what Graham and Hoggett were seeking from a writing collaborator. Graham praises Ravenhill’s script, but there is a sense that the writer approached the interaction of text and physicality in the production in ways which Graham and Hoggett found difficult to comprehend or to incorporate in their processes.

Stockholm

The three-year artistic plan in which *pool (no water)* was developed had included several large-scale undertakings, such as *Villette* (2005), a collaboration with Laurie Sansom at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough¹³¹ and movement direction work on *Market Boy* (2006) with Rufus Norris, alongside the other projects Graham and Hoggett were taking on. As a result, the intention was to create a smaller, more intimate show for their next ‘in-house’ production: ‘We knew that *Stockholm* would be a two-hander and completely intimate’ (Graham 2008). The relationship with the National Theatre Studio, established through their work on *Market Boy* and their R&D sessions on *pool (no water)*, meant that the company once again carried out development sessions in the Studio. The collaboration with Bryony Lavery came about at the suggestion of Hoggett’s childhood friend and collaborator John Tiffany. Following meetings with Lavery, the company had an initial two-week development period in December 2006, during which they worked ‘purely on physicality’, followed by a later one-week development phase based on an early draft of the script (Graham 2007: 7). Though, as described below, the ‘gestation’ of the idea was the longest in Frantic’s history, the actual development period was much more contained than that for *pool (no water)*.

It is important not to consider any single play as the apotheosis, the inevitable end-point of a straightforward progression towards perfection of process and product. *Stockholm* (2007) is however often cited with pride by both the directing team of Graham and Hoggett and their writing collaborator on the project, Bryony Lavery. Graham feels that ‘*Stockholm* stands out as one where physicality and text absolutely captured what we wanted to achieve, right from the nugget of the idea’ (Graham 2011a). External factors also support the view of the collaboration as successful: reviews and audience reception were overwhelmingly positive, and, tellingly, the company went on with some enthusiasm to work with Lavery again in quick succession on the NT Connections 2008 play *It Snows...*, 2010’s *Beautiful Burnout*, and 2014’s *The Believers*. This rare recurrence of the collaboration indicates that the

¹³¹ This same team would also work together on *Frankenstein* (2008), and both of these productions featured Georgina Lamb, who had appeared regularly in Frantic shows since the Generation Trilogy, and who would also perform in *Stockholm*.

personal relationship between the writer and the directors, as well as the artistic outcome and creative process, were seen as successful by all parties. Graham's assessment in 2011 that *Stockholm* 'stands out' over more recent productions (even, presumably, those others also involving Lavery) credits the way the project's physicality and text worked together to express the initial idea, which was, as they emphasise regularly in discussions of the show, his and Hoggett's.

Graham speaks of *Stockholm* as novel and a turning point for the company in terms of the 'collaborative' process behind its making.¹³² The happy collaboration experienced by Graham may be attributed to a number of factors, including, in fact, the clearer demarcations of specific roles and phases in the process. As we have seen, Frantic Assembly had progressed from an early incarnation as a relatively ensemble-led, small-scale company focusing on lyrical rather than narrative pieces exploring modern mores. Following their work with Spencer Hazel, they moved in gradual shifts towards higher-profile collaborations and the development of a form of house style, but with a shift away from the sense of a recurrent, regular ensemble of performers, towards casting for each show. Graham and Hoggett had been discussing and circling round the idea which became *Stockholm* for around eight years, and in several other ways, the production represents the culmination of the company's preceding decade of work, as several circumstances combined to provide unusually fertile territory for the collaboration.

The initial idea

It is repeatedly emphasised, in the directors' programme note, the information pack supporting the production, and numerous discussions around the piece, that the impetus which became the play *Stockholm* came from Graham and Hoggett. As Graham explained in a Connecting Conversations panel discussion, 'this idea goes back about eight years, and is probably the longest gestational period we've had for a show' (Graham speaking in Graham *et al.* 2008a).

According to Lavery's story of the genesis of her collaboration with the company, she was initially convinced that she would meet the artistic directors but politely

¹³² 'We learned so much in those weeks, about ourselves, each other and a truly collaborative way of working' (Graham 2007: 7).

decline the project. She had not seen any of the company's previous work¹³³ and describes a certain reticence in meeting them. Lavery was, however, charmed by Graham and Hoggett and found herself agreeing to the project. At that stage, as Lavery recalls, 'they had the title, and [...] Scott kept telling a story about this couple who wanted to be left alone' (Lavery 2011b). Graham's resource pack on *Stockholm* agrees that it was 'the subject matter and the gift of our gab' (Graham 2007: 7) that convinced the writer to sign up to the project. As Lavery puts it,

We were an arranged marriage...the subject matter, Frantic, me...I was very over-commissioned, I was going to politely turn them down...but we met for coffee/croissant...and I just said 'Yes'. I think it was a combination of their seriousness, charm and the subject matter. (Lavery 2011a¹³⁴)

The subject matter which became *Stockholm* dated back to a time when Graham was living in a shared house and overheard a row between one of his housemates and her boyfriend. As the argument became worse and turned into a fight, he and another housemate went upstairs to offer help, 'thinking we were going to be of use,' only to have the couple – together – push the door closed on them.

There was a lot of care on our part, on that approach up the stairs, and we thought we understood it, as their friends. Then when we got really close [...] we were told [through the gesture of closing the door]: 'You don't understand it,' and told to keep out. [...] We thought that was quite a nice journey to take an audience on. (Graham speaking in Graham *et al.* 2008a)

It is worth noting how Graham presents this initial idea, predating the engagement of a writer, as the 'journey' on which they wished to take the audience. This conceptual framing – and its attribution to Graham – is echoed by Lavery in a separate interview, talking about a different collaboration with the company. In discussing the NT Connections piece *It Snows...*, Lavery states that the materials she, Graham and Hoggett had to work on in constructing the piece were three days, six people (the performers),

¹³³ Once she had agreed to work with the company, Lavery went to watch *pool (no water)*, and she describes her somewhat confused reaction: 'I loved the way it was written, thought it was marvellous. And I just went – *what!?* But then I thought – no, I love it. Whatever it is, I love it. I was quite shocked' (Lavery 2011b).

¹³⁴ Lavery characteristically uses punctuation and other typographical elements in her writing to suggest emphases, pauses and other inflections of the verbal; I will hence preserve her typography as closely as possible in all written material of hers that I quote. I nonetheless mark spelling errors '[sic]'.

and then just the story, which actually was Scott's. Scott gave it in such a beautiful way – there's no snow, there's the possibility of snow, it snows, it's here, it's gone. Slush. It's fantastic. (Lavery 2011b)

Lavery suggests that, rather than merely a series of images from which she could work, this constitutes 'a story arc' (*ibid.*), and that setting up this framework is one of the key aspects of the impetus provided by Graham and Hoggett for the writer in these collaborations.

The writer's response

For *Stockholm*, then, the title¹³⁵ and main concept were in place before Lavery was approached or the development sessions booked, and there was a striking arc of images – the move up the stairs, the door pushed closed – already inherent in Graham's story. Lavery's comments above suggest that, like Graham and Hoggett, she is drawn to the strength of the images behind a story, even, arguably, perceiving story as something imagistic. Both Lavery and (in this instance) Graham present images not just as discrete, static materials upon which the writer draws, as in the Nan Goldin photographs employed as inspiration for *Dirty Wonderland* and *pool (no water)*, but sequences which combine into a foundation for a coherent (verbal) text. Lavery also goes beyond this by suggesting that the language of a production – the text in a non-literary sense – should be conceived of as both verbal and physical. This is by no means unique to her collaboration with Frantic Assembly. Writing about her 2001 adaptation of Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* for Shared Experience, Lavery addresses the posited would-be theatrical adapter and contrasts their task with that of the novel's author:

Remember, You Are Not Alone. She [Carter] just had some paper and a typewriter... You have some wonderful, physically-adept, smart, bright actors... a clever director, an imaginative designer... music, lights... The Magic Of Theatre! (Shared Experience 2001: 8)

As this indicates, Lavery is a visually-engaged writer who, moreover, is keen to stress the intelligence and 'physically-adept' nature of the actor. Her writing is

¹³⁵ At least in its original form, 'Stockholm Syndrome'.

infused with the experience of acting and directing.¹³⁶ She also refers to the significance of past experiences with companies like the National Theatre of Brent, with whom she worked on several projects, employing physical improvisation and group development processes (Lavery 2011b).

Lavery's own response to the question of whether she considers herself as carrying out 'R&D' in writing her plays – whether with Frantic or other collaborators – brings in the explicit notion that the process is organic, not clear-cut:

another writer I know calls it “composting”...that’s a better description of the whole dirty organic process. (Lavery 2011a)

This notion of 'composting' chimes too with Hoggett and Graham's discussion of the long 'gestation' of *Stockholm*, and of many of Frantic Assembly's productions ('it may take years for an idea to get into the rehearsal room' Graham & Hoggett 2009: 5), and is, furthermore, a distinctive concept which has long appeared in Lavery's vocabulary.¹³⁷ Malcolm Gladwell describes her distress when she visited him to apologise over her inadvertent and potentially career-threatening plagiarism of elements of one of his articles in writing 1998's *Frozen*: 'I'm still composting what happened', she says (Gladwell 2004). The usage is not unrelated: both of these examples refer to a process which occurs over a lengthy period of time – far longer than the brief R&D or rehearsal periods afforded to Frantic – and subconsciously.

Like Paul Hunter of *Told by an Idiot* (Hunter & Grose 2012), Lavery links the ideas of devising (and 'R&D') with writing: 'Both devising and R&D are what one does to write a good play. And, tragically, a bad one too...' (Lavery 2011a). She has, for a long time, highlighted the importance to her own writing of visual and physical storytelling as well as of work with a team of co-creators. In the *Women Writers' Handbook* (1990), Lavery contributes a piece on 'Writing with Actors... or... The Playwright gets out of her Garret' (Lavery 1990: 48). In this she describes her work with *Monstrous Regiment*, *The National Theatre of Brent*, and others, as involving

¹³⁶ She began several companies of her own in the 1970s and '80s, such as *Les Oeufs Malades*, as well as taking on prominent roles within and collaborations with *Gay Sweatshop* and *Women's Theatre Group*. See, for instance, *Unfinished Histories* (2010).

¹³⁷ There are also echoes of Anne Bogart's conception of devising, as cited by David Williams in his article 'Geographies of Requiredness': 'devising combines “scavenging” and “nesting”,’ (Williams 2010: 198) i.e. the active acquisition of ideas and their 'juxtaposition' and 'weaving [...] together' (*ibid.*). As argued here, though, Lavery's vocabulary of 'composting' is more organic, and subconscious, than 'nesting'.

‘whole armful of gifts from the actors’ (*ibid.*: 48). As with her advice to the adaptor, she recommends a workshop-led, collaborative process which involves setting up ‘scenarios, games, rules...’ and ‘[s]cour[ing] books by Keith Johnstone, Viola Spolin, Stanislavski, Micheal Chekov [*sic*]...any books about Theatre Games and devising processes [...]’ (*ibid.*: 49-50). This joint work in the rehearsal room is still nonetheless followed by a retirement to ‘your lofty garret [...] among your rich collection of actors’ gifts’, to ‘find the structure which will show them off to full advantage’ (*ibid.*: 50).

Although the structure of *Stockholm* was to some extent agreed upon during the first research and development phase (rather than later by the writer in isolation), the rest of the process behind its creation is strikingly similar to Lavery’s description, as I will demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter. As Lavery puts it, though, the experience of working with Frantic was for her

[...] absolutely the first time I’ve been completely led by the movement. Completely. And I think that’s because there’s something about what they do that has narrative in it, which I don’t always see in other physical pieces. And in me, it just presents stories and scenes. So it’s sort of a gift. (Lavery 2011b)

Hence, across a gap of over twenty years, Lavery uses strikingly similar vocabulary to describe both her ideal working process (in her advice to writers), and the actual experience of working with Frantic Assembly. It was ‘a gift’, and Lavery elsewhere describes the pleasure she derived from being empowered to work in this way with Graham and Hoggett, where physicality was the root of the initial development sessions:

It wasn’t so much a challenge; it was a wonderful revelation. [...] I remembered that whenever I’d been in rehearsal [it was clear that] actors absolutely love playing around with their bodies, and they learn everything and they express through their bodies. [...] Very often the only thing that you see at the end of that time, onstage, [is:] they walk into a room and then they walk out. Or they might kiss. It just seemed to me that I had been using five per cent of actors’ abilities with their bodies, so it was a joy to me. (*Xtra!* 2012)

Graham, too, recognises that Lavery ‘was an actor and a director, so she’s got a very practical head’ (Graham 2011a). Her acting experience was often that of comedy or

cabaret, in which, like in the earliest Frantic productions, there is a very direct connection with the audience. Frantic's 'direct address' style found in Lavery a writer whose texts, without obvious exception, also tend to shift in and out of this audience connection through characters' self-narration.¹³⁸

The performer, designer and writer in R&D

It is fundamental to the representation of the processes behind the creation of *Stockholm* that as well as a collaboration between the directors and the writer, the play was developed with the involvement of performers, in three distinct periods of work, all of which were collaborative in varying ways. The work with performers took place over two separate phases of 'development workshops' (Graham 2007: 7) at the National Theatre Studio and BAC, followed by the actual rehearsal period of six weeks (Hoggett speaking in Graham *et al.* 2008a).

The choice to separate 'development' from 'research' in describing *Stockholm* (as discussed above with reference to 'development sessions')¹³⁹ is a public standpoint which reinforces an apparently quite sensible distinction. According to this framing of the process, the 'research' which provided foundational materials for the play took place away from rehearsal rooms and outside the phases of 'development' described, and the 'research' work and 'development workshops' involved different personnel. There was, for instance, no expectation that performers should carry out interviews or background reading, unlike in the processes underlying, for example, Joint Stock's collaborative creation (see, for instance, Ritchie (1987)); though such background reading was carried out by Graham, Hoggett and Lavery and formed the basis of some of their discussions around the theme of Stockholm Syndrome.¹⁴⁰ Graham and Hoggett had, as indicated above, been discussing and gradually investigating the themes for nearly a decade.

¹³⁸ The supporting examples are numerous and span Lavery's career: *Her Aching Heart* (1990) is a two-woman show involving lengthy narration and address of the audience such as 'Dear Watcher' (Lavery 1998: 89); *Origin of the Species* (1984) is another two-hander which includes in its opening monologue 'Are you sitting comfortably? / Then I'll begin.' (Lavery 1998: 4); *Nothing Compares To You* (1995) includes a number of characters who speak only or primarily in monologue to the audience.

¹³⁹ See page 116 above.

¹⁴⁰ The *Stockholm* resource pack (Graham 2007) suggests news articles and other pieces which influenced the creation of the play.

What developed in the workshops at the National Theatre Studio, then, were the beginnings of the physicality which would not only appear in the production, but would shape the story being told. The company emphasises their work in encouraging individual performers to use their own idiosyncratic physicality in regard to their particular performance, but as I have indicated, this had led to certain anxieties and difficulties in some productions prior to *Stockholm*: for instance the difficulties around teaching choreography ‘from the front of the room’ for *pool (no water)*.¹⁴¹ The actors who worked with Graham, Hoggett and Lavery in these first workshops were very definitely not intended as those who would go on to perform in the final work. However, whereas this had been a source of anxiety for Graham when the issue arose impromptu during rehearsals of *pool (no water)*, the deliberate demarcation of *Stockholm*’s first sessions as ‘development’ for a later ‘rehearsal’ phase, as opposed to the lack of clarity of the previous production’s demarcations, seems to allay these difficulties.

This demarcation was clear from the composition of the development stages. The first sessions involved four performers: two engaged primarily as dancers (Delphine Gaborit and Ben Wright) and two as actors (Daniel Evans and Amanda Lawrence) (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 191). Graham and Hoggett’s decision to include four performers in these workshops – when they had already decided to create the show as a two-hander – indicates that a straightforward transition from workshop to production performers was never intended. The second development phase involved Bryan Dick and Georgina Lamb, but while Lamb was ultimately cast as Kali in the premiere production, the actor who ultimately played Todd, Samuel James, did not join the project until the auditions held after the second development phase, and had never worked with Lamb or the company before ‘day one’ of the rehearsal phase. The development workshops were not intended as auditions. However, unusually in the company’s processes, a large amount of the physical material generated through devising exercises in these initial workshops was carried through into the final performance, sometimes in barely altered form.

Graham gives the initial motivation for the make-up of the first development sessions as being because

¹⁴¹ See page 124 above.

we wanted to have the ability to set actor/character tasks as well as dancer/movement tasks. The idea was that they would all have an input into the two characters giving them a well rounded naturalistic and physical potential. (Graham 2007)

This is a markedly different approach from those examined previously, though it is revealing in the division of ‘naturalistic’ and ‘physical’ potential. The division between ‘character’ and ‘movement’ tasks is also revealing, as is Graham’s recollection of consciously dividing the creative process, telling Lavery ‘We will make the beauty; you create the beasts’ (Graham speaking in Graham *et al.* 2008a).

Though Graham and Hoggett hence compartmentalised the research and development process for *Stockholm* to a far greater extent than in previous productions, the division went perhaps further than they had imagined. They had in fact expected that Lavery might write scenes as the first set of sessions went on, as Ravenhill and other past collaborators such as Hazel had done.

We went into [*Stockholm*’s development] thinking that the process might be something similar: we give Bryony all these physical possibilities, or just inspiration for her writing, but what she saw was scenes. And that was utterly inspirational for us actually, to meet this writer who was writing for theatrical possibilities, and could see that – could see the power of silence, or the power of movement and how it had a place alongside her words, and how she could actually write those moments, as space within the text or somehow capturing it poetically through her stage directions. (Graham 2011a)

Here, Graham explicitly describes the ‘space within the text’ which Lavery provided for the theatrical possibilities – not just grand physical choreography, but the expressivity of silence or gentle gesture. In the *Frantic Book*, too, Graham and Hoggett cite Lavery, alongside Abi Morgan and Chris O’Connell, as writers who have ‘delivered this space’ – room for ‘the unsaid’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 170).

Again, Graham contrasts these processes with those behind *pool (no water)*. In the R&D for the initial ‘scratch’ performances forming the foundation of the earlier play, much of the physicality was ‘throwaway stuff... it wasn’t as integral as the *Stockholm* stuff’ (Graham 2008). For instance, the concept of having the couple in *Stockholm* ‘eat each other’ with knives and forks was explored in a movement exercise in the very first workshop session: an ‘R&D’ tape labelled from this first session in December 2006 shows the two female performers playing with knives and

forks while leaning across a table, sliding the cutlery across each other's body and face. The male performers are then videoed doing likewise. The stage directions in the final script (as used in rehearsal and later published) record this section as follows:

They start to drink one another
They start to cut each other up and eat each other...
And pour each other and drink each other
They savour and devour each other (Lavery 2008: 37)

The physical conceits and actual movements explored in the first development phase (in the form of 'notation' by Lavery) often, as the example above suggests, survived more or less intact in the final production and the published script. Graham says of Lavery's directions: 'if you look at the scripts for *Stockholm* or *Beautiful Burnout*, ninety percent of those stage directions are actually about our work' (Graham 2011a).

This is not to say that the initial workshops were merely an extension of the rehearsal process. The tapes recording the 'R&D' phases also record plenty of experiments with physical material which did not appear in the production itself. It is also crucial to remember that almost none of the script was written at this stage, before the first development workshops, and very little was created during these sessions. Lavery recalls having written one scene on the basis of her first meeting with Graham and Hoggett:

I came home from the meeting, sat down, and wrote the prelude to The Big Physical Fight[which is in the final draft virtually unedited]¹⁴² ...and that was all I wrote until after our first two week workshop. (Lavery 2011a)

It is striking that she claims this scene made it through to the final draft 'virtually unedited'. However, it is also telling that Graham's recollection of the process, which is supported by the videos of first-phase workshops, suggests that the physical work carried out in the sessions did not use any textual basis and was largely without dialogue at all. The first phase of development work was booked to last two weeks, in which the company 'looked at every aspect of relationships [...] It was very instinctual [...] It was all about tiny movements and looks between people' (Graham

¹⁴² This is Lavery's text and punctuation rather than an editorial insertion.

speaking in Graham *et al.* 2008a). However, before the full two weeks were up, Graham claims, they

got to the point where at the end of the week and a half, we had two more days left and we were saying ‘So, what should we do?’ and she just said ‘We’ve done it! Enough! Enough; just stop talking!’ And we just had to go – we had to separate because we’d reached that point where it became her private time. (Graham 2008)

Graham also describes the use made of the first workshop phase in creating the environment in which the play would be set. From rehearsal room experiments, the company explored different settings for the play. The decision had already been made to set the piece entirely within the couple’s home, and as a consequence Graham and Hoggett set about exploring the dangers potentially present in various domestic settings. So the initial sessions were used as material on which the designer, Laura Hopkins, could draw as well, and the second set of workshops – and the finished script – benefited from Hopkins’s creative input too:

The first *Stockholm* research and development session was so productive and threw up so many possibilities. Laura absorbed them all and then came back to us in the second research and development session with sketches for a design that would offer our entire wish-list and more [...] (Frantic Assembly 2012: 17)

The company provides a specific example: Graham, Hoggett and Lavery wanted to include an incident in which the physical environment – a specific physical object in one of the rooms – is so threatening and dangerous to Kali that it actually attacks her. In the production, this was the ‘dangerous desk’ in the attic, the surface of which was revealed to be made of water (rather than, as it had appeared, glass) and seemed to drag Kali into itself, rather than being reassuringly solid. This coup de théâtre, a visceral, visual solution to the psychological challenge set by Lavery and the directors, is credited entirely to Hopkins:

It was a moment that we would never have come close to solving without the particular eye of and input from our designer. (*ibid.*)

So the performers were not responsible for the generation of text, and Lavery produced little or no writing for use in the rehearsal room in the first research and development sessions. Graham and Hoggett use this part of the process as an

example of ‘Devising with words – devising through images’ in the chapter of this name in the *Frantic Book*. In that section, Graham and Hoggett reproduce a list of inspirations and quotations generated on the first day of the workshops, where the performers and other contributors were encouraged to discuss the idea of the show through ‘free association’ (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 191-194). Notably, the ideas are not prioritised (in any apparent way), nor are they attributed to any individuals, which ‘might be to protect the person or might be an act of abject laziness’ (*ibid.*: 192). The other effect, though, is to produce an anonymous, and hence democratised, list of inspirations which, as a result of their anonymity, do not impinge upon the ownership of either the original idea or the resulting text. At the end of this fortnight, Graham and Hoggett attempted to produce a ‘framework, a skeletal structure’ – even ‘a dramatic arc’ for the production (*ibid.*: 194), which is a sparse but clear outline for the writing work which Lavery then took on:

A couple
Us
A day
Some events
A plea. Some demands. (An ultimatum – the deadline is reached and passed)
A recipe/A confession
A meal is cooked
The last dance
(The end of the world) (Graham & Hoggett 2012: 194-5)

So while the performers are not tasked with generating ‘text’ in terms of actual verbal contributions to the script, the work of the rehearsal room served to clarify and expand upon Graham’s original plot arc. The democratisation of the work helps to preserve the ‘sense of ensemble’, as Heddon and Milling put it (2006: 178), but also, here, to protect the integrity of the play’s authorship.

By the time it came to ‘day one’ of rehearsals for *Stockholm*, then, the ‘essence’ of the scenes of the play had been devised, the script had been developed in two separate writing phases, physical motifs had been explored in workshop environments, and the design had been incorporated in script and conceptual development work. This is not to suggest that all the work had been done, but the script changed markedly little between the first rehearsal draft and the performance.

Lavery contrasts the writing of *Stockholm* (and *It Snows...*) favourably with that of the later collaboration *Beautiful Burnout*:

Beautiful Burnout didn't fall out, entirely newly made and formed like *Stockholm* and *It Snows...* [...] The difference was that it was much more writing in the rehearsal and of the room. So it was more hairy. (Lavery 2011b)

The basis for *Beautiful Burnout* was much less elaborate, and revolved, fairly simply, around the idea of putting boxing on stage. Graham and Hoggett researched the topic by visiting boxing clubs and gyms and talking to trainers and boxers, but the resulting play was produced, to a far greater extent, through 'writing in the rehearsal'. In Lavery's assessment, this was the hardest of the collaborations, and in part she attributes this to the difficulty of choosing a 'story', in the absence of this clear single arc: '[I]f I went back again I'd give it a bigger story' (Lavery 2011b). The various smaller strands to the piece, she felt, were not 'big' enough, and came about because in lieu of a larger narrative, 'we decided to keep everything on.' Overall, compared to *Stockholm*, 'I didn't get it right at first. And there were more elements in it' (*ibid.*).

Dramaturgy and writer support

Turner and Behrndt describe the dramaturg's role in devising as that of providing stimuli in the rehearsal room: the 'shared starting point for the company' (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 174).¹⁴³ A dramaturg is also at least partially responsible for considering 'how to facilitate rehearsals' (*ibid.*: 175).

With no script to bring to the rehearsals, Canny [the dramaturg on Complicite's *The Elephant Vanishes* (2004)] details the process of setting up a task, discovering possibilities, setting a new task and then gradually beginning to find an emerging pattern that could lead towards what he calls a 'template' for the production. (*ibid.*)

This seems deeply relevant to Graham and Hoggett's position within the research and development processes they have undertaken on productions such as *pool (no water)* and, particularly, *Stockholm*. They work to create a 'sense of ensemble' through empowered 'author-creators' with ownership over their own movement

¹⁴³ In examining 'The Dramaturg and Devising', Turner and Behrndt take as examples Louise Mari's work with Shunt and Steven Canny's with Complicite, among others.

‘material’, but, through compartmentalisation of the research and development stages, the pair retain – where they can – authority over the initial idea.

Their rhetorics of opposition to expectation have continued, with the company repeatedly keen to refresh their practice and image. In 2006, Graham reasserted, against expectations for a ‘physical’, ‘devising’ company, that ‘I love the imagination of the writer, I love their skill – I admire and I envy it’ (Steiger 2006). This is a revealing statement of the respect – and consequently distance – with which the process of writing has been treated in the company’s processes.¹⁴⁴ The ‘imagination of the writer’ is seen as something separate and intangible, and the kinds of textual intervention such as were commonplace on *Klub*, *Flesh* and (of course) *Zero* are not, in these processes, within the remit of the directors. Later productions would, in turn, challenge this, too, with the directors solely responsible for the extensive cutting and reshaping of *Othello* for their 2008 production. In interview at that time, Graham responded to the overemphasis of the writer’s role in their creative processes:

In the past we almost [...] became kind of a watered-down Paines Plough. We had a very good relationship with Vicky Featherstone and the team at Paines Plough. We admired their work and wanted a piece of that relationship with writers. But it wasn’t what I wanted to do in starting the company, [...] and it became clear that neither of us actually wanted that – it was just happening. (Graham 2008)

Othello – suggested to them by Tom Morris – and some subsequent productions such as *Little Dogs* with the National Theatre of Wales, may be seen as Graham and Hoggett’s attempt to reassert the aspect of the company which did not simply involve writer support. But in their rhetoric of collaboration, the writer is one of the most revered contributors.

¹⁴⁴ Graham also voiced a similar respect – for a *particular kind* of writer – around the company’s work with Nicola McCartney: ‘Writers who want to write for theatre fascinate me [...] I get the impression that some playwrights actually write for print – to see their words duplicated in books, to live for the ages’ (Logan 2001).

Frantic Assembly – conclusions

As Turner and Behrndt argue, concerning the question of playwright support in the dramaturging of new writing, working on a play as both dramaturg and director is possible, though ‘delicate’ (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 137). In Frantic’s case this is possibly even more delicate, as Graham and Hoggett are operating as both literary manager – giving feedback ‘in the line and in the language’ (*ibid.*: 140) – and dramaturg – thinking about ‘physicality’ and ‘the whole stage picture’ (*ibid.*). Furthermore, as directors, they are also deeply responsible for motivating, training and in other ways working with the performers. The compartmentalisation of separate phases, roles and responsibilities, even when not expressly or officially spelled out by the pair, is a notable growing trend in the company’s work. This is generally positioned as democratising and enabling creativity; for instance, in explaining the processes behind creating *Beautiful Burnout*’s physicality, Graham states:

It is fairly standard choreographic practice of ours to split up the creative task like this. It gives everyone an input without crippling them with any responsibility for what the finished scene might look for. (Graham 2010: 20)

Seeking ‘input’ without distributing ‘responsibility’ seems characteristic, and also serves to retain a degree of priority in the creative process for Graham and Hoggett themselves: a responsibility for the artistic vision and creativity behind the pieces which reviews, not to mention other institutional structures such as the copyrighting of playtexts, struggle to encapsulate in ways representative of the deep and continuing contribution to the plays which Graham and Hoggett make. Their compartmentalisations may also be seen as geared towards a more equitable attribution of the play’s authorship in ways which can nonetheless be accommodated by extant institutional structures. So the performers employed for research and development sessions are those sourced either from within Frantic’s constellation of ‘Creative Associates’ or from the ensembles provided by the institutions who support the R&D process (so far, the NT Studio or BAC). These practitioners are paid for their work in the process, but there is no expectation of ongoing ownership of the material thus generated, in either performance or financial terms.

The collaboration with Lavery, particularly on their first work together on *Stockholm*, provides a clear-cut example which sprung easily from their shared language and conceptualisation of the process:

So that led to a kind of feeling of equality between us in making the work, which was great – it means you work really quickly and organically and all that. (Graham 2011a)

However,

There was a sense that the world around us hadn't quite caught up with that – didn't know how to evaluate it, didn't know what to call it. And that has very real implications, that we've had to fight for, because Bryony owns the rights to the play and the implication from any agent is that as soon as the writer writes a word, they own everything. [...] And [...] Bryony isn't going 'all mine all mine,' she doesn't see it as *her* work – she sees it as *our* work. (*ibid.*)

The shared nature of the practice which Graham and Hoggett evolved together is what has led to these struggles – with agents and other institutional representatives, rather than fellow practitioners – 'to get some kind of credit for the work' (*ibid.*). Shared understandings of visual and verbal languages for creating new work have led to clearly productive relationships with many practitioners, as Lavery attests. However, they have also led to these problems of categorisation and of the negotiation of royalties, especially as the company's plays are published with major publishers such as Oberon, and the rights available for subsequent performance.

Graham and Hoggett's techniques of playwright support, textual analysis and physical expression have been developed and learnt over nearly two decades of professional performance, choreography and direction. Within the company's rhetoric there is a constant sense of ongoing development and refinement of the process: Graham describes being inspired to try new improvisatory practices through collaborations with Rufus Norris such as *Doctor Dee* (2011): 'The apprenticeship goes on and on...' (Graham 2011a). With Hoggett's departure from the company in 2013, enabling him more freely to pursue work on Broadway, both he and Graham are now moving into a new phase in which they take sole responsibility for the directing, devising and choreography work in the rehearsal room. Yet both continue to emphasise collaboration as a key to their vision and process. 'I like working with

other people,’ Hoggett told Lyn Gardner recently. ‘It’s where I flourish. With any production I know that, if I’m the smartest person in the room, I’m in the wrong room’ (Gardner 2015). Graham suggests that Hoggett’s desire to work overseas conflicted with his own ties in the UK (Graham has a wife and two children). Work on *The Believers*, his first new show without Hoggett, ‘felt strange’ (*ibid.*). Again, though, he emphasises his willingness to learn (echoing our discussion in 2011), and reiterates the sense of creative reinvention which has characterised Frantic’s work over the past two decades:

I’ve found a new confidence, and know that when I have an idea I can just get on with it and not wait to hear back from someone in another time zone. It’s invigorating and liberating, and I learn something new every day. (*ibid.*)

The *de facto* collaboration of the co-artistic director structure – the ‘core of two’ (Mermikides & Smart 2010: 17) – has now been disbanded. However, close but compartmentalised work with trusted collaborators (for instance, Bryony Lavery for Graham, and John Tiffany for Hoggett) looks set to remain central to both Graham’s and Hoggett’s evolving practice.

3. FORCED ENTERTAINMENT

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3. FORCED ENTERTAINMENT

Introduction

The interactions of devising and writing in the work of Forced Entertainment, from the institutional point of view, clearly differ from those involved in Frantic Assembly's processes. The company does not work with outside writers in any straightforward sense, and uses and frames writing in ways which differ in numerous regards from those examined for Frantic Assembly. As in that company, though, a significant energy is invested in finding methods of collectively generating material for performances, with the writer-director Tim Etchells as a sort of hub for the creativity. While there are aesthetic and processual differences between the two companies, there are also productive overlaps and points of comparison. It is in the rhetoric employed by Etchells (and, to a lesser extent, the other members of the company) that the differences are most marked, and this rhetoric derives from and contributes towards the ways in which Etchells and the company seek to sustain creative energies and construct their aesthetics.

In contrast to Frantic Assembly, Forced Entertainment have long been the subject of numerous studies and provided material for theoretical works, encouraged by the company's (and in particular Tim Etchells's) own engagement, since at least the 1990s, with academic discourses. In light of this fact, I aim to contextualise the development of Forced Entertainment's creative processes and rhetoric, with particular focus on the role(s) of writing, and of creativity in general. As the main producer of text – the regularly-credited writer for the company – and latterly artistic director, Etchells has produced a substantial amount of theoretical writing around the company's work and participated in innumerable interviews and panel discussions, and I examining this in detail for the insights into the company's processes and attitudes it suggests. As Cathy Naden says to Judith Helmer in 'Always Under Investigation: From *Speak Bitterness* to *Bloody Mess*', '[a] big part of making the work has always been Tim writing about it' (Helmer 2004: 73).

So writing is to be considered for the role it plays around the company, but also, of course, within the company's creative processes. The company's output is not, naturally, a single product, but it is certainly continuous in a variety of ways, with

ongoing themes, approaches and strands discernible. Malzacher and Helmer are right to point to the presence of ‘*leitmotifs, leitinterests, leitideas, leitrules and leitatmospheres*’ (Malzacher & Helmer 2004: 12) throughout the company’s vast array of work – yet Etchells cannily advises care in interpreting any of his statements as fixed: ‘Take caution’, he warns, as his remarks ‘come from someone whose heart is changeable and whose theatre practice shifts in and out of love with other art-forms, other media, tricks and toys’ (Etchells 1999a: 94). The case study productions will hence be considered from deep within this context of the company’s ongoing, growing project.

The company’s ‘core’ of performers and collaborators¹⁴⁵ has been, roughly, constant over around thirty years (though the shows are performed by shifting combinations of these individuals, and with frequent input from other contributors) and a couple of ‘key texts’ (1999’s *Certain Fragments*, by Tim Etchells and 2004’s *Not Even a Game Anymore*, edited by Helmer and Malzacher) offer insights into their methods and rhetoric at given points in time. The company’s work is notably accumulative, of approaches, tropes and styles, and even costumes, stagings and individual lines.

Not Even a Game Anymore can be seen in part as an authorised collection of essays on the company, and provides much interview material and analysis towards a history up to 2004. Etchells’s own *Certain Fragments* was published earlier, in 1999, and it presents more of an attempt to capture in writing the methods and concepts making up the performed pieces. It is also a collation of several of the texts which contributed to the company’s shows, and of materials surrounding other performances: programme notes and some journalistic texts authored by Etchells.

Prior to this, secondary material on the company’s performances and methods is scarcer, but through examination of the available material and of rehearsal and performance videos and contemporary reviews, I seek to build a picture of the accumulation of method and aesthetic. Alison Oddey’s work on the company in her *Devising Theatre* (1994) was one of the first to take a detailed, albeit scattered, look at the processes behind Forced Entertainment’s creations, particularly focusing on 1990’s *Some Confusions in the Law about Love*. Oddey observes that the company’s

¹⁴⁵ See pp. 11-14 above for more on the company’s formation. Malzacher and Helmer refer to Robin Arthur, Tim Etchells, Richard Lowdon, Cathy Naden, Terry O’Connor and Claire Marshall as the ‘core group’ (2004: 12).

members ‘work[...] towards a product over a long period of time’ (1994: 35). While Oddey almost certainly meant this to indicate the ‘five to six months’ hard work’ (*ibid.*: 91) exerted on any individual show, the comment can also be profitably applied to the idea of the product being the longer-term project, and incorporating the company’s whole, growing, body of work. As I argued in Chapter 1, the notion of a starting point is not straightforward, though companies and commentators may have various reasons to declare one for any given project. This is particularly amplified in the case of Forced Entertainment, as the creative team is always substantially – and often entirely – the same from one project to another, leading to a growing mesh of references and common interests on which they draw in ‘beginning’ work on a new production. Etchells has pointed out that ‘nothing much gets wasted’, and that the ‘chunks of material’ which get ‘throw[n] out’ from one production will often resurface ‘in the next show or the show after that or ten years later’ (Etchells in Heathfield *et al.* 2006).

The notion of a ‘day one’ for any of the company’s projects is implicitly problematised by Etchells, for instance in interview with Giannachi and Luckhurst in 1999, responding to a question about how he starts work on a piece:

As a company, we will develop a list of things that we are vaguely interested in, such as a couple of fragments of text, an idea about space, some ideas about costume or action or whatever. Then from day one we’ll begin to work with these things in combination, exploring them through improvisation, adding new ideas, mutating them. (Etchells quoted in Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 25)

In this way, though Etchells does not openly query the notion of a ‘day one’ for the project, his description of the order of events – developing a list of vague interests, *then from day one* working on them suggests that the base material – the ‘list of things that we are vaguely interested in’ – is in circulation since *before* ‘day one’ of the work of combination and improvisation. Elsewhere, Etchells reinforces the notion that initial concepts and inchoate material builds up prior to its exploration as a group, so ‘you’ve got these characters and you’ve got these images, and they’re rattling round in your head [...] and just waiting three or four months’ (Etchells on *The South Bank Show*, Kelly 1997).

Arguing for the company's output as full of – indeed largely predicated upon – repeated performance tropes and concepts, Karen Jürs-Munby describes their work as being 'palimpsest' in nature, with, quoting the company's *A Decade of Forced Entertainment* (1994), 'things [being] used and reused, [...] things mov[ing] in and out of the work' (Jürs-Munby 2006: 8). Freeman's similar discussion borrows the term '*pentimento*' from Italian art criticism, which is used to describe the way in which 'an earlier pencilled sketch can show through the surface of subsequent paintings' (Freeman 2007: 131). There is a similar accretion of critical vocabulary and framing around the performance works. Furthermore, the works themselves often explicitly invite interpretation in the light of knowledge of the processes of their creation. The introduction to the information pack for 2010's *The Thrill of It All* suggests that potential audience members should watch a YouTube video about the show *before* attending:

We have also made a short film which we'd love you to watch before you come. No plot spoilers [*sic*], just the company talking and [*sic*] their working practice and how the performance developed. (Forced Entertainment 2010b: 2)¹⁴⁶

For these reasons, then, I will examine two Forced Entertainment productions, *Emanuelle Enchanted* (1992) and *Speak Bitterness* (1994-5), in detail but very much within the context of their position in the company's body of work.

My first task below will be to track company vocabularies – the ways in which the company members talk about 'their working practice'. As with my examination of Frantic Assembly, I will begin with a brief consideration of how these vocabularies and practices originated in the practitioners' education and early influences – the precedents on which they drew at first. Throughout, I will pay particular attention to the public stance(s) of the company's (latterly) artistic director, Tim Etchells. As the regular spokesman for the company, as well as the named writer and director of many of the pieces, Etchells is clearly in a privileged position within the process, though he frequently mitigates and demurs from outright ownership of all of these positions in any straightforward way. In interrogating his conceptualisation of his

¹⁴⁶ Frantic Assembly's attitude is diametrically opposed. The information pack for *Lovesong* gives a 'Spoiler alert!': 'While *Lovesong* may not have a twist we still believe that, like most things, it is best to experience it before dissecting it. We cannot stop you from reading this resource pack before you see the show but we can implore you! We have no shame in that matter' (Graham 2011b: 3).

role, I continue to identify a number of what I have dubbed *anxieties*: concerns to which he has returned repeatedly, in some cases implicitly, and which contain paradoxes and tensions around the framing of the company's work, and the individual's position within it. By tracing interviews, reviews and other critical material, then, I aim to establish a history of Forced Entertainment's development towards their current framework of creative practices, their hybrid forms and slow accretion of material for performance.

Oddey's aforementioned work provides a useful analysis of the company towards the end of its first decade, while Alex Mermikides's chapter on 2002's *The Travels* (in Harvie & Lavender 2010) provides a more recent view of the company; though *The Travels* was a quite unusual example of the company's output, Mermikides's approach nonetheless offers further first-hand evidence and the beginnings of a framework for (some of) the company's processes.

The company's roots

Early structure and precedents

Forced Entertainment's early years saw the development of creative processes within a close-knit group of colleagues and friends, through a rotating directorship, communal living and work, and a focus on group (and sub-group) discussions. On this latter point, Oddey observes that 'members of Forced Entertainment are clear about the role of discussion in their approach to work. Some discussions involve the whole group, many do not' (1994: 71). Furthermore, she suggests that 'sub-committees' of two directors and sometimes one performer were found by the group to be useful in separating from the rest to 'mak[e] practical, pragmatic decisions, whilst always returning to the whole group for criticism and help' (*ibid.*). Oddey's observation that 'very early on, they discovered the whole group to be an unwieldy object' (*ibid.*) is telling. The company's leadership and its status as a 'co-operative' have clearly shifted over the years, but the core principle in much of their rhetoric has remained that of group decision-making, albeit of a 'strange kind', as is summed up by company member Robin Arthur in 1998: 'I don't really know if we really constitute as a co-operative anymore, but essentially that has always been the way that the company has worked. It is a strange kind of pragmatic socialism' (in McGuire 1998: 12).

These approaches were forged in circumstances demanding very close group work, through the then-tiny Drama course at Exeter University in the early 1980s at which most of the company's personnel met. According to Etchells, at that time a year group on the course consisted of around a dozen students, who would all work together closely, with taught studio time alone totalling at least fifteen hours a week.¹⁴⁷ The content of these sessions was, in Etchells's recollection, very much focused around ensemble work rather than the development of individual technique; he cites Grotowski and Artaud, along with Meyerhold and Balinese dance, as the main approaches he remembers – 'non-narrative, non-Western, [...] non-mainstream approaches to what performance might be' (Etchells 2012).

¹⁴⁷ This information is drawn from Etchells's comments during an interview with Brian Catling, available on the European Live Art Archive website (Etchells 2012).

Following this experience, Etchells performed in several of the company's early works before stepping out of the (performance) limelight for the most part. He performed the voiceover texts of several early works, and was onstage in at least two (*Nighthawks* in 1985 and *The Day that Serenity Returned to the Ground* in 1986); his role since then has become more and more openly and exclusively defined as one of director and 'leader' of the company.¹⁴⁸ This echoes Graham and Hoggett's shift from performer-devisers to non-performing directors, though their move away from performance has been more definitive. Etchells, on the other hand, does still tend to perform in many of the more recent 'durational' works (in several iterations of *Quizoola!* as recently as 2014, some performances of *Speak Bitterness*, and 2000's *And on the Thousandth Night*). He also appeared in 1994's retrospective 'performance/lecture' *A Decade of Forced Entertainment*, and in 2014 appeared alongside Richard Lowdon in some performances of *The Notebook* when Robin Arthur was unexpectedly unable to do so.

Oddey observes that in the early 1990s it was the company's practice, as indicated above, to have 'two directors, sharing responsibility for rehearsals, performance quality, steering meetings, and the eventual form of the show' (1994: 44). This is reminiscent of what Mermikides and Smart identify as the 'core of two' structure (2010: 17) in many recent devising groups. However, in the example of Forced Entertainment's early productions, the partnership, though often that of Etchells and Richard Lowdon, would nonetheless vary from production to production¹⁴⁹.

Officially, this was to change shortly after Oddey's observation of the company, with Etchells becoming far more openly the leader figure, and most productions crediting him as the sole director. The processes of group discussion observed by Oddey and integral to the creation of the earliest works remain ingrained, however. Much of

¹⁴⁸ His biography as Professor of Performance at the University of Sheffield's School of English describes him in these terms (University of Sheffield 2013).

¹⁴⁹ According to the Forced Entertainment website, of the twelve works classed as 'theatre productions' created in the company's first decade, Etchells and Lowdon are credited jointly with the direction of four pieces, and this pair along with other members of the company are credited with two more. Etchells receives a solo directing credit for three of the productions; Tim Etchells and Terry O'Connor are credited with direction for 1987's *200%* and *Bloody Thirsty*. Robin Arthur and Cathy Naden are credited with 1985's *Nighthawks*, the sole occurrence in the company's history of a production's directing team not naming Etchells. The anniversary show *A Decade of Forced Entertainment* (1994) receives the uncharacteristic credit 'Conceived and devised by the company' (Forced Entertainment 2014). While these are important indications of the company's representation of its processes at a given time, it must also be noted that the information available on some programmes or in *Not Even a Game Anymore* in some cases varies from that recorded on the website.

Etchells's portrayal of his own role hinges upon downplaying the guru-like authority which the position of sole director might tend to confer. Yet at other times he is more content to inhabit the role of the company leader, and the number of interviews and volume of written material he has produced amplify this impression.

Etchells's above discussion of his university education is atypical within the company's rhetoric, and Forced Entertainment's members, like Frantic Assembly's, only occasionally mention direct, training-based precedents for their work. Also like Graham and Hoggett, Forced Entertainment's members more frequently cite the influence of other forms than theatrical or dance-based ones; they refer to films, music and modern art. However, there are some identifiable procedural and aesthetic precedents which the company's members do on occasion admit. The influences they most regularly refer to as important are those of Impact Theatre Co-operative and the Wooster Group. In fact, early reviews such as Allen Saddler's of the company's first production, *Jessica in the Room of Lights* (1984), recognised that '[t]he sound and visual style of Impact Theatre is stamped all over Room Of Lights' (Saddler 1985); as Frantic Assembly began as 'Volcano clones', so Forced Entertainment bore the influence of Impact on their sleeves. Even part of their original name, which enshrined the ideal of communal living and creation, is borrowed from Impact: both companies described themselves as a 'Theatre Co-operative'.

The Impact Theatre style has been described as one of 'stunningly dense and dystopic multi-media collages' (Kershaw 2004: 368) and it is this textured and 'atmospheric theatre' (as Saddler called *Jessica in the Room of Lights* in 1985) which is recognisable in early Forced Entertainment performances. Though no video was made of *Jessica in the Room of Lights*,¹⁵⁰ this is the only exception to the increasingly compulsive documentation of performance and rehearsal by the company. In the discussion of the company's style, as throughout this chapter, I have drawn on large quantities of the video and audio material preserved by Forced Entertainment online and in the British Library Sound and Moving Image archive.

¹⁵⁰ As reported by Etchells in Bailes (2011: 79).

Early style

Forced Entertainment's early style, including that of *Jessica in the Room of Lights*, involved small casts, repetitive movements, a simple, singular aesthetic which was often streamlined and clean, and odd, dream-like texts 'narrating' often seemingly unconnected stage action. *The Set-up*, which premiered at the National Review of Live Art in October 1985, exemplifies this with its minimal pre-recorded text and simple, almost clown-like moments of choreography. In one section, the woman (Susie Williams) attempts to light a cigarette, while the men (Huw Chadbourn and Robin Arthur) interfere, repeatedly blowing out her match. She tries twice in a repeated gesture, before bluffing and moving the match to avoid the men. This use of bare-bones clowning – the 'rule of three' in its simplest form, and performed in a deadpan which could be described as po-faced – is present in many of the company's works.

In *Nighthawks*, which also premiered in October 1985, directed by Cathy Naden and Robin Arthur, a bare bar-room is the setting for similar basic movement games. Susie Williams is again pursued, this time more physically, from seat to seat, in an increasingly frenzied (non-)musical chairs as the men attempt to get closer to her, following simple movement rules which dictate their repositioning of themselves around the empty seats. There are also moments of choreographed ensemble gesture in each of these shows, as well as in 1986's *The Day that Serenity Returned to the Ground* (hereafter *Serenity...*). This latter saw the onstage performers speak – a rare occurrence in these early productions – and here, too, repetition and 'rules' dominated:

You're looking good. You're looking good. We feel fine. We feel fine.
Everything is normal. We will be with you soon. (Forced Entertainment
1986a)

The voiceover texts of the earlier productions had at least hinted at narratives: Saddler identified the story of *Jessica in the Room of Lights* as 'two young girls sharing the delights of cinema going during a hot London summer [etc...]' (Saddler 1985). *Nighthawks*'s voiceover offered glimpses of a similarly fragmentary story including 'some guy named Paul' 'dreaming a twitching dream' (Forced Entertainment 1986b) of an imaginary United States gleaned from films and the

Edward Hopper paintings suggested by the title (all delivered, in frankly unconvincing ‘American’ accents, by Naden and Etchells). The text of *Serenity...*, as spoken by the performers, on the other hand, is abstract in the extreme, working with their arch, simultaneous hand gestures – reminiscent of David Byrne’s spasmodic and ritual gesticulation in the music video to 1981’s ‘Once in a Lifetime’ – to create a stark, mannered atmosphere.¹⁵¹

The sets themselves, all created by Richard Lowdon (and, until his departure from the company, Huw Chadbourn), were also instrumental in conjuring this environment, and regularly featured a significant moment of transformation or revelation, something absent from the simpler and fixed sets of more recent performances. So in *Nighthawks*, the bar-room backdrop of the first half opens out, after a particular flurry of activity, to reveal a stylised motel room with a high window, the setting for the calmer moments of the latter half. In *Serenity...*, the set design consists of a constrained space formed by a box (open to the audience) which the performers enter through a zippered cloth doorway, with a television screen in the back wall and low benches at either side. This evokes an isolated, claustrophobic science fiction setting to which the text also contributes, with its blankly-delivered count-downs and IT and technical references, for instance to a performer ‘talking to himself. [...] In binary’ (Forced Entertainment 1986a). Later, the benches are opened up to reveal lightboxes within, generating a new dynamic in the confined space.

The Exeter University Drama course shaped the company’s approach but, more than this, their visits (with shows such as *The Set-up*) to the annual National Review of Live Art – along with documentaries on the likes of the Wooster Group, Robert Wilson, Station House Opera, Pina Bausch and others – shaped their aesthetic.¹⁵² Impact Theatre Co-operative were the most evident antecedents, as noted above, and

¹⁵¹ The text is nonetheless comprised of comprehensible phrases; Oddey seems to have overlooked this production when she claims that *200% & Bloody Thirsty* was the performance in which ‘they had used text on stage for the first time’ (Oddey 1994: 88). *Serenity...*’s (non-voiceover) text may have been (evocative) near-gibberish, but it was by no means ‘compris[ed] entirely of sound or vocal rhythm’ (*ibid.*), as Oddey suggests all onstage speech had been up to 1988.

¹⁵² This ‘lineage’ is acknowledged, and placed at least as early as 1986, by Etchells in *Certain Fragments* (1999a: 19). Etchells frequently acknowledges the support of Artsadmin, ICA Live Arts (including its director for much of the 1990s, Lois Keidan), and the National Review of Live Art (including its director, Nikki Milican) in providing ‘a space in which we and many other artists have been able to question, frame and reinvent our work’ (*ibid.*: 6).

a significant encomium to their style came when Etchells was asked in 1995 to describe one ‘life-changing moment’ in his theatrical experience, for a *Guardian* feature entitled ‘Dramatic Moments’ (Etchells 1995). He chose Impact Theatre Co-operative’s (and Russell Hoban’s) seminal *The Carrier Frequency* (1986), calling the work ‘raw’, and saying that despite its ‘significance and major themes, [... it] still found time to be silly, wild, barbaric slapstick.’ The aspiration to this combination of elements is evident from Forced Entertainment’s own work, such as 1991’s *Marina & Lee*, in which sequences featuring extended cartoon kung fu sound effects and violence are juxtaposed with the lists of sometimes grim ‘confessions’, and an ending that Kenneth Rea found ‘very moving’¹⁵³ (Rea 1991). Etchells picks out *The Carrier Frequency*’s ‘flooded stage’ and ‘post-nuclear’ setting, and the performance’s set was clearly an influence on the scaffolding and platforms used in *200% & Bloody Thirsty* (1987), as well as, more obliquely, on that production’s mounds of clothes which echo the actual flooding of the Impact piece.

Rea, in 1987, recognised the tendency of performance groups at the time to cite film as a main source of inspiration (particularly Tarkovsky, an influence also cited by Etchells in *Certain Fragments* 1999a: 20). As mentioned, the very earliest Forced Entertainment pieces did indeed draw upon cinema for their styles – often conjuring an imagined America, as, explicitly, in *Nighthawks* – and despite the abstract, non-narrative turns to their texts, these pieces were largely stylistically coherent, tackling a single genre or concept in each piece. As early as 1986, though, the company’s rhetoric had begun to shift, and instead prioritised the role of television over that of cinema. Etchells has long stated an interest in the ways in which technology affects the manner in which individuals view the world, writing that ‘[w]hat interests me about technology is precisely the way it has of changing everything, from the body up, through thought and outwards’ 1999a: 96). Writing in 1994, Etchells reaffirmed the company’s 1986 declaration that their performances were ‘understandable by anybody brought up in a house with the TV always on’ (in Shank 1996: 109).¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Even the ‘rawness’ of Impact’s performances was echoed in the production as picked up by Rea’s review: the full, contextualised quotation mentioned reads ‘For much of the time, *Marina and Lee* feels like a work in progress, though the ending is very moving’ (Rea 1991).

¹⁵⁴ It is possible that Etchells is mistaken about the date here, as he attributes this to a publicity document for *200% and Bloody Thirsty*, a show which was not debuted until October 1988. In any case, this is an early and much-cited statement by the company.

Furthermore, in his essay 'On Performance and Technology', published in *Certain Fragments*, Etchells links the medium of television to the multiplicity of narratives in Forced Entertainment's theatre, and writes of the appeal of a medium which can happen in the background, simultaneously to (the narratives of) one's day-to-day life (Etchells 1999a: 94-7). While this interest in incomplete narratives is present from the very first performance, the shift in the metaphor selected to encapsulate their performance mode, from cinema (which conventionally demands certain generic unity – 'Tuning In' as Etchells puts it (1999a: 109-112)) to television, becomes particularly significant from *Some Confusions in the Law about Love* (1989) onwards.

Etchells himself identified this moment as the key exemplar of the effects of the 'remote control culture' (Etchells 1996: 111-2) on the company's work. *Some Confusions in the Law about Love* (hereafter *Some Confusions...*) saw a bad (not-even-trying) Elvis 'impersonator' and other scenes from a tacky nightclub world juxtaposed with a narrative depicting two 16th-Century love-suicides, dressed as skeletons, and a supposed 'satellite link-up' (in fact just pre-recorded video) to a glitzy showbiz couple in Hawaii who describe their act in a series of bizarre and stuttering interviews which give the impression of being constantly on the verge of falling apart. Beginning with focused (albeit abstract, even absurdist), single-idiom performances, then, the company soon introduced to their stylistic palette a collaging of different impulses and narratives, inspired by several live art companies they saw at international festivals and on television.

Outsider status

By the time that Oddey came to witness the creative processes behind *Some Confusions...* (from 1989 to 1990), the company had been in existence for five years and had created six theatre pieces. Moreover, it had swiftly gained support and patronage from the likes of Arts Admin, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and Sheffield City Council, and Etchells had already begun to serve the functions of an artistic director. The 1987 ICA season 'Home Work' saw the company gaining a large amount of exposure, and Etchells quickly established himself as a quotable practitioner not only speaking on behalf of Forced Entertainment but held up as an example of a wider 'Live Art' movement. 'Most theatre concentrates on one narrative strand, but we're more interested in ambiguity,' he is cited as saying by

Rea (1987). ‘Any one scene in our shows could have five or six different narrative strands. So there’s room for the audience to make meaning for themselves’ (*ibid.*).

The company’s success with funding continued as it gained its first Arts Council grant, for *Let the Water Run its Course...*¹⁵⁵ in 1986. This project funding was repeated for *200% & Bloody Thirsty* and *Some Confusions...*. The National Review of Live Art (NRLA) had previously commissioned *The Set-up*, and Barclays Bank later supported the company (and nine others) through their New Stages sponsorship from 1990-92, funding performances at the Royal Court and the ICA. The ICA (headed by Lois Keidan) then provided a regular London-based stopping-off point for tours, and the British Council supported productions which toured overseas.

The company’s positioning of themselves as outsiders – for instance in Etchells’s later remarks that in the UK the company felt largely ‘locked out’ of the theatre environment in Britain (in Brine & Keidan 2007: 27) – therefore requires some unpicking. In this contribution to Brine and Keidan’s *Programme Notes*, Etchells claims that ‘at home, we languished in a strange marginal position. Feeling shut-out of larger spaces, locked out of “the mainstream” (whatever that might be) [...]’ (*ibid.*). He does acknowledge that this is in part due to the fact that the company members themselves were ‘at the same time perhaps rather too bound up with the idea of being “outside”, with a self-imposed role of exile, to do much about it’ (*ibid.*). It was only the encouragement of ‘a few strategic programmers, and [...] a few people inside the funding system’ that meant that the company ‘took to assuming that doors were (or might be) open instead of closed. We got interested in pursuing a dialogue with larger spaces in the UK’ (*ibid.*: 27-8).

It is important, however, to read these remarks in the context in which they were made: that of a company which by 2007 had long been performing throughout Europe, and had been the recipient of substantial Arts Council funding, with almost uninterrupted project funding leading to Forced Entertainment’s later becoming a national portfolio company. In comparison to that situation, the small auditoria (and converted spaces) in which the company played at first, despite the enthusiastic support of the likes of Lois Keidan and Nikki Milican, may in retrospect have seemed like slow progress: in 2005, too, Etchells reminisced that ‘[i]nterest grew

¹⁵⁵ The full title is (*Let the Water Run its Course*) to the Sea that Made the Promise.

slowly but steadily' (Max Prior 2005: 9). Moreover, the lengthy creative processes and involvement of a large number of individuals (all the core personnel as well as regular collaborators Hugo Glendinning and John Avery, and other occasional contributors) make the company resource-hungry: Oddey points out that at the time of her research the Arts Council money would not support the full five to six months desired by the company in the development of new work. From the vantage point of an abundantly-funded, internationally-recognised company, the early years must inevitably have looked like ones of compromised process and inadequate payment for the hours spent; in fact, as Graham and Hoggett have also pointed out, scrimping and work for free is an expected part of the early life of almost any theatre company.¹⁵⁶ It is also important to note that Etchells's comments were made in a book inviting a dialogue between Live Art and 'the mainstream', and that his contribution marks part of his continued attempt to define himself against this latter concept.

There is a cachet which accompanies the company's higher profile, but members of Forced Entertainment today still seek to preserve their outsider status, and often argue that their product is not unendingly scalable. Robin Arthur in 1998 suggests that an important moment came, despite the company's expansion, in '[w]orking out about five years ago that we didn't want to go and play in huge theatres in front of 600 people' (McGuire 1998: 11). Playing to auditoria of this size endangers the anti-theatre, outsider element of their rhetoric which is important not only to their funding as 'trailblazers' (Arts Council 2014), but also, I argue, to their own creative processes. Arthur himself goes on to assert that their 'form' itself,

a form that's about small scale and about a kind of intimacy with people, is for me, one of the biggest political parts of what we do because it's a rejection of all those notions about 'up-scaling' and 'size is important' and mass communication being incredibly important. (McGuire 1998: 11)

Fundamentally, performing in the largest venues on their tours feels to him 'horrible [...]. You don't like the lack of communication or the lack of contact' (*ibid.*).

¹⁵⁶ See, for instance, pp. 86 and 101 above.

Claire Marshall also reflects on the company's growth, in a written reminiscence, 'On Touring in the UK', presented to a 2012 symposium entitled 'Getting It Out There', in which she recalls the moment when, after years of touring,

We started to say: let's be more nimble
let's play bigger stages
let's do fewer gigs for more people
let's find an audience to grow older with us (Marshall 2012)

This conscious effort to shift from intense and wide-spread touring of small venues is situated, in Marshall's loose chronology, roughly in the early- to mid-1990s: she refers shortly after the cited section to the company's 1996 ICA-organised tour of three US cities. Marshall continues, with obvious irony: 'We said it would be ridiculous if we were still doing this when we were forty...' (*ibid.*). So the situation as of 2012 was that

now we do play some bigger stages – and some small. [...] And we say: we don't like buildings where the audience and performers never really meet, buildings where they're surprised that you can do the laundry and perform, buildings where they want to know who wrote it; buildings where there isn't a bar people actually want to stay in. (*ibid.*)

The connection between performer and audience is emphasised here, and while Marshall expresses excitement about creating work for specific (single) venues or live-streaming (as for 2013 and 2014's 24-hour versions of *Quizoola!*), she still 'really liked being in Taunton not so very long ago – with a disparate bunch of people who wanted to be in the same room, the kind of gig where small connections are made [...]' (*ibid.*).

The regular performers are perhaps inevitably the most likely to acknowledge (and pine for) this experience,¹⁵⁷ but Marshall's piece also implicitly acknowledges that there are compromises to be made between the desire to continue performing to larger audiences as a largely consistent ensemble and the needs of the individuals as they age and continue their own personal lives, with their concomitant requirements

¹⁵⁷ See also Cathy Naden's acknowledgement to David Williams that in performing her list of audience deaths in *First Night* in Adelaide 2004, she could not actually see individual audience members, despite appearing to address them personally (Williams 2009: 65).

for stability (as quoted above, Marshall writes that ‘it would be ridiculous if we were still doing this when we were forty....’; she, like Etchells, now has children).

Compromise has also been required between the politics of close engagement mentioned by Arthur, Marshall and Naden, and the benefits to process (and funding) brought by collaborations with larger European theatres and producers. Etchells, as the artistic director and hence usually outside the performance itself, focuses on these positives for the process. Interestingly, the first reason Etchells gives Dorothy Max Prior in explaining the appeal of European co-productions and premieres is the procedural one that the intense development and ‘concentrated attention’ (Max Prior 2005: 10) possible in the run-up to the overseas premiere, ‘away from the distractions of everyday life’, is simply not possible (any more) in Sheffield. ‘At home, we work 10 to 5 and not at weekends. Away from home, it is 24-hour absorption’, says Etchells (*ibid.*). Etchells is, like Marshall above, seeking some means by which to retain the company’s earliest creative energies. Marshall (as a performer) does so through the intimate contact with an audience which to her is still crucial. Etchells (as the writer-director) focuses rather on ways of enabling (or recreating) an intense concentration on their combined creative output: in the first few years of the company this was engendered by the ethos and material circumstances of communal living and ‘the collective’. The collective’s members lived together and only comparatively rarely took on side-projects, and they had fewer family ties beyond the company to dissipate their energies.

Other than this, and beyond the cachet which goes with higher-profile co-productions and festival appearances, Etchells notes two other benefits to the European focus which has dominated Forced Entertainment’s productions since at least the early 2000s. These are both to do with the institutional and cultural context, which he considers more ‘mature’ in (Continental) Europe. Along with this ‘maturity of context’ – a willingness of festivals and producers to schedule so-called ‘Live Art’ and ‘experimental’ companies in larger, higher-profile venues than, he argues, in the UK – Etchells also finds useful the way that producers demand less detailed information on forthcoming productions from an early stage, in comparison to the marketing departments of UK theatre venues and festival coordinators. This better suits the drive towards openness and experimentation which the company

seeks to retain in the process throughout the lengthy periods during which its shows are created.

Anxieties and creative tactics

Tim Etchells: ‘fingerprints’?

Before examining the group and individual processes at work behind the creation of two significant productions, I will identify, as I have for Frantic, some often paradoxical elements of the company’s (primarily Etchells’s) public persona and depiction of their processes. As such my aim is to trace the development of the company’s style and stance, particularly as it concerns the ‘writing’ involved in their work. For want of a less emotive word, certain *anxieties* may be traced through the performances and, more crucially, their framing in interviews and writings around them, which mark the imagined practices and systems within and against which the company, and Etchells himself, define themselves.

Mermikides (2010) and Freeman (2007), among others, have recently focused attention on the role of writing in Forced Entertainment’s processes, signalling the tensions between the singular ‘voice’ and hybrid forms of authorship.¹⁵⁸ Etchells often takes a seemingly straightforward line on the question, claiming at one point that writing, to him, is ‘not precious [...] It was just something that got done’ alongside the other work of the rehearsal room (Benecke 2004: 46). In a sense, this is the opposite claim to that of Frantic Assembly’s artistic directors, who have sought at some points in the company’s past, as noted above, to legitimise their work by insisting that ‘the text comes first’ (for example, in Graham 2007: 7). Etchells’s rhetoric, on the other hand, aims in several ways to deprioritise the role of the written word, and of processes of writing.

The role of writing in the work of Forced Entertainment is tied, in these debates, to the authorship which Etchells here plays down. John Freeman, towards the conclusion of *New Performance/New Writing*, moves from his discussion of Forced Entertainment’s ‘making process’ (Freeman 2007: 134) to talk of the position Berkoff has carved for himself, as a guru, writerly figure, although without explicitly making the connection between Etchells and Berkoff, the ‘self-styled and self-confessed outsider’ (*ibid.*). He earlier expresses more openly the way in which he sees Forced Entertainment, through analogy with the Wooster Group, as a

¹⁵⁸ See, for instance, Mermikides 2010: 105, and my discussion below.

performance ensemble in whose work the ‘fingerprints’ of its ‘long-term director’ are ‘eminently visible’ (Freeman 2007: 119). However, this claim seems at best to spring from a circular assumption about Tim Etchells’s writings for and on the company: who is to say that it is not the ‘fingerprints’ of that group of people which are reflected in Etchells’s own (solo) writing and theorising?

In fact, the question of whose ‘fingerprints’ are whose – and whether Etchells’s ‘individual voice’ is reflected in the performance – ‘does not anticipate an objective answer’, as Mermikides puts it (Mermikides 2010: 116). As Etchells told Giannachi and Luckhurst in 1999, ‘my directing develops within the ensemble’ (Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 27). That interview in particular includes an interesting shifting back and forth between statements made on behalf of the ensemble and languages of the individual – sometimes within the same response: ‘We were very influenced by Impact Theatre Co-operative [...]. I’ve also been influenced by practitioners such as Pina Bausch, and the American company the Wooster Group’ (*ibid.*: 28). This is a negotiation which is ongoing in the rhetoric of the company, but one which Etchells at least has become increasingly adept at expressing with clarity. Several steps in the development of the ensemble can be read as moves to clarify and codify the collaborations at work in Forced Entertainment’s processes.

So, though I will not seek to provide any definitive answer to the question raised by Freeman’s assumption, I wish to identify the tensions at work relating to the question of ‘voice’. Etchells at times explicitly resists such notions of the singularity of a voice in the company’s work (whether that of an author or of a director with a distinct ‘fingerprint’ as suggested by Freeman). He emphasises the importance of multiple viewpoints and narratives (‘never one story in our theatre, always two, three, four or many’ (Etchells 1999a: 96)), and questions the very possibility of a profound, personal ‘voice’ of any kind (‘Like I don’t have a voice – I’m just a space this other stuff is flowing through and lodged inside’ (*ibid.*: 99)).

Freeman’s investigations are related to those involving auteur theory. One function of that theory was to claim artistic validity for the burgeoning form of cinema, with Caughie summarising the *metteur-en-scène* – comparative (and inferior) to the auteur – as ‘lack[ing] the consistency of the profound involvement of a personality’ (Caughie 1981: 9). Etchells, meanwhile, turns this on its head by *insisting* on the

absence of a single driving personality. Shunning the stance of the auteur, Etchells's self-positioning is aligned with that of the *metteur-en-scène*. Sarris influentially wrote that 'meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings' (Sarris in Caughie 1981: 9); Etchells in fact embraces the lack of 'meaningful coherence', at least in his rhetoric. This is hence one reason that Etchells often strongly denies that his presence amounts to such a dominating, auteur-like directorial figure.

Yet there are many indications that this is a conflicted stance within Forced Entertainment. On numerous occasions,¹⁵⁹ Etchells refers to Mark E Smith's work with the band The Fall, one of his cultural lodestones. In 2012, he again cites this influence, tellingly, perhaps, referring not to The Fall but only to Smith 'describing Northern England in a lot of *his* work' (Etchells 2012; my emphasis). Whereas Forced Entertainment was formed as a co-operative and maintain a permanent core membership, The Fall is famously a vehicle solely for Smith's anarchic, idiosyncratic (writing and singing) voice – with band members in almost permanent rotation, being hired and fired at Smith's desire or whim. While Etchells is making a point about the energy and liberating spirit of punk music, there is implicit here a related undertone about the strength of a singular vision and the ways in which in some cases such an individual voice nonetheless requires a larger group for its full expression.

Andrew Quick argues that Etchells's writing, for instance in *Certain Fragments*, 'must always be distinguished from the material and collaborative condition of Forced Entertainment's performance work' (Quick 2004: 134). It may seem odd that in the same collection of essays, the apparently diametrically opposite point of view is also put forward, by Forced Entertainment's Cathy Naden: as cited above, she says that '[a] big part of making the work has always been Tim writing about it' (Helmer 2004: 73). This lends weight to a claim for Etchells as the company's 'public figure head' (*ibid.*: 59), but suggests that the clean distinction argued by Quick is not possible.

¹⁵⁹ These include the above-cited 1999 interview with Giannachi and Luckhurst, his *Guardian* 'Dramatic Moments' feature (Etchells 1995), and *Certain Fragments* (Etchells 1999a: 106-7).

Yet Quick's claim may invite another reading: it may be seen as referring not, primarily, to Etchells's theorising texts in *Certain Fragments*, but more centrally to the performance texts reproduced in that work. By drawing attention to the 'material and collaborative condition' of the performance work, he is following Etchells's line in seeking to distance the performances themselves – the *performance work* – from the writing reproduced (for instance) in *Certain Fragments*, which provides either the *impetus for* or *transcriptions of* for the creative endeavour of rehearsal. In this way, Quick is reinforcing the notion that the writings created by Etchells should not be viewed in the same way as those of most theatrical writers, as dictating a mode of performance or even a sequence of events for performance. As the prefatory 'Note on the Text' to 1996's *Showtime* puts it: 'Whilst this text [...] provides some small indication of the performance structure and context it does not attempt to describe the show in any detail or to substitute for it' (Forced Entertainment 1996: 5).

Here lies one of the central anxieties, or sets of related anxieties: how to represent accurately the ways that writing (and hence authorship) fits into the collective. In looking at Etchells's and Forced Entertainment's claims for their work, I will identify anxieties related to the ownership of the work, the generation of material, and the shaping of this material into performance. I will begin, though, with a brief examination of Forced Entertainment's collaboration with practitioners from outside the company and Etchells's own positioning within the wider performance and, particularly, academic context. These give rise to an anxiety which Mermikides signals, and upon which I expand.

The anxiety of status

The interview, article and other material available for such analysis expands rapidly from the publication of 1999's *Certain Fragments*, in which Etchells collects the core texts of several of the company's productions to that point, as well as a number of essays theorising and to some extent explaining the frameworks within which the company created the pieces. From the mid- to late-1990s, too, Etchells made an increasing number of appearances on panels discussing performance work in an academic setting. Compared to the others in the company, he says he 'was pretty fast off the mark in terms of developing a kind of voice and a way of talking about what we were doing that was able to sit in those kinds of contexts' (Etchells 2012), and he observes that once he had contributed to two or three such panels, he found

the offers increased exponentially. This is indicative of Etchells's welcome into the critical paraphernalia surrounding performance, and is a central element in his becoming officially recognised as the 'artistic director' of the company, rather than simply one member of the 'co-operative'.

The critical machinery has also been absorbed into the company in various ways. The foreword to *Certain Fragments* is penned by Peggy Phelan, whose work, such as 1993's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, has been deeply influential on ways of theorising and discussing performance which was not happily framed in the terms of theatre, or drama. Her work is representative of a zeitgeist with which Forced Entertainment have often been associated. Partly in tandem with this trend, Etchells's associations and dialogues with academics and theoretician-practitioners have grown in number and in significance to his output. For instance, both Etchells and practitioner-academic Adrian Heathfield (among others) took part in 2008's set of performance lectures 'A Peachy Coochy Afternoon at the Heart of Performance' (Forced Entertainment *et al.* 2008). It was mentioned there that Heathfield's link with Forced Entertainment has been particularly strong since around 2002 – though even before this, he and Etchells worked together on the 2000 collection *Small Acts: Performance, the Millennium and the Marking of Time* (Heathfield 2000).

From an early stage, Etchells and the company had formed other such relationships and invited numerous dialogues of this nature. From the outset, they used contributions from artists working in other media, such as, most notably, Hugo Glendinning and John Avery, who have provided photography and sound respectively for projects from the very earliest days up to and no doubt beyond 2012's *The Coming Storm*. But there is a precedent for collaborators on more short-term bases, often performing with the company. Performer/film-maker Alex Kelly is one of numerous practitioners who have appeared in the larger-scale works created by the company. He credits his experiences as a guest performer in *Dreams' Winter* (1994) for his decision to set up his own company, Third Angel, with Rachael Walton, who also performed in the Forced Entertainment piece (Kelly 2009). Kelly later made Forced Entertainment the subject of *On Pleasure* (Kelly 1997), a short documentary film commissioned by *The South Bank Show*.

There is however a difference between allowing trusted fellow practitioners (theorists such as Heathfield or performers and documentarists such as Kelly) into a process which is otherwise comprised fairly exclusively of the six core members, and allowing academics and other observers into the rehearsal room in a non-collaborative capacity. Mermikides reports Etchells's self-confessed 'anxiety' concerning her presence as observer and 'witness' in rehearsals for *The Travels*: he tells her of a dream he had, totemising her notebook as a locus of anxieties about how she may be viewing the process (Mermikides 2010: 107).¹⁶⁰

This is an understandable edginess about being observed by someone who remains outside of the group, but Etchells also exhibits a related anxiety about his own status as an academic. He has made innumerable contributions to journals and other publications, and held positions as Creative Research Fellow at Lancaster University (2004-07), 'Thinker in Residence' (2009-10) at Tate Research and LADA in London, and more recently Professorships and Visiting Professorships at Roehampton and Sheffield University. Yet his contribution to Heathfield's book on Tehching Tsieh alongside Peggy Phelan, Carol Becker and Marina Abramovic prompted his modest protestation 'I'm doing my level best to feel like a natural part of that line-up!' (Etchells 2009a). Etchells hence, despite his breath-taking activity and high regard as a writer and thinker, exhibits a self-deprecating *anxiety of status*. Forced Entertainment's (and Etchells's) indisputable rise to prominence sits uneasily with the company's constant emphasis of the parochial, the colloquial and the shambolic: this in some ways explains the thread of mitigation and apologetics discernible, as here, in some of Etchells's public rhetoric.

The anxiety of collectivity

The company was originally legally constituted as a co-operative, and though in 1995 their status (and official title) was changed, Etchells stated in 2012 that 'intellectually and morally we remain a co-operative. That's a very deep part of the group really' (Etchells 2012). He gives the main reason for the change in status as being that 'arts funding organisations can't really deal with that [co-operative status] – you have to be a charity' (*ibid.*).

¹⁶⁰ This is not, of course, unique to Forced Entertainment's practitioners. Gay McAuley lays out some of the difficulties of observing rehearsals, including the resultant anxieties among those at the centre of the process, in *Not Magic But Work* (2012: 8).

Though the output of the company in terms of supporting materials was much sparser in Forced Entertainment's early years than in the late 1990s and onwards, those that can be traced were more emphatic about the company's status as a 'co-operative', and the democratic nature of its creative processes, as over the years Etchells's leadership of the company has become less mitigated in public, in the ways discussed above.

Yet the shift in this position may have occurred in private more swiftly than it appeared in the public rhetoric. Though Etchells began as a performer and co-director, he is quickly given privileged status within the group. Even as early as 1987 he is the only member to speak on behalf of the company to Kenneth Rea, in an article about the ICA's 'Home Work' season of 'experimental' British theatre. Likewise, while Oddey holds the line, based on her observations and interviews, that the company rehearsed through democratic discussion, it is Etchells whose interviews dominate that chapter (though Terry O'Connor is also cited at times; these two, and Etchells in particular, dominate Oddey's perspective on the company). In the aforementioned *South Bank Show* documentary (Kelly 1997), Etchells is the only group member to speak directly to camera; the others appear only in the context of the performance excerpts. Etchells's role as 'leader', 'figurehead' and 'artistic director' is hence well-established in the dissemination of much material concerning the company. As mentioned above, Etchells has lately played this down as due to his being 'fast off the mark' in developing vocabularies with which to discuss the work (Etchells 2012). He also identifies the fact that he preferred to take the 'outside role': 'I like performing but I felt like my skills were more in this kind of organising and structuring and devis... this outside role' (*ibid.*). His hesitation to claim his role as that of 'devising' indicates the distinction he appears to make: that devising is something done by the group, in which discussion, writing (the generation of material), practical experimentation, organising and structuring all play a part. The responsibilities for all of these sub-tasks are not, it seems, equally distributed, but at times each member of the core ensemble has had input into and some degree of control over each element.

Etchells's attempts to mitigate his own importance as the writer, artistic director, leader and figurehead of the company are perhaps necessary in preserving what might be termed – with the caveats below – the 'myth' of collectivity by which they

make the production of new work possible. By ‘myth’, I do not wish to suggest that the notion of collectivity is necessarily spurious or untrue in these processes; rather to recall the mythologies spoken of by Barthes, which are socially constructed networks of signs imbued with (linguistically-rooted) further meaning. This process is (for the most part) not consciously recognised by individuals within the societies involved (Barthes 1957). A myth in this sense is also a narrative in which one places one’s faith.

As with the creation of Forced Entertainment’s work itself, it would be invidious to ascribe this myth of collectivity solely to Etchells (or any other individual): Barthes describes mythologies as group constructions of a society, jointly and subliminally adopted. The myth constructed by and around Forced Entertainment is one of collective responsibility for the work, which absolves individuals of responsibility for creative momentum and forgives them (indeed at times applauds them for) any foolish-seeming moves or suggestions. A brief example of the importance of this is Richard Lowdon’s mention of the acceptance of – or rather insistence upon – the performers’ ‘doing things in the rehearsal room [which you] wish you hadn’t’ (Lowdon in Heathfield *et al.* 2004).

It is a mythology in violent tension with the currently prevailing cultural mythology of the auteur-director-writer, as witnessed by Freeman’s previously-cited invocation of the director’s fingerprints (Freeman 2007: 119). Mermikides has recently traced this infiltration of the director’s ‘brand’ into once-collective devising companies, examining work at the National Theatre and noting ‘[t]he promotion of individual rather than group authorship’ as ‘exemplified by the rise of the director as the primary creative force among devising companies’ (Mermikides 2013: 157). In Forced Entertainment’s case, Jonathan Kalb provides another unwitting example of the precedence given the writer-director: in reviewing *Quizoola!* in Portland in 2008, he states that ‘[e]veryone knew Etchells had conceived the piece and written the questions, so he had the upper hand in many ways’ (Kalb 2008a). This is questionable on a number of counts: *did* everyone know this? (There is nothing in the performance itself which declares it). And *did* Etchells indeed ‘have the upper hand’? What is interesting is how Kalb’s knowledge (or assumption) of the power dynamic behind the work shaped his reading of the performance.

Etchells's sometime demurral at the concept of his leadership of the company is in part aimed at preserving the myth of collectivity against such outside readings of the authorial and directorial nature of his contribution; this is why I also refer to this as an anxiety in the terms I have set up. The process through the 1980s was, he insists, that his position in an 'outside' role¹⁶¹ and in dialogue with criticism and academia 'just grew and officialised to the point where [...] I was officially artistic director, whatever that means. I don't have a big feeling about that...' (Etchells 2012). While Etchells has taken on the title – and indeed it has proved useful in dialogues with academia – his comments, protesting ambivalence about it, reveal the related *anxiety of leadership*, explored below.

Again, I should draw attention to the difficulty of the term 'anxiety' here: I do not wish to imply by it a fretful *problem*, but rather a *tension*, a recurrent *concern*. Nor do I wish to suggest that Etchells, or Forced Entertainment, is unique in this regard: it is a common anxiety among companies involved with devising work. For instance, Scott Graham's comments reveal similar anxieties of status and leadership, in remarking upon the lack of any official paperwork to prove that one is a director¹⁶² and in the insistence that he and Hoggett did not teach choreography from the front of the room (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 7). There is, here, an attempt to credit the creative contributions of the performer/deviser in ways deemed fair by the individuals involved. In Forced Entertainment's case, though, there is a strong undercurrent of the aforementioned myth of the creative process: a sense that to ascribe authorship of the material to any individual in too strong a way would not only be traducing the processes behind it, but would impinge upon the future efficacy of those processes. I expand upon this issue under the heading 'the anxiety of creativity' below.

The anxiety of leadership

This anxiety of leadership, in Etchells's case, is threefold. Firstly, there is his profession of a politicised engagement which is clearly ill-at-ease with the notion of

¹⁶¹ 'And also I suppose by virtue of the fact that I was usually outside of shows, performances, I had a perspective on that work that other people don't necessarily have because they're in the thick of it, they're inside it, and I'm more kind of supposedly scanning the entirety of it from a sort of outside position' (Etchells 2012).

¹⁶² 'I still feel really uncomfortable if I'm somewhere and somebody asks me what I do. Because I don't know whether I've got the certificate behind my desk, saying "that is what I do"' (Graham 2011a).

one individual's leadership over another. The models cited by the company (in both creative and political terms) are left-leaning, often collectivist and anti-authoritarian: as noted, Impact Theatre Co-operative was the clear early influence on Forced Entertainment's style and methods. Furthermore, the company's founder members lived together in various configurations for several years when they first moved to Sheffield, extending the shared experience of their lives and work. This is the ideal still implicit behind Etchells's above-cited desire for '24-hour' commitment to the group creative process (Etchells in Max Prior 2005: 10).¹⁶³

Secondly, the company espouses an aesthetic which has developed from the above politics: one which aspires to a radical flatness of composition and contribution. Etchells pitches this in its purest form as the use of 'the fragment' as the 'ideal compositional unit' (Etchells 2004a: 281), a unit of narrative or, more extremely, language of some kind, which is juxtaposed with other fragments in the creation and performance of Forced Entertainment's works. Despite its prominence in 1999's *Certain Fragments*, Etchells's use of this metaphor has declined somewhat more recently, but it is still a central concept and shorthand. Mermikides interrogates this and other metaphors of creation (such as that of 'sampling') around 2002's *The Travels* (Mermikides 2010: 116). Here, the important point, related to the anxieties of leadership and collectivity, is Etchells's use of 'the fragment' to emphasise 'an equal involvement in the process of making the work' (Etchells 1999a: 17), on creative as well as political grounds.

Finally, Etchells displays anxiety in a different sense, about his actually *being* the leader, and about the effect that an overt statement of this situation would have on the group's ability to go on functioning. Etchells in person is eloquent but informal; one interviewer describes him as a 'soft-spoken man who looks like someone's uncle' (Patton 2003). Though his work shows a clear intellect and strong interest in recurring aesthetic concerns, in his public persona he has a tendency to play this down, especially in less formal discussions (as opposed to prepared statements and papers, in which he is 'performing' the role of 'artistic director', or 'artist'). In some discussions he defines his role in the rehearsal room as that of a 'filter' (Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999; Woels 2011), chairperson (Woels 2011; Etchells 2012) or 'filing

¹⁶³ See page 160 above.

clerk' (Woels 2011; Etchells 2012). But the anxiety or tension here comes from the acknowledgement that Etchells is not merely a neutral team member facilitating the input of others (and indeed the insistence that there is no such thing as neutrality). Hence he extends the 'filter' analogy to allow that 'I am like an organizer, a filter; but not a neutral filter, because ultimately it's what I like that is prioritised' (quoted in Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 27). Etchells's 'filter' analogy is also elsewhere allied to the idea that this may not be 'neutral': for example, 'I am framing and filtering and coming in with proposals I want to pursue' (Woels 2011). However, these are unusually candid claims for his personal priority in the creative process. That he has more recently admitted this organising role of his input in earlier processes – 'I used to go in more with a plan' (*ibid.*) – is also in tension with the stated importance of flatness and the artless juxtaposition of 'fragments'.

Etchells's statement that he 'used to go in more with a plan' was made in 2011 in the context of the company's increasing use of video cameras in the rehearsal room since the early 1990s, in capturing improvisations around a concept, rule or text for later analysis and restructuring. Prior to this, he explains that he and Lowdon would meet to formulate an idea for the following day's session; the 'admission' is hence designed to contrast this with the current situation and insist that his leadership role in shaping the work has diminished thanks to the rise of the company's use of cameras in rehearsal. Benecke described the earlier management structure, in 2004, as follows:

This smaller group – known jokingly as the 'sub-club' – slightly formalized an existing informal structure, in which Etchells and Lowdon would meet in the pub each night to discuss the work of the day and to make plans for the next' (Benecke 2004: 33).

Benecke places this development around the same time as Etchells's move away from performance and into direction, officialising gradually between *Jessica in the Room of Lights* (1984) and *Let the Water Run Its Course...* (1986).

Etchells hence insists on the ever-increasing democratisation of these processes (even though this involves admitting stronger leadership in the past than he would have claimed at the time). This is an anxiety also identifiable in Alison Oddey's claims that '[d]evised theatre is concerned with the collective creation of art (not the

single vision of the playwright)’ (Oddey 1994: 4). As discussed in my first chapter,¹⁶⁴ Oddey sets devised theatre in opposition to ‘text-based’ theatre created in a ‘playwright-director relationship’, and given that Oddey’s observations draw deeply on her interviews of Etchells, it is unsurprising that her attempts at delineations of the term ‘devising’ should resonate particularly strongly with Etchells’s own claims. Yet Oddey also states that the processes involved are a reaction against ‘one person’s text under another person’s direction’ (*ibid.*). In Forced Entertainment’s case, even by the time Oddey was writing, the move to acknowledge Etchells’s contribution as ‘director’ was well underway, hence producing a situation, potentially, in which the company might be working on one person’s text under *the same* person’s direction. This situation, were it not for the rhetorics surrounding it, would seem to indicate an even greater tendency to a ‘single vision’ than in the (imagined) mainstream against which Oddey (and Etchells) set up their projects. Like Frantic’s claims concerning the importance of text in their processes, Forced Entertainment’s rhetoric here is a conscious act of positioning in the light of evolving processes which may otherwise be seen as falling into a fixed mould or stereotype.

Indeed, Etchells’s regular rhetoric suggests a very specific counter-example which he uses to deny the too-great influence of his own ‘vision’ on the company’s output:

It’s not this kind of model of Robert Wilson, or someone who’s drawn the whole show in his head before anybody arrives. It’s entirely more collaborative and discursive somehow. (Ziemilski 2006)¹⁶⁵

Despite the way he slips in ‘somehow’ to mitigate the claim – or perhaps the slippage into academic idiom – Etchells repeatedly emphasises ‘collaboration’ as against ‘authorship’. Etchells’s insistence on the ‘collaborative’ nature of the process is part of his continual efforts to set the company’s work against the mainstream and the tradition of the auteur-director here represented by Wilson. These efforts are spurred in part by failures of criticism to understand or assimilate

¹⁶⁴ See page 26 above.

¹⁶⁵ This is an ongoing comparison, since at least 2004’s conversation with Adrian Heathfield published in *Not Even a Game Anymore*: ‘We defer the authorship, the intention, the failure [...] Whereas when you look at Robert Wilson it looks like Robert Wilson, like what he wanted. Robert Wilson signs it’ (Heathfield 2004: 92), and at least as recently as 2012: ‘What it isn’t for sure is that model where Robert Wilson or whatever will draw the whole thing’ (Etchells 2012).

the different ideologies espoused by the company. In 1998 alone, one round-up summarised Forced Entertainment's contribution to an English theatre festival in Brussels as 'their production of *Pleasure* by Tim Etchells' (Bates 1998), while the better-informed Susannah Clapp nonetheless strained to categorise its authorship: '[...] this group of five actors – who are performing in a work devised in collaboration with the director Tim Etchells [...]' (Clapp 1998: 81). Neither of these attributions aligns fully with the company's own descriptions of its methods, and both instead give clear precedence to Etchells in terms of ownership of the process and its outcome.

This problematic question of Etchells's leadership in the rehearsal room is indubitably also tied to an anxiety of leadership in terms of the company's strategic decisions, and to the politics of the company. The move by which his readiness to speak on behalf of the company led gradually to his being officially named the artistic director is repeatedly played down by him, as seen above. Yet this role has other, material, repercussions. For instance, he has been instrumental in forging links with arts organisations and funders. Forced Entertainment produced only their second ever show, 1985's *The Set-up*, as a commission of the National Review of Live Art (then hosted in Nottingham). Nikki Milican had just (in 1984) become its artistic director, and her connection with the event would continue for decades to come, as would Forced Entertainment's. Etchells has spoken of a major new direction for the company which arose, in his telling, simply as part of a later discussion between himself and Milican:

[A]t some point – 1992 or 1993 – there was an invitation from Nikki Milican, who ran the NRLA, to commission a new piece. And I said, 'okay, well, we'd like to make a long performance. We'd like to make something that's twelve hours long.' And she said, 'okay sure, that's exciting, that's fine.' Afterwards I talked to the others and said, 'I've sold Nikki a twelve-hour show. Now we have to figure out what it is...' (Kalb 2008b)

Though Etchells here claims the desire on the part of the company ('we'd like to make a long performance'), he also recounts this as a move instigated by him and *reported back* to the rest of the group.

Likewise, the information pack for *Exquisite Pain* (2005), a performance based on a text by Sophie Calle, includes as its opening gambit a note by Etchells in which he

explains that his interest was piqued when he read Calle's work in December 2004. A week later, as he reports it, the company held its first 'informal "rehearsal" for what would become our staging of *Exquisite Pain*' (2005: 3).

It was clear soon enough that – having spent twenty years devising, improvising and otherwise creating our own performances – we now felt compelled, for the first time, to "do" a text. (*ibid.*)

The way Etchells reports this does not suggest a sequence whereby the company decided collectively to seek inspiration from a pre-existing text (thus breaking a twenty-year precedent) then sought an appropriate text, but one in which Etchells read the text and wanted, himself, to try staging it; the exploratory 'rehearsal' suggested that it would be possible and the rest of the company agreed with the suggestion. Calle's text was brought to the creative process in much the same way that Etchells would provide his own writing for the company. The difference here is that the use of this text itself suggests a significant shift in the established 'rules' by which the company operate – a shift which is proposed in the first instance by Etchells.

This is not to deny the right of veto on the part of the other company members, nor to suggest that they have no input in terms of directions the company may take. For instance, as Richard Lowdon explained in a 1994 interview, 1991's *Marina & Lee* (directed by Lowdon and Etchells) was sparked by his interest in the real-life figures of Marina and Lee Harvey Oswald: 'We became interested in them when I read the book *Marina and Lee* by Priscilla Johnson McMillan' (Kaye 1996: 242). Lowdon's language here demonstrates a blend of the individual and group motivations familiar from Etchells's rhetoric: 'we' blurs into 'I' within a single sentence. What seems evident as illustrated by these cases is that there is an inevitable tension between the need for clear leadership and direction (in a managerial sense) and the desire to retain collectivity and joint decision-making. In 1998, Robin Arthur told one interviewer: 'I don't really know if we really constitute as a co-operative anymore, but essentially that has always been the way that the company has worked' (Arthur quoted in McGuire 1998: 12).

The anxiety of creativity

Even if there are indications of the strength and importance of Etchells's direction and leadership in the rehearsal room and in the decision-making processes of the company, he is often ill-at-ease admitting them. This anxiety is symptomatic of the strategies he and the company employ in order to alleviate the pressure to be creative: the claimed mitigation of Etchells's (or any one individual's) leadership and the insistence that chance rather than intention is largely responsible for the creation of the work.

This could almost as well be termed an 'anxiety of intentionality', as so much of this rhetoric hinges around this denial of intentionality on entering the rehearsal room. Etchells as a creative artist is certainly recurrently drawn to unpredictability as well as to the input of other creative individuals. In a talk on the body and language, he described his experiments with artist (and Etchells's partner at the time) Vlatka Horvak, in which they would spend an hour-long session sitting either side of a table, joining hands round a pen to experiment with a form of *dessein automatique*. Etchells comments that what interested him about it was that it represented a 'strange meeting of two intentionalities in one [...] object, and [...] you weren't clear in that part of it who was leading or following, or where the impulse was coming from' (Etchells 2010). In *Certain Fragments*, Etchells writes about the company's process of collaboration as 'just a good way of confounding intentions': 'I trust discoveries and accidents and I distrust intentions' (Etchells 1999a: 55).

Earlier in the same book, he talks of Forced Entertainment's working methods: 'It's [...] a process which refuses to know, at the outset, what it is looking for' (*ibid.*: 17). This contains a dual denial of intentionality – or a denial and a deferral. Insisting on setting out without a clear roadmap, and being open to the inspirations of improvisation and the contributions of performers, is a familiar aspect of devising companies' rhetoric; Harvie and Lavender suggest that being 'significantly open-minded' (Harvie & Lavender 2010: 2) is a key unifying characteristic in such companies' methods. But this is most commonly on the basis of an initial idea – as I have explored, devised theatre is often also said to start 'from an idea or concept rather than a play text' (*ibid.*), and as soon as this is posited, the political question of *whose* idea or concept comes into play. Etchells here proposes that underlying the company's process is not just a significant but a radical openness. He frames the

work as refusing to accept of any end-point in sight at its beginning. Terry O'Connor supports this framing of the company's 'radical way of working' in a more recent interview with Hannah Giles:

each show is an opportunity to break open the possibilities of theatre or performance, break them down to their basic elements and build them up again in a way that fits each project. (O'Connor quoted in Giles 2010)

This is the denial. The deferral is, if anything, more surprising, and may at first glance go unnoticed. Etchells here – and elsewhere – personifies 'the process', ascribing to it this refusal 'to know [...] what it is looking for'. He hence seeks – partly subliminally – to defer responsibility and intentionality to an abstract 'process'. In a 2004 panel discussion with Adrian Heathfield, Etchells answers criticism of *Bloody Mess* in a question from the floor by invoking a similar deferral:

It's perhaps a bit passive to say this but I think we often feel like we're basically at the mercy of where the work takes us. [...] I think we feel we're following something, and that thing has a life and an energy of its own. (Etchells in Heathfield *et al.* 2004)

As early as his 1999 collection of writings *Certain Fragments*, Etchells has identified this as a 'deferral/projection to this "it"' (Etchells 1999a: 62). He writes: 'we have long asked ourselves the question: 'What does it want?' 'What does it need?' Anthropomorphising the work as if it had desires of its own' (*ibid.*). Etchells claims the company members are able to laugh at themselves for relying upon this deferral, but that they nonetheless find it a justified one, as

at the same time we know there is also an 'it' – a collection of objects, texts and fragments which resonate in certain ways [...] – and which in combination really do (I think) make demands [...] (*ibid.*)

In a later discussion, 'Re-wiring/Re-writing Theatre' (also chaired by Adrian Heathfield), Etchells pinpoints this 'avoidance' (as he suggests it might be) in much greater detail:

[...] we begin to talk about 'it', i.e. the show, and we talk about what 'it' wants, which is a sort of weird piece of deferral or kind of projection or creation of a kind of exterior object which according to *you* then has a set of demands and qualities and energies, that *you* then have to respect. We say, 'it does not like it when we do that', [...] 'it doesn't want that' or 'it rather

likes it when...’ It’s a very strange piece of personification that [...] in the cold light of day, I don’t know what I really think about that, maybe it’s a huge piece of avoidance but [...] in twenty-two years of making stuff that’s one thing that we do really, really persistently [...] (Etchells in Heathfield *et al.* 2006)

At times, he says, the group may try to restructure a piece, removing a middle section, for instance, only to find that ‘then actually, the beginning and the end rather like that middle and you’re forced to bring it back’ (*ibid.*). This is structuring work of the kind carried out by any group or individual engaged in creative processes, but the deferral of the intentionality, tastes and desires behind it, onto the ‘it’ of the (as-yet non-existent or only nascent) show, provides an informative insight into one way Etchells frames collaborative creation.

There may be hints that these are, at root, strategies to foster quite *individual* creativity. Etchells has written of his need to ‘trick’ himself into creativity (Etchells 2007). In his blog he describes his response to a question about his own creative strategies:

I don’t have a strategy for this. I get tricked by accident – by being too tired, too busy, by being distracted, by getting fascinated with something that is happening, by becoming delirious (in a banal way, not thinking of hallucinogens) [...] I guess a ‘strategy’ could be putting yourself in a position where all that is more likely, however one would do that whether [*sic*] over a period of hours, days, weeks, months or years. As if creativity were a matter of making mistakes that you quite like and then trying (with all your best ‘craft’) to live and deal well with the consequences. (Etchells 2007)

Since at least the late 1990s, this language of mistakes and accidents is a consistent part of the company’s discussions of their methods, as is the fundamental belief in a strategy of creating an open framework in which such accidents can occur. Robin Arthur supports a similar viewpoint in the 2004 panel discussion with Adrian Heathfield: ‘We’re trying to create an environment that will allow [...] strange things to happen’ (Heathfield *et al.* 2004). Richard Lowdon also, as mentioned above, describes the importance to the company of performers’ ‘doing things in the rehearsal room [that] you wish you hadn’t’: ‘It’s just the extension of some stupid bit of yourself that you’re wanting to live out in this performance or another performance’ (*ibid.*). This admits of the presence of individual preference and intention – the element of yourself that ‘you’re wanting’ to live out – but the crucial

aspect here is the liberty for this to be ‘stupid’, and for mistakes to be made in the rehearsal room.

Though Etchells’s line states that by 2007 at least the company concentrated on other methods of generating this randomness than artificial stimulants, in the 1999 DVD *Making Performance* he claimed that ‘we probably make our best work at night, when people have been drinking [...] then you tend to put the material together in unexpected ways’ (Forced Entertainment 1999). There is a strong emphasis on the crucial importance of long, repetitive work in generating the framework and the openness (the freedom from the censorship of intention) required for such creativity, and this is significant to my later examination of the processes behind both ‘durational’ and ‘theatrical’ works.

What is being discussed here is a range of methods for enabling the generation of raw material for performance. In these descriptions of Etchells’s contributions, and ‘strategies’, the written material he brings to the rehearsal room is, like his directorial contribution, repeatedly diminished in importance. Hence the company (including Etchells) is careful to mitigate his role as a writer, and to deny that he is ever *the writer* of a piece. For instance, Etchells summarises in a recent interview: ‘Basically, the work gets made in the room with the whole group’ (Etchells 2012). Just as the company’s processes allow the performers to pursue ‘stupid’ lines of thought and experiment (as per Lowdon’s observation above), so too is the right reserved for the textual contributions to be original texts, ‘bland re-workings of yesterday’s ideas, or nothing at all’ (Etchells in Oddey 1994: 53). In this way, Etchells reserves the right for himself to arrive with nothing in the form of text, a liberty rarely afforded to a ‘writer’ in a creative process. Straddling the functions of ‘writer’, ‘director’ and ensemble member enables him not only privileged access to intentions and arguably control within the devising process, but also dissipates the pressure to be creative in a given way at a given point in that process, either in terms of writing or in leading the rehearsal room.

The anxiety of repetition

I will identify one final element to this creative anxiety before looking more closely at how Forced Entertainment’s creative processes actually operate, with specific reference to the role of writing. This final significant anxiety is a product of the

ways in which the network of recurrent images and tropes adds up to a work, as mentioned earlier, which goes beyond any single performance and ties Forced Entertainment's output together in a dense web of references, styles and concerns. This provides a rich vein of internal references upon which the company can draw in creating any new work. As Etchells told Oddey in 1989-90, 'the more we can re-use from old pieces in a slightly different way the better – that feels very comfortable' (Oddey 1994: 89).

But a corollary of this has been the development of the anxiety, recently expressed by Etchells, of *repetition*:

[I]n a way things also have gotten more difficult because now there is a big history of stuff we have done. We feel a bit burdened by that. Finding an energy to just be here and do this thing and not to be endlessly debating our back catalogue can be rather difficult. (Woels 2011)

Peter Brook's experiments with continuous ensembles working and reworking performance experiments¹⁶⁶ provide a rare example of a similar project in terms of longevity and continuity of personnel. Brook, in *The Shifting Point*, explains how

[n]ecessarily, our starting point was ourselves. However, to avoid the danger of going round in narcissistic circles, it is absolutely essential to be jolted from outside, and this comes when we try to work on something which challenges our understanding, forcing us to see beyond our personal universe. (Brook 1988: 154)

The 'danger', for Forced Entertainment, is the same, if not more intense. While Brook welcomes 'jolt[s] from outside' – 'something to glance off' in Turner's (2009b) term – in the form of pre-existing texts, either dramatic or poetic, Forced Entertainment's tactics and interests are different. To date, they have only based two productions directly on a pre-existing text: 2005's *Exquisite Pain*, based on Sophie Calle's 2004 book, and *The Notebook* (2014), based on a novel by Ágota Kristóf. However, this is not to say that the company is devoid of influence. Indeed, Etchells insists that the work has always been 'drawing on music, fine art, city life, cinema, science fiction, photography, graffiti, personal history, performance' (Etchells 1999a: 17). But the insistence, for most of the company's history, that this is created

¹⁶⁶ He writes of 'three years of travel and experiment' leading to the establishment of a home at Les Bouffes du Nord (Brook 1988: 151; emphasis in the original).

without the impetus of ‘outside’ texts, and the placing of ‘narrative’ or ‘storylines’ in quotation marks (as in Etchells 1999a: 16 and elsewhere) means that the company works within self-imposed limits of creative impulses. This is itself also a rhetorical insistence, and though in public Etchells seeks to emphasise the use of sources such as film, music and writings which might be termed ‘lowbrow’ (such as science fiction), the eclectic pooling of influences has included, as reported by Oddey (1994: 89), Plato’s *Symposium*.

The reliance on lengthy creative processes (the importance of which I elaborate on below), the continued collaboration of a largely unchanged core personnel (particularly, almost hermetically, for roughly a decade following the arrival of Claire Marshall in 1989), and the increasingly familiar working methods involving attempts to start from no pre-conceived notions while developing upon previous concepts and material have all led to the build-up of shared history to which Etchells refers above. Indeed, Etchells does at times describe the importance of the kind of jolts Brook mentions, though not in terms of textual influence. Whereas Brook saw the closed group as involving the risk of stagnation, and a project challenging the group’s ‘personal universe’ (Brook 1988: 154) as the opportunity to reinvigorate his practice, Etchells instead relishes collaboration itself as something which ‘knock[s] you off course’ (Dey 2012: 7).

In a related but more reflective vein, Etchells has also spoken of the difficulty caused by retelling the same stories about the company’s history and processes – of imposing narrative on the past. At 2004’s National Review of Live Art festival, Etchells delivered a lecture/performance in the ‘In the Event’ strand, in which he explained that talking about the company’s twenty-year history had become ‘like telling not what happened but what I’ve told before’ (Etchells 2004b). Even in the form of this lecture, which Etchells reads from the page in a deliberately, archly ‘performed’ way, can be seen his efforts to find new (and performative) ways to tell this history.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ For instance, he describes his failure at a previous event to come up with a suitable lecture, and the way he hence invited his friends and colleagues to contribute: ‘taking evasive action to avoid looking like a total twat...’ (Etchells 2004b). This swing from high to low registers is familiar from his performance writing, and the manner in which he reads the text – a cross between a stilted schoolboy performer and some sort of profane sermon – has become a familiar performance persona when Etchells is delivering a pre-written paper in such contexts.

The role of ‘Writing’

The deadpan delivery of poetically-crafted texts is one element of the company’s work which has been present since the very first production, though this has been augmented and shifted now by other means of creating these texts, and other styles of delivery incorporating a more apparently colloquial relationship with the audience. At first, though, Etchells identifies this style as the product of ‘an interest in writing with a capital “W”’:

In the beginning of the company’s work [...] we worked with texts that were evidently written. There was an interest in writing with a capital ‘W’ – in poetry, if you like. (Etchells quoted in Giannachi & Kaye 2006)

Though this interest seems clear from the performances themselves, it was often overlooked by reviewers, who focused instead on the acting and visual style and on John Avery’s eerie, drifting soundtracks; in brief, the *atmosphere* of the early shows was repeatedly seen as remarkable, but the poetic contribution made by the text to this atmosphere was not at first recognised, partly in deference to the collective rhetoric of the company.¹⁶⁸ Only later did critics begin to describe Etchells as the ‘writer-director’ behind the company (e.g. Gardner 1996)¹⁶⁹. In 1994, Claire Armitstead (an early supporter of the company’s work) drew attention to Forced Entertainment’s ten-year anniversary, and the production *Hidden J* at the ICA, with the following incitement:

Those who maintain that the avant-garde is a writer-free zone should sample the strangely beautiful riffs of writer Tim Etchells, a poet who has devoted himself to performance. (Armitstead 1994)

This is a rare apt summary of the function of Etchells’s texts in these early productions, and points to his linguistic alertness. Etchells himself has recently made reference to the formative influence of his parents, both teachers and both fond of ‘language and reading’ (Etchells 2012). As a child, he recalls being ‘buried’ in books and devouring stories in the car on long journeys, reading a lot of ‘trashy’ (as well as some more respected) science fiction. ‘So writing was there in the family,

¹⁶⁸ ‘[*Jessica in the*] *Room of Lights* is more of a grope in the direction of an atmospheric theatre than a definitive performance’ (Saddler 1985).

¹⁶⁹ Claire Armitstead also mentions Etchells alongside David Gale and Fecund’s ‘writer-director’ John Keates as producing ‘exquisite lyrics, the gentle repetitions of which provide a haven of calm and consideration in a storm of subversion’ (Armitstead 1993).

literature. [...] I think I probably thought that I would end up writing because language was [...] a really big love for me' (*ibid.*).

However, Etchells is certainly not a 'playwright' or writer in a straightforward sense, and it is not always easy for critics unfamiliar with the company's work to summarise the relationships involved between text and performance: for instance, as noted above, one preview gave the attribution 'their [Forced Entertainment's] production of *Pleasure* by Tim Etchells' (Bates 1998).

Etchells himself seeks never to take ownership over the texts in the way this attribution suggests, and his positioning as 'writer' is at times highly problematised. As in his response in interview above, he continues the deferral of authorship with phrasings familiar from elsewhere in his rhetoric: the pluralisation of 'we worked with texts'; the passive voice he employs in the statement that '*There was* an interest in writing with a capital "W"' (Etchells quoted in Giannachi & Kaye 2006). Further evidence of problematised authorship may be seen in *While You Are With Us Here Tonight* (Etchells 2013b), a recent publication supported by Etchells's Legacy: Thinker in Residence award. Its authorship is attributed to Tim Etchells, but the cover also lists seven 'contributors', and given that its form is that of footnotes arranged around a monologue text (originally performed in *First Night* in 2001, by Terry O'Connor), the attribution is problematic.

In fact, as O'Connor herself comments at the end of the first page (she is one of the contributors who penned the 'footnotes' throughout the text),

It's always a bit like this. It would have stopped here. Right here. A pithy half idea. A bit of a paradox from the heat of an improvisation. But Tim comes over, makes a circling gesture and says 'keep going' – something that happens often in rehearsal – and with the continuation and extension it becomes something, not just another line, but a kind of event. (Etchells 2013b: footnote 4)¹⁷⁰

She also goes on to describe Etchells's further side-coaching during the delivery of the monologue: 'then Tim arrives to whisper again, "just bad stuff" and eventually the text finds a freedom and a form in that constraint' (*ibid.*). As the product of this form of coached improvisation (which will be examined in the rehearsal room

¹⁷⁰ Due to the lack of page numbering, I will refer to these quotations by their numbering as 'footnotes'.

context below), the supposedly main text is not authored by Etchells in any straightforward way. Later footnotes provided by O'Connor describe how, over the two years that the show was performed, certain elements of the monologue were revised (by her) in order to insert references to 'the events of the day; nothing too direct or particular, nothing too prominent or easy, nothing to break the continuum' (*ibid.*: footnote 31). Hence 'reading the news became a part of my daily preparation for the show' (*ibid.*). That she alone was solely responsible for this (within the framework constructed through group work) further complicates the authorship behind what can, nonetheless, be seen as a 'written' text.

Like the performance text itself, the footnotes are almost entirely created by the other contributors rather than Etchells himself, but collated and edited by him. He also provides the final, lengthy footnote (number 135, amounting to nearly seven whole pages), as well as, one presumes, those attributed to Steve Rogers, a contributor to and latterly editor for *Performance* magazine who died in 1988 and to whom Etchells pays tribute both here and in *Certain Fragments* (Etchells 1999a: 6).¹⁷¹

Attribution is hence tricky. Of the 'Works for Theatre Spaces and Durational Performances' listed in 2004's *Not Even a Game Anymore* (Helmer & Malzacher 2004), all 'texts' are credited either to Tim Etchells or, in the case of several from 1994 onwards, to 'Tim Etchells, Forced Entertainment'. On the Forced Entertainment website these productions are credited to 'Tim Etchells and the company'. The durational work *12 am: Awake & Looking Down* (1993) does not give a credit for 'text'; the only verbal elements were the written signs carried by the performers. *Who Can Sing a Song to Unfrighten Me* (1999) and *And on the Thousandth Night...* (2000) do not give a credit for 'text'. This seems logical, as these shows' verbal elements were improvised by the performers without textual prompts, whereas 1999's *Quizoola!*, credited to Etchells, featured improvisations sparked by the list of questions prepared by him. The waters are muddied, however, by the company website, which in fact credits all three of these to 'Tim Etchells and the company', again here prioritising the artistic director's input into text which is

¹⁷¹ These footnotes themselves take the form of tributes, each simply stating 'Do not think any more about' and giving the name of a deceased playwright, artist or other figure, many of whom Etchells has mentioned elsewhere as influential on his work. The first of these, hence given prominence, is 'Samuel Beckett (13 May 1906 – 22 Dec 1989)' (Etchells 2013b: footnote 9). This seems a further hint at Etchells's increasing comfort with placing himself within an avant-garde, but *writer-led* theatre tradition.

ostensibly improvised equally and collaboratively in the moment by all of the performers. In the case of *Quizoola!*, the website attribution prioritises Etchells but *does* credit the other performers for their creation of text in the moment of performance. This is hence one example of the ways in which the definition of what constitutes ‘text’ may be differently (and quite significantly) shaded by small questions of attribution and rhetoric.

Structuring the writing

The role that writing has played in the company’s works has clearly shifted over the years. In the earliest pieces, the ‘poetic’ ‘writing with a capital “W”’ (Etchells quoted in Giannachi & Kaye 2006) is isolable thanks to its existence as pre-recorded voice-over, as well as its self-contained, unitary structure. While later texts are conceived by Etchells as fragmentary, with part of their nature their interchangeability and openness to repositioning, and hence a structure which at least on the surface does not build to a coherent whole, the monologues of *Nighthawks*, *Serenity...* and *Let the Water Run its Course...* are clearly separable ‘units’ with singular structures of their own. They were provided by Etchells ‘as is’ – edited with the input of the company, perhaps, and to fit the needs of the piece, but essentially fixed and used within the performance as a unit which ‘frames’¹⁷² the performance. They contrast and combine with the onstage action (and dialogue, where used) as part of an overall collage effect: the stories of the framing texts do not interweave with those played out onstage.

The text’s narrative may be fragmentary or incoherent, but it is a single unit, and in fact often progresses in a linear fashion, with certain way-markers to indicate progress through it. The text for *Let the Water Run its Course...*, for instance, reproduced in 1999’s *Certain Fragments*, is representative of the pseudo-stream-of-consciousness word association which Armitstead (1994) described as Etchells’s

¹⁷² This terminology is employed variously throughout Etchells’s discussions of the company’s work, for instance, as noted below, in *Certain Fragments* (1999a: 134), and hence adopted by commentators as in Benecke’s description of the ‘disjointed and fragmentary framing text’ (Benecke 2004: 34).

‘strangely beautiful riffs’, full of assonance and skewed pop culture references¹⁷³. It opens with ‘Man’¹⁷⁴ saying:

to the Mr Heart-Lung babies of this
place & the so-called platitude girls
those for whom falling is a way of life. (Etchells 1999a: 135)

After this pseudo-dedication, ‘Woman’ takes over:

Part one was the death of his hands.
This didn’t seem to matter at first, though it changed his style of dress. (*ibid.*)

In this way, there are, peppered through the Edward Lear-esque nonsense language, references to numbered ‘parts’, which create an impression, at least, of forward momentum, up to ‘part five’, which is then followed by a brief ‘P.S.’, mirroring the opening ‘dedication’. ‘Part five’ itself consists of an antiphonal list of absurd, egregious or banal things the speakers have done or been, using the first person for the first time in the text: ‘We woke to hear a man’s voice & found that it was morning’, ‘We played sniper on the balconies of the world’, ‘We sat 20 billion years in the ridiculous dark’, ‘We have died in London & we have kissed in Rome’, ‘We were born inside out’ (*ibid.*: 138-9).¹⁷⁵ These shifts in the voices of the speakers, as well as the style (each speaker’s lines becoming shorter, building the back-and-forth rhythm) display a clear awareness of how the structuring of shifts in language and delivery can be used to affect an audience. The writing of the piece is structured to include change and momentum in other ways: while the opening speeches are lengthier (many spanning between six and ten lines as printed in *Certain Fragments*), the middle section includes a phase of single lines – again an antiphonal list within the list of ‘parts’: ‘Man’ enumerates a list of cities (‘The first city was the City of Stones’, etc.) and ‘Woman’ provides the same response each time, ‘They spoke each night & every night about a journey standing still’, lending an almost liturgical tone to this sequence (Etchells 1999a: 137). The division into five

¹⁷³ For instance, ‘Thos wer [*sic*] the hands he got from Superbig Safeways’, or ‘they listened to Vivaldi’s Baseball Concerto’ (Etchells 1999a: 135).

¹⁷⁴ This was read by Tim Etchells; the text for ‘Woman’ was read by Sarah Singleton. Described by Benecke (2004: 41) as a ‘non-actor’, Singleton, a ‘friend of the company’ (*ibid.*), has not performed live with the company, but also appeared in the subsequent production (*200% & Bloody Thirsty*) on video.

¹⁷⁵ This is an interesting pre-echo of the ‘confessional’ style which would be developed in *Marina & Lee* (1989) and, most notably, *Speak Bitterness* (1994).

numbered parts echoes the classical five-act structure derived from Aristotle, and *structuring* is often a central part of what writing means to Etchells and the company.

In slightly later works such as *Marina & Lee*, *Emanuelle Enchanted* and *Club of No Regrets*, this principle of collage and of multiple, open narratives takes greater precedence in, as Etchells says in interview with Heathfield, ‘the brutal juxtaposition of images, languages and things’ (Etchells in Heathfield 2004: 77). Again, he employs the image of changing television channels in describing the company’s work at this time: the shows ‘were structured in a way that owed a lot to the metaphor of TV channel-hopping. Each of them had many sections, often constructed on different-but-related principles’ (*ibid.*: 77-78).

Etchells, in interviews and explanations of the company’s work, often speaks of his interest in approaches to the structuring of the pieces. In one online interview around the publication of his novel *The Broken World* (2008), he declares himself

very interested in structure [...] how to structure experience, how to devise paths through something, how to project and anticipate different ways of negotiating an environment (whether it’s a visual one or one that exists in text alone). (Bloomer 2008)

The aforementioned repetitions, the plunges between lyrical ‘Writing with a capital “W”’ and more colloquial turns of phrase and, particularly, the surreal weaving of familiar landmarks of modern Britain into a tapestry of legend and pop culture, are certainly familiar from Etchells’s own published fiction. For instance, several of the group’s titles, references and obsessions crop up in *Endland Stories* (Etchells 1999b), his collection of absurdist short stories written in a narrative voice that is a fractured, twisted collision of childish cliché, pop culture and high register. With reference to the theatre pieces, but just as apposite for the scope of Etchells’s non-theatrical writing, Hans-Thies Lehmann likens the style to Shakespeare: ‘between fairy tales and reality, dream and triviality, the cosmos and the inn, between Lear and Falstaff, the sublime and the inebriated, tragic and comic’ (Lehmann 2004: 104).

Etchells acknowledges the recurrence of certain phrases and themes in and across his fiction and the theatrical pieces, but again here seeks to dismiss the significance of this overlap, in much the same way he insists that his role as ‘director’ is overstated.

It's mainly that I tend to collect stuff in notebooks, then the stuff from the notebooks ends up everywhere. What I also do sometimes is, if I'm working on stories while we're also working on shows, I'll take the stories in to pass them round to get comments, or just to amuse people while we're working. Then bits of that material will slip between the two contexts. [...] Then sometimes we'll be working on a theatre-piece, and if I'm looking for some random little detail for the story I'll nick something back from that. So it does kind of steal from itself, but it's not that conscious or important. [...] So, yeah, there certainly is that kind of relationship there, but it's not really very important. (Etchells quoted in Burrows 1999)

Hence Etchells claims that such overlap arises merely because, in employing fragments of notes and stories, 'you'll often end up snatching things you'd already snatched before' (*ibid.*). This is credible, but it also obscures the fact that it is *his* notebooks that are being used in this manner, and that the verbal style and structural principles evident in the texts of many of the company's pieces are also distinguishable in his own solo writings.

There are also, furthermore, recognisable overlaps in the ways that Etchells discusses the writing of his own individual texts and the creation of the company's theatrical works. Whereas his first (unpublished) attempt at writing fiction 'was just a splurge,' as he told Wayne Burrows in the above-cited interview about *Endland Stories*,

doing the stories – and doing all the Forced Entertainment shows we've done since then – has taught me an awful [lot] about controlling things, structuring things, and basically understanding the architecture of a book. (*ibid.*)

This terminology crops up in the stories themselves. In *Endland Stories*'s 'James', the title character asks his older sister Olivia:

'What is the play about?'
James asking Olivia. No sense of it in his head, the architecture too vast.
O: 'It is not about something' she says. 'It is something...' (Etchells 1999b: 64-5)

The phrasing is familiar from Etchells's own discussions of structure in the theatre pieces: in interview with Heathfield for *Not Even a Game Anymore*, for instance, he describes each of the company's 'theatre shows' as 'a machine with an architecture' (Etchells quoted in Heathfield 2004: 80). A large element of Etchells's role within

the company is clearly that of an ‘outside eye’ concerned with ‘structuring’ the ‘architecture’ of the pieces, and in this way the priority developed as the provider of texts is retained, in mutated form, within the company, as I will examine in greater detail below. The architectural metaphor is joined by a more direct sculptural one, as Etchells describes his experiences in the rehearsal room for *The Thrill of It All* ‘trying to sculpt the fog as it warps and weaves in front of me’ (Etchells 2009b). He hence at times depicts himself as the solo sculptor trying to grasp and shape a quite intangible substance: the performances of the rest of the company.

However, straightforwardly to ascribe authorship to Etchells on the basis of his production of texts for early works, or his apparent prominence in structuring the works, would be oversimplifying. Cathy Naden too, talks about the importance of structure in the company’s apparently chaotic works: having ‘two or three ideas running simultaneously’, she argues, not only necessitates but leads to ‘an idea of structure’ (Naden speaking in *Goat Island et al.* 2006b). There is also a fluid movement between writing, designing, directing and performing within the company. A photograph published on 16 April 2010 on the ‘Notebook’ section of Forced Entertainment’s website¹⁷⁶ shows ‘[a] running order for *The Thrill of it All*, probably already out of date’ (Forced Entertainment 2014).¹⁷⁷ Though the show in question had its premiere on 7 May 2010, another photograph published on 6 May, and apparently taken during the final week of rehearsals, shows ‘Richard’s ongoing “re-structuring kit”’.¹⁷⁸ Notably, this is ‘Richard’s’ kit rather than ‘Tim’s’. This indicates how responsibilities for structuring the pieces are fluid and distributed, and also how the structuring of the piece – a key element of its writing – is often left until late in the creative process.

¹⁷⁶ The ‘Notebook’ is a frequently updated collection of writings and images, often relating to recent work or events but also unearthing memorabilia from the company’s archives. The company’s website has recently been completely overhauled, with the Notebook section losing something of its random-seeming ordering in favour of ‘tagged’ posts organised by production.

¹⁷⁷ Available online at <<http://www.forcedentertainment.com/notebook-entry/a-running-order-2>> (accessed 14 November 2014).

¹⁷⁸ This was previously available online at <<http://notebook.forcedentertainment.com/?p=243>> (accessed 24 August 2013), but in the overhaul of the company’s website, the image has been removed. The caption to which I refer (‘Richard’s ongoing “re-structuring kit”’) is, however, preserved at <<http://web.archive.org/web/20100531052854/http://notebook.forcedentertainment.com/?>> (accessed 5 January 2015).

While Forced Entertainment's creative process as a whole is described as 'serving the work rather than the work coming out of the process that has been decided upon' (O'Connor in Oddey 1994: 91), there seems a roughly consistent tendency among the company members' documentation of this process, which involves splitting these flexible processes into two phases. There are lengthy initial creative processes alongside (or, more recently, replacing) the provision of text, which will be examined below. These are about grinding out ideas and testing material, which is then in a second (shorter) phase edited or selected. Several of the company's more recent experiments with process have led to explicit and evident division of the processes in this way. Mermikides's observations on the creation of 2002's *The Travels*, for instance, indicate that the development period was indeed distinctly split, with an initial setting-up of the project followed by the work of gathering the material as the company members (except Etchells) travelled around Britain writing about and responding to what they found. The final phase (with, potentially, some overlaps in terms of the timing) involved Etchells selecting and re-writing the extracts (Mermikides 2010: 112-114).

This is one specific example of the division of the creative process, but Cathy Naden expresses it as exemplary of the process in general:

Devising and rehearsing can be split into two periods – a research and development time, where ideas are very free, and a structuring time, where ideas, through improvisation, editing and discussion are subjected to a rigorous questioning of how and why things work or don't work, and what kind of a show we are trying to make. (Naden 2003: 134)

Since the earliest works, then, the company's attitudes towards processes of writing and structuring have shifted. The above-cited recognition Armitstead gives Etchells's writing in *Hidden J* (Armitstead 1994) in fact came at a time when he and the company were becoming much less straightforward in their use of text. Etchells himself identifies *Hidden J* as, roughly, the moment when they 'became less interested in the idea of writing as a separate function' (Benecke 2004: 46), a statement predicated on the acknowledgement of the company's previous tendency to treat text as an individual unit, provided by Etchells, and comparatively uninflected by the rest of the company. As their processes developed, the company became

more interested in the kind of ‘writing’ that one does either improvising or in condensing or ripping off stuff that’s already written. Written texts were often thrown into the mix, but at least from *Hidden J* onwards, people were reading them in different sequences during improvs or cutting backwards and forwards between texts they had in rehearsal, just trying to find combinations or juxtapositions of stuff that worked (*ibid.*)

This latter description is particularly relevant in the context of *Speak Bitterness*, where improvisations around pre-written texts both structure and inflect those texts, and flow at times organically into the ‘writing’ of new material as I will analyse.

O’Connor and Etchells both ascribe a shift in aesthetic, related to this shift in process, to the company’s first encounter with the Wooster Group – in 1986¹⁷⁹ they watched *L.S.D. (Just the High Points)*. ‘It wasn’t as shrouded in atmosphere as the stuff we were used to watching’, says O’Connor (*ibid.*: 38). Benecke links this to the increased interest in employing direct address and introducing self-referentiality to the performances.¹⁸⁰ The move away from dense, Impact-inspired ‘atmospheres’ and towards straight onstage lines, direct audience address and deconstruction, as employed by the Wooster Group, began here. As such, later shows are ‘framed’ not by a single, stylistically coherent text but by a set of rules, a physical space, or a single conceit – ‘single idea shows’ in their own ‘jargon’ (Helmer 2004: 53). The texts as performed are also created, chosen and juxtaposed in processes which are, in the company rhetoric, far more group-based. The ‘frame’ may still be constructed or strongly shaped by Etchells, but its nature has moved away from the verbal, and the verbal elements of the performance are, to a far greater extent, inflected by the performers.

Effort, not skill

Part of Etchells’s ongoing resistance to claiming full ownership of the writing behind Forced Entertainment’s (and often his own solo) performances is tied to the company rhetoric and approach favouring *effort* over *skill* in the creative process. To accept the title of ‘writer’ in an unproblematic way would not only traduce the collaborative nature of the ‘writing’ as noted above, but would furthermore suggest a particular

¹⁷⁹ Benecke (2004: 38) gives the date as 1987, but Etchells (2012) gives it as 1986, and this is corroborated by the tour date information on the Wooster Group website (Wooster Group 2013).

¹⁸⁰ Wooster Group shows frequently explain their own structure or take the recreation of a well-known performance or text as a starting point, such as in 1991’s *Brace Up!*, a version of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*.

aptitude or speciality. I have already indicated some of the ways in which Etchells plays down his position as an academic and commentator, insisting – both explicitly and in more subtle ways in his self-presentation – that he is in some way an outsider. Chaotic (apparent) amateurism forms a strand throughout the company's work, from the rough, practical lighting of *Jessica in the Room of Lights* to the (again, apparently) disorganised, rambunctious storytelling and incompetent musical interruptions of *The Coming Storm* (2012). Etchells and the company place an emphasis on creation through ongoing, lengthy effort rather than the development of a performance through the perfection of skill.

It is again an almost directly opposed approach to that of Frantic Assembly's directors, who became famous at first for the ways in which their productions pushed themselves and their fellow performers in developing physical skill and strength; significantly, this rhetoric persists in their depiction and discussion of their approach today.¹⁸¹ Etchells has in recent years referred directly to the kind of work Frantic Assembly creates, mentioning a Lyn Gardner article which, he recalled, describes the performers 'strutting around the stage like young gods'. He described his reaction to the idea: 'Ooh god, I really *would not* like to see that. Ever' (Etchells 2010)¹⁸². In contrast, he describes *The Thrill of it All*'s physical, energetic commitment to 'choreography' (which he qualifies with 'big quotation marks') that is beyond the skill and fitness of the company, who were by that stage into their forties and early fifties. 'We could have saved ourselves somewhat by making this when we were twenty,' he says, pointing out that this effortful failure to carry out the dance moves, along with the sweat and red faces of the performers, is in fact exactly what interests him in the work (*ibid.*). This, too, is a recurrent theme. In the 1997 documentary *On*

¹⁸¹ 'One more press-up is progress,' as the pair say in the *Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* (Graham & Hoggett 2009: 97). *Beautiful Burnout*, a 2010 co-production with the National Theatre of Scotland, took this approach to a new extreme, in large part inspired by the directors' fascination with the training of the professional boxer. Mark Evans's interview with Hoggett and Graham (Evans 2012) explores numerous aspects of this link between physical training and performance (in Frantic's work and beyond).

¹⁸² I have traced the Gardner quotation to her review of Frantic Assembly's *Beautiful Burnout* in *The Guardian*, 9 August 2010. Etchells slightly paraphrases; Gardner does not mention the actors 'strutting' and in fact is making a somewhat tangential point to the one suggested by Etchells's reading: 'They are not acting this play; they are living it, their bodies sculpted, swaggering and shining like young gods' (Gardner 2010). Hence Gardner is suggesting that the performers are authentically embodying the roles of arrogant young boxers in a way that only intense training and pride in one's own body *as a boxer* rather than as an *actor* can create. The swagger of the well-trained is unappealing to Etchells; read differently, though, the *authenticity* described here might be more interesting to him: he has often stated his interest in situations in which an audience is 'watching the people before us, not representing something but going through something' (Etchells 1999a: 49).

Pleasure, Etchells also states explicitly that he (and the company, on whose behalf he talks) ‘never liked those kind of performances that are about virtuoso skill’, preferring to explore the ‘gap between people’s desire to do something and their ability to do that thing’ (Kelly 1997).

As the company has grown in profile and funding, their development processes have become lengthier, so while effort is manifest onstage in the performances, the belief in its usefulness as a creative strategy is also evident. From early on, though, the development process was emphasised as one of a length uncharacteristic in British theatre. Oddey records that *Some Confusions...* was initially intended to take ‘five to six months’ hard work’ (1994: 91). Though it is difficult to reconstruct the exact timing of these rehearsals as several shows were being performed and developed simultaneously, with ideas bleeding between them, Oddey also elsewhere traces the work as beginning in summer 1989, leading to ‘work-in-progress’ previews, the first of which was at Nottingham Polytechnic on 30 October 1989, followed by further development before a full tour in 1990. Etchells’s own way of framing the process subtly insists on the effortful, as opposed to skilful, nature of the work. Oddey cites him, discussing the group’s dynamics:

a long set of shared work experiences inevitably builds some kind of collective shorthand. We’ve developed a set of terms, of reference points, and theoretical frameworks that underpin and give precision to our struggles in making the work. (*ibid.*: 36)

There is an interesting point here about the tension between ‘beginning afresh’ with each production (Etchells supports the view that ‘devising is about *not* starting from a single thing’, as Oddey puts it; *ibid.*: 35) and the pre-existing ‘shorthand’ of any group of individuals who have worked and lived together for so long. But what concerns us most here is the vocabulary, which passes unremarked and buried by this larger point, of ‘*struggles* in making the work’.

More recently, Etchells has repeated the above description of the lengthy gestation of a show, with each one usually requiring a process which may last five or six months – ‘though not necessarily in a row’ (quoted in Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 25). Sometimes,

[i]t can be a frustrating journey – one step forwards, two steps back – but over the years of working together we’ve become inured to the fact that sometimes this slow and picky progress is how it has to be. (Etchells 2009b)

The reason it ‘has to be’ this way is related to the seeking of strategies for the deferment of creative responsibility. By allowing the process to be slow, communal, and effortful, there is no pressure on any of the group to provide the creative impetus:

It’s a very slow process. Nobody has to come in with a clever plan and make things work. You can just sit in the room and talk, and slowly, with some effort and some coffee, you’ll find what the next step should be. (Woels 2011)

So, over the years, and despite the shifts in methods and aesthetic, this effortful and slow process has been integral to each show. There is, in fact, a clear connection in company rhetoric between the onstage effort and that behind the scenes. For instance, in the company’s recent general information pack, the section on ‘the aesthetic of the work’ describes its creation through ‘long months of rehearsal’, thereby explicitly linking the performance aesthetic to the process which lies behind it (Forced Entertainment 2010c: 4).

On the rare occasions that Etchells has discussed the influence of the Drama course at Exeter University, which all of the founder members of the company attended, there is a telling focus in his description of that time. As mentioned above,¹⁸³ the course consisted of group work in small cohorts; importantly, the precedents Etchells recalls in the 2012 interview are all distinctly processual rather than actor-training-based: ‘group project-making, all practical research-led. Very little on plays. Mostly on [...] games, ritual, and so on’ (Etchells 2012). He says that ‘aesthetically it [...] felt like the 1960s in that department, [not] the 1980s.’ It had ‘a slightly older-school, slightly rustical, slightly holy flavour’, focusing on continual group work as in Grotowski’s laboratories, rather than on specific actor training, writing or play

¹⁸³ See page 150 above.

development: ‘Very much with an emphasis on doing rather than writing, and in a way doing rather than talking – just try[ing] things’ (*ibid.*).¹⁸⁴

Though Etchells states that the course provided much against which the members of the nascent company ‘argued’, he also insists that they ‘took a lot from it’, and elsewhere he has praised Peter Thomson, who led the course at the time: ‘He pursued – and encouraged us to pursue – a way of thinking about theatre that was unprecedented’ (Etchells quoted in Ahad 2008). ‘Unprecedented’ is, of course, an overstatement, and Thomson himself would acknowledge his debts not only to Grotowski but, crucially, to Brecht, of whose work Thomson is a respected scholar.¹⁸⁵ But it is nonetheless informative to note the combination of these influences and those of other companies such as Impact Theatre, who, like Etchells and his course-mates, were becoming more and more interested in the possible fusion of cinema and popular music with theatre and live art. The impact of contemporary popular music – particularly the post-punk aesthetic, as in Etchells’s invocation of The Fall – has been noted above. What is interesting here, though, is Etchells’s use of this reference point as revelatory to him that ‘anybody can be creative, you don’t need *skills* – you can just do something. If you’ve got the energy to do it you can do it’ (Etchells 2012). Again, here, his rhetoric de-emphasises ‘skills’ and places the onus instead on ‘energy’ (a similar concept to ‘effort’).

¹⁸⁴ There is some overlap in rhetorics with certain of Grotowski’s own stated intentions: for instance, ‘our productions are detailed investigations of the actor-audience relationship’ (Grotowski 2002: 15). However, it is not evident that Grotowski’s ideology for how to achieve this would also apply to Forced Entertainment’s approach. He sees ‘the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art’ (*ibid.*); this seems counter to Forced Entertainment’s aesthetic of amateurism and deliberate anti-skills focus as discussed here.

¹⁸⁵ He has written and edited various works on the practitioner, including, in 1980, *Brecht*, co-written with Jan Needle.

Improvisation and duration in rehearsals

These rhetorics (and the anxieties and repeated concerns within them) position the company's processes as collective but with Etchells frequently placed at the centre of a collaborative effort. By analysing rehearsal room footage from two productions created as the company shifted its processes significantly, I examine this role in practice, and seek to elucidate some of the forms of writing which take place in creating the company's theatrical works. While Etchells's own recurring rhetorics seek to defer authorship and to democratise or marginalise writing, they can also be seen to insist on writing's centrality, albeit an expanded view of what 'writing' may be. One of his more recent statements explicitly links the process of rehearsing – and the running through, verbally or mentally, of performance possibilities – with that of writing:

I recognise some of this in the sense that it is *like* writing... The same split be[t]ween the here of the context and the elsewhere of the fiction you're creating. But at least in writing (most of the time) there is an object that you're working with (language) and a computer or a pen... whereas this part of our process (the imagining and speculating about possible scenes, possible sequences, possible transitions) can be so very virtual – ie no way to actualise without [assembling] the whole group and heading into the studio... (Forced Entertainment 2010a: 9; punctuation and capitalisation as in original)

Several key sequences for *Emanuelle Enchanted* and, later, *Speak Bitterness* were developed through improvisation sessions of new lengths in the company's process, and looking back on this, Claire Marshall tells Judith Helmer that '[i]t took us a long time in the rehearsals for *Emanuelle Enchanted* to get the game with the signs as simple as it is. [...] It was frustrating that you get such a little of it in the show' (Helmer 2004: 52). Etchells identifies a crucial element in this simplification as developing the 'rule' which states 'I suppose [...] that you don't much interact with the other people' (Kalb 2008b). Far from seeking to generate the impetus for more conventional improvisational 'scenes', 'there might be a moment of eye contact or a little look between [...] two figures, but that will be it. They don't get into complicated improv where they join up together to make a story' (*ibid.*). However, the footage of these rehearsal sessions reveals some useful overlaps with

practitioners more conventionally discussed in terms of techniques for improvisation.

Etchells, as in discussing the ‘writing’ of the theatrical works, uses language in describing the ‘rules’ which, consciously or not, seeks to avoid any suggestion that these rules and overt leadership derive from him – his ‘I suppose’ in his comment to Kalb above suggests that he has merely inferred them. The sense is that these are not hard and fast, pre-written (nor perhaps even openly stated) rules, but ones derived from communal work on the improvisations, and jointly adopted, sometimes without open statement. It seems fair at this stage to agree that Etchells himself is by no means the sole authority for these rules, though as we have seen, his priority in the rehearsal room does shape individual moments aesthetically, and, it would seem, goes some way towards shaping the broader rules. We can see through these developments how the passive voice and deferral of authorship which he and the other company members tend to employ in discussing their processes represent conceptualisations useful to them in balancing the freedom to create with the structures which not only shape the material but in fact *enable* this creative space.

Robin Arthur, talking about the later durational performance *Who Can Sing a Song to Unfrighten Me?* (1999) on the company’s 2003 CD-ROM *Imaginary Evidence*, provides an example of this. Interviewed apparently shortly after the performance¹⁸⁶, he mentions the existence of different ‘kinds of relationships’ which performers are ‘allowed to have’ in different guises (Arthur calls the trees, created by performers donning faux-naïve cardboard costumes, ‘creatures’ rather than characters). In talking of the relationships the trees ‘are allowed to have’, he again employs a passive voice which subconsciously indicates and allows for the communal derivation of such rules. This show involved a larger than ever number of performers, the core augmented by guests found through the company’s collaboration with SpielArt in Munich. It included several preordained and rehearsed sequences, derived in many cases from rehearsals for the theatre piece. Within these structures, though, the performers were responsible for keeping the

¹⁸⁶ Several of the interviews with performers clearly take place in backstage areas, filmed with a (sometimes deliberately) shaky camcorder, and the performers are clearly tired, discussing moments and events which have, it would seem, only just taken place on stage. Strikingly, Etchells’s contributions are, in contrast, almost all pre-written and ‘performed’ in the slightly arch ‘performing academic’ style which he adopts for several talks, such as the ‘In the Event’ talk for the National Review of Live Art in 2004 (Etchells 2004b).

show going, and able to combine pre-agreed material with several improvisational games. Playing within but manipulating these rules to bring back the naïvely-made cardboard tree ‘creature’ for a sequence in which it did not usually appear, Arthur had ‘really really good fun for five minutes being outrageously like a tree’ (Forced Entertainment 2003).

Enabled by increased use of video logs of rehearsals, but inspired by the collective ethos from the earliest days of the company, the performers took increasing responsibility for the creation of text through such improvisation, as well as for other, dramaturgical, elements of the performance. Arthur’s descriptions of the work of this later durational show are reflected also in the rehearsal room footage, from *Emanuelle Enchanted* onwards: as well as the bold improvisatory moves such as those described above, Arthur spent a lot of time

doing a lot of little side jobs in the show, like [...] the dancing at the front and [...] wandering about and kind of chatting, or looking like chatting, and walking across the stage just to break up the picture. (Forced Entertainment 2003)

This suggests how the individual performers function through combinations of individual, discrete tasks which they nonetheless put together with an awareness of ‘the [overall stage] picture’. This approach began in rehearsals, but moved, in the durational performances, into the performance situation itself.

These moves, along with the aforementioned use of video recording in rehearsals, contribute towards the previously discussed liberty for Etchells, in his role as ‘the writer’, nonetheless to arrive empty-handed at rehearsals. In Etchells’s recollection, the shift towards daily use of video recordings of rehearsals began around 1994-6, though fairly regular use of such recordings and rewatchings was common from at least the time of 1992’s *Emanuelle Enchanted*:

Increasingly we have come to work with improvised text and speech, so there’s been a shift in the work from an interest in writing to an interest in spoken language. One of the things you notice as soon as you start working with a video camera on a daily basis – as we did may be [*sic*] 10, 12 years ago – is that when you transcribe actual speech it’s quite extraordinary. (Etchells quoted in Giannachi & Kaye 2006)

The company's increasing use of the video camera in the rehearsal room also provides increasing quantities of footage by which we can examine the process of improvisations turning into more fixed 'dramaturgy', as I discuss below with reference to both *Emanuelle Enchanted* and *Speak Bitterness*.

Several tapes preserved from performances and workshops with students around the time of these performances reveal a consistency of concerns, beyond the stylistic and dramaturgical similarities of 'fragmentary' collaging of disparate material. The performance labelled 'At 17:00 There Will Be 30 Seconds of Weightlessness 03/08/91',¹⁸⁷ as part of a summer workshop at an unnamed institution, shows how material being shaped for *Marina & Lee* and *Emanuelle Enchanted* filtered into other sessions held by the company. The set includes elements which were subsequently used in *Emanuelle Enchanted*, such as a backdrop of stars, and there are sections in which one performer 'narrates' the actions of others: 'She's pretending to be Lady Macbeth out of *Macbeth* by Shakespeare', or 'She's pretending to be Nina out of *The Seagull* by Chekhov'. This echoes both the rule-based sequences of Forced Entertainment shows of the period (and later) and a passage in *Emanuelle Enchanted*, discussed below, in which Cathy Naden applies descriptions of characters from the film *Goodbye Emmanuelle* (1977) to seemingly unrelated images on the screens. The performance also uses video screens in similar ways to the earlier shows, and several performers address each other as 'Jordan' and 'Amy', speaking in formulaic dialogue deeply reminiscent of the angels of *200% & Bloody Thirsty* or the skeletons and the 'showbiz couple' Mike and Delores in *Some Confusions....*

The company encourages a chaotic approach to the formation of the material. The tape of 'Impro material' around this performance shows the dozen or so student performers in a rehearsal room, all simultaneously following their own impulses and engaged in largely individual activities, as Etchells and Naden sit watching and discussing amongst themselves, pen and paper in hand. In this way, Etchells and Naden act as the shaping influence, drawing on collisions and unexpected moments within what for the most part resembles a disorganised bedlam. The camera, too, as sometimes in Forced Entertainment's own rehearsal tapes, becomes an 'actor' itself,

¹⁸⁷ This rehearsal and performance footage is available in the British Library archives.

moving within the chaos, with performers at times acknowledging it and acting towards it, at others ignoring its presence. The scenes contain elements of improvisations familiar from Keith Johnstone and similar practitioners, who talk of the ‘making’ and ‘taking up’ of ‘offers’,¹⁸⁸ but with the habitual rule concerning the sharing of focus removed. In this process, performers do make and take up ‘offers’, such as when one starts singing a song in response to a request for ‘something romantic’, and others join in, or stop their own improvisations to listen and respond. For the most part, however, it seems clear that the performers themselves are oblivious to any overall picture, and to much of what is happening; it is Etchells and Naden who are tasked with collecting and shaping the material thus generated. It is one of the clearest examples, at this stage of the company, of the earliest part of the process, involving what Etchells later called the ‘chaotic’ and ‘blundering’ improvisatory workshops which create the basis of performance material (Etchells’s ‘Manifesto on Liveness’, cited in Kalb (2011: 130)).

Etchells and Naden let these student improvisations run for lengthy periods,¹⁸⁹ as was becoming the case for the company’s own developmental improvisations. These can be seen in the light of Frost and Yarrow’s discussion of ‘long-form improv’ (Frost & Yarrow 2007: 56). In their book *Improvisation in Drama*, they explore the long-form work of Del Close and the Chicago ‘improv scene’ which gave rise to extended improvisational games, usually, in Close’s case, as the basis of comedic performance. Frost and Yarrow describe this as involving, and requiring, the ‘development of *groupmind*: relaxed attunement and memory – a pre-conscious sensitivity to underlying pattern leading to sustained group creativity, and the fundamental principle of reincorporation’ (Frost & Yarrow 2007: 56). Each of these elements can be witnessed in the durational performances, as derived from these lengthier and lengthier rehearsal processes, and, especially, in the developmental rehearsals for *Speak Bitterness*, as examined below.

¹⁸⁸ For instance, Johnstone spells out his concepts of ‘offering’ and ‘blocking’ in his section on ‘blocking and accepting’ in *Impro* (Johnstone 1981: 94-100), specifically mentioning these terms on page 97.

¹⁸⁹ Several moments in the students’ improvisations may reflect their reactions to the lengths of the session. At one point the improviser with the camera notices the ‘Exit’ sign above a door, and tries the handle, pretending that they have been locked in. Also, the song chosen in the improvisation mentioned above is one made famous in Britain by Engelbert Humperdinck in 1967: ‘Please Release Me’.

While the tapes recording development work for *Emanuelle Enchanted* offer some insight into the material which became the durational *I2am...*, they (and the final performance) are far more revealing of a set of new concerns within the company's work, and of an increasing (and arguably productive) tension between improvisation and direction.

Speak Bitterness (1994) is much more integrally preserved in the archive, with hours of rehearsal revealing the process of fixing the improvisations which adapted the durational version into the shorter theatrical piece which toured in 1995. The original (five-hour¹⁹⁰) durational show, mounted, like *I2am...*, for the National Review of Live Art (in October 1994), was improvised around reams of 'confessions' written initially by Etchells but augmented by the rest of the company's writings and spur-of-the-moment inventions. The company members were finding new ways of working together, new levels of 'attunement' and an increased interest in the generation of text, rather than physical stage images alone, through improvisation. This can be seen most clearly on the tapes preserving this development of *Speak Bitterness* from an improvised durational piece into a theatre piece which would last roughly 80 minutes and reproduce largely the same material from performance to performance.

¹⁹⁰ Later versions, including a 25th anniversary performance at PACT Zollverein, Essen in 2009 which was also webcast live, usually ran for six hours, as does the regular incarnation of the subsequent durational performance *Quizoola!*

Emanuelle Enchanted

Emanuelle Enchanted (or a Description of this World as if it Were a Beautiful Place) was first performed on 6 October 1992,¹⁹¹ though as always, ideas which ended up in the show had been circulating in the company for some time. The show in some ways represented a renovation in process and aesthetic, in that it was a re-concentration on the core group of five performers (Robin Arthur, Richard Lowdon, Claire Marshall, Cathy Naden and Terry O'Connor), with Etchells responsible for the 'direction' and 'text'. This precise configuration was responsible for the majority of the company's theatrical works between 1992 and 1998.

Furthermore, the preceding tour, in 1991, had seen the three shows *Let the Water Run its Course...*, *200% & Bloody Thirsty* and *Some Confusions...* grouped together as a 'retrospective trilogy' (Helmer & Malzacher 2004: 295), given the title *Welcome to Dreamland*. There are distinct continuities, and *Emanuelle Enchanted* does not represent any radical attempt to move away from the atmospheres, concerns and vocabularies of the company's preceding eight works. However, while I have sought throughout to present the company as accruing themes, techniques and tropes over time, and hence to examine its history as an ongoing developmental process, the use of a retrospective revival of several recent works is at least in part indicative of a company seeking to take stock after nearly a decade of work together; though Frantic Assembly toured their career-summarising Generation Trilogy at an earlier stage of their development, that 'Trilogy' similarly re-mounted the productions with which they had made their name, and in Frantic's case preceded the company's new direction of working with established playwrights in generating new work.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ The taped performance of the show to which I will refer was made in November 1992 at 'Crewe and Alsager College' according to the tape, probably on the 2 or 3 November; the Forced Entertainment website (<<http://forcedentertainment.com/page/3038/Past-Tour-Dates>> accessed 19 August 2013) listed performance dates in Crewe as 2-3 November 1992 but gives the venue as 'Alsager Arts Centre'. Though the website listed this as a separate venue from 'Crewe and Alsager College', it probably refers to the same space: the Arts Centre was 'developed as a public facility out of the "Cultural Policy" of the old Crewe and Alsager College of Higher Education, in the early eighties'; it has since been renamed Axis Arts Centre (Axis 2013). Since I gathered this information, the Forced Entertainment website has been updated and is still awaiting repopulation with details of past tour dates.

¹⁹² Forced Entertainment was also in reflective – albeit playful – mood in 1994's *A Decade of Forced Entertainment*.

Emanuelle Enchanted has proven a popular production for commentators in analysing Forced Entertainment's style: several of the essays in Helmer and Malzacher's *Not Even a Game Anymore* make often prominent reference to the show, despite the work's publication over a decade after the first performance. They examine, for instance, the role of language (Siegmund 2004: 207-219) or the performer's experience (Matzke 2004: 169-181), or situate the show as one of a couple of 'milestone projects' for Forced Entertainment in 'establishing some of their most fundamental approaches to theatrical language' (Benecke 2004: 44). None of these accounts, however, really link the process of its creation (and interpretation of the rehearsal room material now made available through the British Library's Sound and Moving Image archive) with the resultant performance, or examine its wider implications in terms of the company's methodologies.

New moves

Emanuelle Enchanted is, notably, the first production for which a significant quantity of rehearsal footage was recorded and preserved, hence providing the earliest available prolonged insight into the rehearsal process. The caveat here is that the company did not yet habitually record *all* of their improvisations, and though there are a number of these tapes available in the archive at the British Library, some have been overwritten, and the labelling of the existing tapes is haphazard, mostly without indications of the dates or stages of rehearsal captured.

We can make some assertions about the organisation of the process, though. Two of the tapes available in the archive are labelled as 1991 rehearsals (no further date information is available for them, nor for many of the rehearsal tapes), indicating a prolonged development period (as described by Oddey in 1994 for *Some Confusions...* and by Mermikides in 2010 for *The Travels*). The majority of the rehearsals preserved on these tapes consist of prolonged improvisations following seemingly simple rules, and from them it seems clear that the set and main aesthetic concerns were decided upon early in the process. Furthermore, at least as long before the premiere as 28 August 1992, the company was performing runs of material which closely resembled the final performances (for observers outside the regular company – 'K and Nigel', for instance).

Besides some uncertainty over the chronology of the tapes preserved, though, a further limitation of these tapes as a basis of analysis is that they are obviously documents intended for use in immediate reference back during the rehearsal period, and inevitably fail to capture the discussions which went on amongst the company in light of this review. They often begin, frustratingly, at the tail end of discussion or instruction, and are cut off before the real post-mortem begins. However, certain insights are possible based on the evidence captured here and through the combination this evidence with Etchells's and other company members' recollections and contemporary commentary.

In terms of Forced Entertainment's history, the show is positioned at the genesis of the company's interest in long-form performances, with Nikki Milican's approach to Etchells concerning a potential 'durational' performance noted above.¹⁹³ As also discussed above, the role of lengthy, effortful improvisations and rehearsals has been significant in the company's creative methods since at least Oddey's investigations around the end of the 1980s, but in fact stretching back to their first experiments together at Exeter University even before the official foundation of the company. While developing *Emanuelle Enchanted*, the company took this to new lengths, with a new singularity of vision.

The show also marks the final mutation for some time in the company's employment of video onstage. Etchells places this as itself a development of their use of 'framing texts'. He suggested in 1994 that the taped voices in *Nighthawks* and *Let the Water...* 'had an omniscient, body-less quality' which made them 'exterior to the world. We wanted to put the narrator's voice in the world – on video – so that it would become more questionable and visible' (Kaye 1996: 236). *200% & Bloody Thirsty*'s pre-recorded video worked in much the same way as the earlier audio texts, with two angels – like *Let the Water...*'s narrators, one female and one male – literally looking down over the stage world and making comments which framed the live action much as the voiceovers did. But in *Some Confusions...* and *Marina & Lee*, the pre-recorded video performers had become more like participants in the action, with the live performers apparently interviewing or having conversations with the performers on the screens. In *Emanuelle Enchanted*, as Etchells put it, 'we

¹⁹³ See page 174 above.

firmly placed the camera on the stage and all that's shown on the monitor is what's happening live' (*ibid.*: 238). The video monitors still present a form of framing device, in the company's terms, but here it is 'what's there anyway, reframed' (*ibid.*). Not until *Void Story* in 2009 would the company again show an interest in experimentation with the use of video in theatre performance.¹⁹⁴ Etchells's short film collaboration in 1997 with Michael Atavar and Hugo Glendinning, *DIY*, saw him branching out for the first time into film as a medium in and of itself, while 1998's *Filthy Words & Phrases*, with Cathy Naden carrying out a list-based task familiar from the company's contemporaneous *Pleasure* (1997), represents a combination of the film medium and long-form 'durational' theatrical format – it is described by the company as a '7-hour video installation' (Forced Entertainment 2014)¹⁹⁵ and was screened in circumstances similar to those for the durational theatre works. The growth in the company's interest in such video-based (and CD-ROM and internet) projects has been identified by Helmer as coinciding with a moment at which 'their references to and stage use of video and other technical equipment started to decline' (2004: 62).

As is habitually the case in Forced Entertainment's processes, the construction of a set was crucial to the development of the improvisations. Etchells has repeatedly stressed the importance of a performance environment in which to work on improvisations:

We usually build some crude environment in which to work, using materials from old sets or whatever else is to hand. The building of this environment is really important to us. We need a place to work. If you put us in an empty room we can't do anything. (Etchells quoted in Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 25)

Earlier, Oddey had picked up Etchells's line in identifying the centrality of design to the company's works; she states that Forced Entertainment 'always devises within the designed performing area in order to feel a sense of the space, discovering more about a particular environment' (1994: 91).

¹⁹⁴ In that more recent show, the four seated performers performed a script, written by Etchells, in the manner of a radio play, while large projected images dominated the visual aspect, depicting awkwardly photoshopped scenes of the surreal and impossible episodes described and vocally enacted by Robin Arthur, Richard Lowdon, Cathy Naden and Terry O'Connor.

¹⁹⁵ This information is available online at <<http://www.forcedentertainment.com/project/filthy-words-phrases/>> (accessed 14 November 2014).

Lowdon's design for *Emanuelle Enchanted* hardly changed from the earliest recorded rehearsals to the performances which audiences saw from October 1992. The backdrop, recycled from *Some Confusions...* was a starscape formed of small lights, which was also later used for the durational performance derived from the same rehearsal period, *12 am: Awake and Looking Down* (1993). In front of this was arranged an array of wooden theatrical flats, with the functional 'backs' turned towards the audience. The number and arrangement of these varied at different stages of the development process, and chairs were placed and used in various configurations during the performance and rehearsals as captured on video. At some points, these flats were moved on castors as part of the improvisations. At the sides of the set – in the wings of the performance space, in a sense, although very much visible – were a number of clothes rails, from which the performers took different items of clothing for some sections, again as used in *12 am....* A gauze curtain was placed at the front of the set, and this also acted as a location (and prop) for some sequences of improvisation; on some of the tape labels and in Etchells's recreation of the play's texts in *Certain Fragments*, these are dubbed 'curtain texts'. In the performances, though not present for all the rehearsals and development work, were the two screens and video camera necessary for the onstage use of video discussed above.

The influence of the set on the generation of performance material is emphasised repeatedly by Etchells.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, this is one key example of the ways in which Etchells seeks to distribute authorship and essay 'a broad, adventurous description of what writing for performance might mean' (Etchells 1999a: 98). He explains Lowdon's work on the sets of the earliest performances, once the company began (after the found space of the art gallery in which they performed *Jessica in the Room of Lights*) controlling and constructing their environments in ways which, as in *Emanuelle Enchanted*, profoundly shaped the performance: 'We used to say that the moment in rehearsals [...] when Richard gets up and sees a hole in a flat to make a doorway – that that is a kind of writing' (Etchells in Heathfield *et al.* 2006).

¹⁹⁶ See, for instance, Giannachi and Luckhurst (1999: 25), as cited above. It is also worth indicating that Graham and Hoggett have also described the set as 'crucial for our integrated physical work', with its presence from early rehearsal stages offering 'all kinds of choreographic and theatrical inspiration. Therefore, the set itself becomes a creative element in the process and not just something the performance exists on or in front of' (Frantic Assembly 2012: 17).

Performing ‘performance’

Early in *Emanuelle Enchanted* there is a sequence which suggests one of the new directions in which the company was moving. One by one the various performers alternately close and open the gauze curtain which fronts the set, as if half of them are keen to curtail the performance and the others eager to get the show launched properly. After a brief huddled discussion, the five of them stand in a line and face their audience. The casual dress and lack of framing narrative (such as that in *Some Confusions...*, for instance, as explored below) present the performers in a new, seemingly even more direct light. Claire Marshall, at one end of the line, wordlessly produces a scrap of paper which is then passed along the line, each of them looking over it and, seemingly reluctant to read it themselves, handing it on. Richard, at the far end, is urged by the others (again, silently, with nervous glances to the audience) to read it out.

The earlier *Some Confusions...* contains several ostensibly similar sequences in which performers indicate nervousness or uncertainty about their ‘lines’: the video performers ‘Mike’ (Fred McVittie) and ‘Delores’ (Claire Marshall) both laugh anxiously and excessively, hesitate during their speeches, and repeat phrases which they (in deliberately stagey manner) ‘get wrong’: ‘They call it the Unhappy World... No, no! The Happy World Bar... Umm...’ (Forced Entertainment 1990). It opens with Robin Arthur wandering on to the raised stage, picking up a microphone and telling us all how glad he is to be ‘here in Vegas,’ although later in the evening once he has announced his further pilgrimage to Elvis’s spiritual home, he is informed by one of the female performers: ‘This isn’t Memphis, arsehole, it’s Birmingham.’¹⁹⁷ But both the confusion over location and the use of the mediating microphone act as distancing devices which, while bringing uncertainty over the status of the fiction, also place Arthur’s (and other performers’) utterances within a ‘frame’. When, towards the end, Arthur announces ‘I wanna thank you for being here tonight. Some things have gone wrong, I know. But if I had the chance to do it all again, I’d make the same mistakes’, it seems obviously scripted, and evidently part of the character’s world rather than the performer’s (no matter how flimsily constructed that character is).

¹⁹⁷ In reality, it is none of the above, this particular archived recording having been made at the Leadmill in Sheffield, around 1990.

Etchells attempts at one point (in conversation with Adrian Heathfield in 2004) to pin down the nature of the performance which goes on in their work in terms of the creation of ‘a set of personas who have then, it appears, created the show. We kind of blame it on them – there is a deferral of authorship’ (Heathfield *et al.* 2004: 92). The timing of this comment is distinctly relevant, as this tactic or rationalisation is certainly an apt description of (some of) what was taking place in the company’s work at the time, and towards which their creative methods took a distinct turn around the time of *Emanuelle Enchanted*. While it seems easier to describe earlier shows such as *Some Confusions...* and *200% & Bloody Thirsty* as being populated by sketchy ‘personas’ rather than rounded ‘characters’, these angels, Elvis impersonators, bewigged showgirls, nervous skeletons on the run and so on are so far removed from the everyday that there is small risk of conflating them with the performers who originated them. These are extreme, fantastical, fairy-tale figures whose ‘realistic’ representation is deliberately beyond the abilities of the performers, and pointedly not attempted.

The shift in the work beginning around the development of *Emanuelle Enchanted*, then, was one in which the personas presented on stage were more recognisably human, seeming both closer to the performers through whom they are manifested and more (apparently) responsible for the creation and performance of the work overall – albeit often reluctantly or unsuccessfully. This is not an instant, or total, conversion. The early characters were gestured at by broad, notational signifiers such as a cheap-looking, generic costume (a costume shop gorilla outfit or home-made skeleton suit), rather than fleshed out by nuanced, psychologically-motivated ‘acting’, or even recognisably human intonation. Even Alison Oddey, a close follower and staunch supporter of the company, describes the performers in an early (but public) version of *Some Confusions...* as ‘in danger of performing in a manner so monotone and minimal that members of the audience may simply mistake it for poor acting skills’ (Oddey 1994: 98).¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ This is a ‘mistake’ shared by several reviewers: Kenneth Rea’s review of *Marina & Lee* in 1991 is generally positive, but concludes that ‘[w]hat it [Forced Entertainment] must do now is develop better acting skills’ (1991). Armitstead found similar fault with *Emanuelle Enchanted*, highlighting the deliberate avoidance of comprehensible interaction between the performers: ‘At its worst it is simply more of the same ([...] a fastidious refusal to allow performers to relate)’ (1992).

Often the only indicator of any given ‘character’ being portrayed in the earlier works is provided by another performer naming them in the uncanny, pseudo-Brechtian narration which permeates the pieces. For instance, in *Some Confusions...*, Robin Arthur plays (it might seem) the same character throughout the piece. Early on, he is described by Cathy Naden and Terry O’Connor, in the ‘characters’ of two showgirls, as a ‘crap Elvis’. It is also important to note that extra-performative material such as marketing copy shapes audience expectations as well, in this case referring to ‘a (rather unlikely) Elvis Presley impersonator’.¹⁹⁹ The choice of such a recognisable figure of twentieth-century popular culture is deeply significant, as it makes bluntly clear how little the representation, the ‘acting’ of a ‘character’ is important to the company. In fact, it makes the point that they are, at this level, rejecting representation in a move often linked with Hans-Thiess Lehmann’s ‘postdramatic theatre’, though as Cathy Turner has pointed out, the loose movement Lehmann identifies is predicated on not a refusal of but a fascination with representation ‘and, often, a tentative re-engagement’ (Turner 2009a: 106). In the most well-known sequences of *Emanuelle Enchanted*, too, performers ‘name’ each other and themselves through the use of cardboard signs, each of which displays a character name or description, often (though not always) unrelated to the costume they have hastily put on or the actions they are carrying out. The refusal, for the most part, to take on any characteristics of the character thus designated²⁰⁰, or to engage with the other performers in these sequences, represents a continuity with the formal, stylised choreography and flat delivery of text in the earlier performances.

However, in some of its other sequences, including the ‘curtain texts’, *Emanuelle Enchanted* develops a new aspect to the company’s ‘performance personas’, with a strand introduced in the company’s work whereby the performance itself is presented

¹⁹⁹ This is a quotation from the company’s online performance archive (<<http://www.forcedentertainment.com/project/some-confusions-in-the-law-about-love>> accessed 14 November 2014), but Etchells’s programme note also refers to the way ‘the characters make fictions on a tacky nightclub stage [...] the acting is awkward, the locations they speak of not convergent with their stage’ (reproduced in Etchells 1999a: 214-215). Here, he also writes at length about the appeal of ‘speculative’ or ‘fake’ Presleys as mythical constructs erasing the ‘real Presley’. In this way, the programme notes and other performance marginalia provide, in Etchells’s words, ‘quick accessible ways of framing the concerns, style or ideas of particular works’ (*ibid.*: 214; my emphasis). As discussed above (see page 148), the Education Pack for recent show *The Thrill of It All* even urges its readers to watch an explanatory film before attending the performance (Forced Entertainment 2010b).

²⁰⁰ As discussed below, the performers are often unaware of the actions of the others: in the improvisations for *Emanuelle Enchanted*, they are often unable to see the signs the others hold up in ‘naming’ them. However, the final performance suggests structuring of these clashes in ways which are not coincidental, as I shall also address below.

as ‘going wrong’ in some way. The gauze curtain is at one point pulled back apparently too early, revealing Terry O’Connor still setting up chairs, and hurrying off. The note which is passed down the line and finally read out by Richard Lowdon is, formally, an introduction, based on the actual credits for a well-known 1977 soft-core porn film: Etchells’s text, reproduced in *Certain Fragments*, gives it as ‘Goodbye *Emanuelle*, starring Sylvia Kristel, Umberto Orsini, Alexandra Stewart, Jean-Pierre Bouvier and introducing Caroline Laurence. [...]’ (Etchells 1999a: 147). In performance, Lowdon stumbles over the French names, as if reading them for the first time. Whereas ‘Delores and Mike’s’ performance on camera for *Some Confusions...* archly portrayed the failure of memory, pointing out the inauthenticity of the errors both through the stagey nature of the performers’ ‘forgetting’ and through the mere fact that they appear on pre-recorded video, a medium which permits re-takes and edits, Lowdon’s discomfort in *Emanuelle Enchanted* is much more convincingly portrayed. So *Emanuelle Enchanted*, according to Etchells in 2004, was one of ‘the earliest shows that deal with the audience’, and in it, unlike in later, more confrontational performances, ‘our position with respect to them was rather concerned or worried!’ (Heathfield 2004: 84). The other examples he gives of ‘shows that deal with the audience’ in this interview are the later *Speak Bitterness* (1994) and *Showtime* (1996), strengthening the case for *Emanuelle Enchanted* as belonging at the beginning of this new approach, at least in Etchells’s conception. Furthermore, the use of video, as mentioned above, was different: in using – for all but one of the sequences which employed the video screens – footage which was clearly being created live onstage, the performance was less mediated than the pre-recorded material of the earlier *200% & Bloody Thirsty*, for instance. In some of the rehearsals for *Emanuelle Enchanted*, the company experimented with the use of microphones in delivering some texts, but in the final version they generally opted against this, again favouring a more direct presentation of the performer-‘personas’.

In the sequence cited above, the actual physical presence of a text and the plausible moments at which Lowdon mispronounces or stumbles reinforce the illusion of authentic struggle. In this way, while Karen Jürs-Munby argues that scripts or other texts read from by performers in contemporary theatre generally constitute ‘a visible reminder of their speech’s origin in writing’ (Jürs-Munby 2010: 102), here Forced Entertainment were beginning to use ‘the visible text’ in a different way. The

written text here serves as material against or on top of which the acting is carried out: the speech has its ‘origin in writing’, but the performance – of an awkward, reluctant (but, at this stage, apologetic) performer tasked with reading this text – is almost independent of the content of this speech. This content does, in *Emanuelle Enchanted*, contribute towards an involving, albeit only lightly tangible, set of allusions, as I will touch upon below, but at this stage in the performance the text’s function is, rather, to be *mis*-read. The use of written text, as described by Jürs-Munby (*ibid.*), owes much to Brecht’s experiments with making the apparatus of the theatre visible. The presence of the text adds to the frame which situates Lowdon and the others as unready or unwilling performers, and which thrives on the uncertain, fuzzy boundaries between performer and persona. This uncertainty is brought to the fore in the longer works which the company began plotting at this point, and drives the performance of many (arguably all) of these durational pieces.

Visual moves

Yet alongside this increasing interest in problematising the performer/persona boundary, *Emanuelle Enchanted* was also derived from ‘fragments’ of provenance familiar from even the earliest shows. The show is constructed of several segments of differing kinds of material, each derived from a different impetus (‘constructed on different-but-related principles’, as Etchells tells Heathfield (2004: 78)). There are discernible threads or sequences, which the rehearsal tapes reveal as having been worked on in separate stretches of time in the rehearsal room. These five performers were given certain tasks and various fragments of text – Etchells refers to them as ‘scenes’ in distancing quotation marks (Etchells 1999a: 142) – including a sequence of lists ‘presented into camera’ (*ibid.*: 148) in ‘a chaotic, almost nonsensical TV newsroom’ (*ibid.*: 142) and the aforementioned cardboard signs (over a hundred and fifty of them) describing a catalogue of characters both familiar and newly-minted, jostling next to each other absurdly (‘YOUNG COSMONAUT (SCARED)’, ‘A GIRL FROM THE COUNTRY’, ‘LADY CHATTERLY’ [*sic*] and ‘MICHAEL CAINE’) (*ibid.*: 143-146).

In these juxtapositions and the presentation (and re-presentation) of these ‘units of information, be they textual, visual or spatial’, the group found what Etchells describes as ‘the central methodology’ of the work, through which ‘new patterns, implied narratives and meanings can emerge’ (*ibid.*: 142). In analysing this and the

four theatre works which surround it in Forced Entertainment's chronology²⁰¹, Patricia Benecke argues that '[w]hat came to the fore were the attempts of the performers (and watchers) to make sense of these stressful intertextual spaces' (Benecke 2004: 43). Etchells has more recently referred to these sequences in *Emanuelle Enchanted* and *12am...* as 'a machine for making stories, or throwing up the possibilities for stories' (Kalb 2008b). The description of the sequence as machinery is indicative of the way in which, based on simple rules, the performers could continue indefinitely, with Etchells's role (loosely) defined as that of reporting back on interesting moments or intervening to finesse moves. Crediting the performance to the 'rules' of the 'machine', though, is similar to the deferral or 'projection' to a separate performance 'entity' discussed above as an 'anxiety of creativity'.

Despite claims of fragmentation and of the absence of a guiding aesthetic, there is nonetheless thematic, or at least contextual consistency to some of the 'scenes' or strands to the performance. As mentioned, Richard Lowdon's first 'curtain text' links the performance's name with the well-known 1970s series of *Emmanuelle* porn films. In a section entitled (in Etchells's reproduction of the texts) 'Cathy's Monologue: The Kiss' (Etchells 1999a: 154), Cathy Naden refers again to *Goodbye Emmanuelle*, narrating incidents with links to the actual events of the film, for instance describing the character of Chloe, an ornithologist, talking to Parisian filmmaker Gregory in a nightclub. Here, too, Naden 'names' (i.e. gives names to) members of the company, with Lowdon and Marshall appearing on the screens, in the only use of pre-recorded footage in the performance, kissing passionately and at length. Naden uses this pair as surrogates for all of the characters she describes, so the image is held to represent 'Emanuelle' and 'her lover Jean', 'Chloe' and 'Gregory' and even the male pairing 'Michel' and 'Jean'. The alienation effect is furthered as the dialogues supposed by Naden to be taking place between the pairings are fragmentary texts not derived from the film but sourced, like the other texts for the piece, from a mixture of Etchells's notebooks and the company's improvisations.

²⁰¹ Benecke groups the theatre performances staged between 1989 and 1993 as demonstrations of a new or newly prioritised interest in the juxtaposition of fragments as a creative methodology; these were: *Some Confusions in the Law about Love* (1989), *Marina & Lee* (1991), *Emanuelle Enchanted* (1992), *Club of No Regrets* (1993), and *Hidden J* (1994).

The continuities between *Emanuelle Enchanted* and the company's preceding shows were also remarked upon by contemporary reviewers: in reviewing *Emanuelle Enchanted* at the ICA, Armitstead described it as typical of the company's 'architectural theatricality' (Armitstead 1992). Her gloss on this was that it 'is all about the assembly of people, objects and words into more or less significant edifices' (*ibid.*).

One recurrent sequence, developed over long phases of rehearsal, is 'architectural' in a quite literal sense, in that it is directly derived from play with Lowdon's set. It involves the large screens constructed for the show, which are manipulated by the actors (sometimes hidden behind the screens, at times visibly pushing and pulling them). In the performance filmed in Crewe, this sequence lasts nearly fifteen minutes, though interspersed with these wordless, musically-backed movement sequences there are passages in which performers halt to deliver text. The screens (the aforementioned theatrical flats on castors) are positioned and moved, in combination with the addition and removal of chairs and the revealing and concealment of the performers in various states of dress (and undress) and in varying combinations, creating an ever-shifting set of visual images and scenarios which Armitstead found 'funny and accessible' in its 'hectic comic-capering': it 'us[ed] people and space as machinery to express everyday realities in quite unexpected ways' (Armitstead 1992).

Directing improvisation

The movement sequences of the company's earliest shows made use of repeated, synchronised (and simple) gestures, as mentioned previously in relation to *Nighthawks* and *Serenity*.... In *Emanuelle Enchanted*, these sequences involved a much larger use of stage space and relied much more upon chance and the coincidence of different performers' instincts in their development, though with all of the core company involved onstage for this show, the rehearsal tapes point towards the importance of Etchells as an outside eye, shaping the material. In these improvisational development sessions, he side-coaches as the rest of the company performs. For instance, in the wordless improvisations around the large moving flats, he can be heard calling 'can we try and speed it up a bit, of your own accord?' and 'more people in front of flats [...] or on your own in the space so the flats can

move around you.’²⁰² Etchells is also responsible for fine-tuning the specific visual effects produced by the performers’ actions: in another sequence, in which hundreds of items of clothing are thrown onstage from the wings towards a single performer in just underwear and socks, Etchells can be heard instructing those off-stage to ‘throw them up!’ in order to create more looping, gentle arcs.

Once the improvisations are halted, Etchells also makes direct adjustments to the ‘rules’ by which they are governed, before suggesting another run: at one point he suggests trying a sequence in which the flats are not allowed to ‘split up’, advising the performers to think of them as if ‘glued together’. When one of the group (unseen) asks whether it would be better to think of them as ‘having the same intentionality’, Etchells is very particular about insisting instead that they are merely not to separate, maintaining the more concrete terminology that the flats are ‘not to split up’. On another occasion, when the performers are working with the onstage camera linked to a television and hence providing a ‘live feed’, Etchells comments ‘It’s good if people play to the camera [...] It’s giving interesting stuff.’ As the outside eye, Etchells is clearly a trusted shaper of the piece’s aesthetic, as well as exerting noteworthy influence on the aesthetic and conceptual framework of the performance. Though he at times mitigates his privileged position, this is evidence for his admission as noted above that in his role as an organiser, ‘ultimately it’s what I like that is prioritised’ (Etchells quoted in Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 27).

Etchells’s organising hand can be seen as affecting the development of the improvisations for *Emanuelle Enchanted* in less direct (and less verbal) ways too. Several of the rehearsal tapes reveal how different sequences of the sessions were triggered by different music. So John Avery’s compositions – a driving, repetitive instrumental piece of electric-guitar-led music, or slower piano melodies – are used as signs to the performers to shift to different sequences.²⁰³ That Etchells controls this seems clear from a later rehearsal tape, in which he announces a musical cue: ‘[We’re] just going to go for a bit of Tom & Jerry walls moving without any text –

²⁰² These comments, and those cited below, are audible on the tape labelled ‘*Emanuelle Enchanted* rehearsal #4’.

²⁰³ For instance, on the tape labelled ‘*Emanuelle Enchanted* rehearsals #1’.

just for a minute, OK?’²⁰⁴ The pieces of music used in this way are looped and often left playing for long periods of time, often twenty minutes or more.

This is not a wholly new approach in *Emanuelle Enchanted*: the previous year’s *Marina & Lee*, the performances of which overlapped at least slightly with the development of material for *Emanuelle Enchanted*, featured several sequences of comically inept kung fu or childlike games of cowboy or gangster shootouts. These were seemingly triggered by the playing of relevant cartoon sound effects, with the performers immediately stopping their previous impulse to take part in the appropriate sequence together. The performance was (relatively) stable, as all of the company’s theatrical pieces have been – they rarely incorporate extensive improvisation in the theatrical works – but it is not difficult to see the origins of such sequences in rehearsal room games dictated by the cueing up of different sounds, especially given the loose, unchoreographed movements which the performers used at these moments. These were far from the synchronised, stylised gestural languages of the company’s earliest shows.²⁰⁵

As well as controlling the choice and timing of the music used in these sequences, Etchells clearly called the shots in the rehearsal room in terms of deciding on the right moment to bring an end to such sequences, which, at least for long stretches of the development, had no distinct or pre-agreed end points. As mentioned, the rehearsal tapes capture moments at which he instructs the performers to bring an end to certain sections, and the decisions to leave the music (and hence the improvisations) running for lengthy periods are also his. In interview discussing the development of lengthier improvisations and then the durational works, he tells Jonathan Kalb that ‘[d]oing fifty minutes or an hour or ninety minutes of it as improv in the [*Emanuelle Enchanted*] rehearsals seemed crazy, yet I was definitely finding it hard to stop it’ (Kalb 2008b). Only shortly after the development of the first durational works, Etchells told Kaye that in rehearsals ‘we often work – not to that

²⁰⁴ From ‘rehearsal tape #4’. The mention of ‘Tom & Jerry’ is a reference to the Tchaikovsky *Sleeping Beauty* waltz, an upbeat version of which appeared in a Tom & Jerry cartoon, 1954’s *Mice Follies*, and which was used by Forced Entertainment to soundtrack some of these movement sequences with the large flats.

²⁰⁵ The use of music in the rehearsal room has evolved as technology has developed, but indications remain that it is still Etchells who controls its use: speaking for a 2006 DVD entitled *The Great Deviser – Devising Work*, Cathy Naden reveals that in improvising and developing performance material, ‘Tim has his iPod which we rely on a lot’ (Goat Island *et al.* 2006b).

sort of length [of, for instance, six to twenty-four hours as in the durational performances] – but certainly to two hours in improvisations, just watching a person do things’ (Kaye 1996: 241). The rehearsal tapes of *Emanuelle Enchanted* make it clear that Etchells is the one ‘just watching’ in this situation, and though the company willingly participate in such experiments in extended repetitions of a task or pattern, it is almost always Etchells who has control over the start and end points of these improvisations.

In the version of *Emanuelle Enchanted* presented in public, the ‘Tom & Jerry’ music sequences are kept to only three or four minutes at a time. Likewise, the sign and costume sequences are restricted to times much shorter than those in developing the show, and are distributed throughout the performance – Etchells reckons they totalled around fifteen minutes (Kalb 2008b). Form – and narrative – is also introduced here. The sequence which opens the show is driven by the loud and high-tempo guitar instrumental familiar from rehearsals, with performers running energetically on the spot for two or three minutes at a time as others change costume or display a sign which names or describes a ‘character’. The later equivalent sequence continues beyond the moment at which this music ‘runs out’, and the silence creates a jarring effect. The performers also cease running on the spot, but the ‘game’ with the signs continues, with the performers appearing sadder, slower, and sometimes distraught, though on several occasions the same signs as earlier recur, borne by the same performers. They invite interpretation by the audience, particularly in view of this repetition: whereas in the first round Terry O’Connor, holding a sign reading ‘A stewardess forgetting her divorce’, is high-kicking and glamorous, in the later, soundtrack-less version she kneels downstage and seems to be ruminating sadly, comforted by one of the other performers. Even the ‘character’ of ‘A drunk man shouting at the moon’, on his reappearance, is standing still, looking up with his finger to his lips as if hushing – rather than brazenly shouting at – the moon. Drawing a distinction with the durational version of these ‘tasks’, Etchells points out that ‘in *Emanuelle Enchanted* those things came round in a particular order’ (Kaye 1996: 241). Here again Etchells’s use of the passive voice evidences the anxiety of collectivity. He defers responsibility for the choices made in structuring the performance – creating this order – but he admits, certainly, that the ‘fragments’ of the story are structured (by the company) in a particular way.

Lastly, the performance also incorporated texts which had been straightforwardly written by Etchells. Unlike the voiceovers in *Nighthawks*, or the video narrators of *200% & Bloody Thirsty*, though, these were not delivered as whole ‘units’, and the work of the rehearsal room involved finding ways to use the texts which would effectively diffuse the question of their authorship. A particularly strong image of this aspect of the production is that of Robin Arthur (among others who attempt to deliver similar lines) trying to open the gauze curtain, stating with certainty ‘*This is the...*’ only for a hand to emerge, smothering his mouth and dragging him offstage, as if curtailing his explanation of a crucial piece of information.

In similar ways, the texts which Etchells reproduces in *Certain Fragments* were used as the basis for experimentation through the improvisations, though these texts were created by him and brought to the process, rather than being developed through transcriptions of improvised speech by the company (as has become common practice in later processes). These manipulations often obscure any pattern or clarity to the already incomplete text, and interrupt it in ways often less direct, but no less disruptive, than the gagging of Arthur described above. The case study of *Speak Bitterness* which I will undertake next evidences increasingly fragmentary uses of texts still (largely) provided by Etchells, and the onward development of other anxieties and related creative tactics which evolved through the lengthy creative processes leading to *Emanuelle Enchanted*.

Speak Bitterness

The initial durational version of this production was developed from concepts already present in *Marina & Lee*, one section of which saw Mark Randle and Robin Arthur (as well as, later, other core members) offer ‘confessions’ to the audience while at times balancing on chairs. In the simple staging of *Speak Bitterness*, performers face the audience, seated or at times standing behind a long table, sometimes moving to the back of the stage to loiter and watch the others, at others climbing onto their chair or rearranging themselves to vary the stage picture. In terms of its staging, this simplicity was new to the company, as they (temporarily) left behind the naïve costumes and the juxtaposition of scenes and performance genres: ‘the protection of the layering and all that jumping around’ as Etchells referred to it at the time (Clark 1995). Arthur highlights the performance as an example of one of two kinds of show they tend to make: it is ‘very single-minded’, as opposed to the likes of *The World in Pictures* (2006), which has ‘lots of different things in it’ (Goat Island *et al.* 2006b). *Emanuelle Enchanted* could also be placed in this latter category.

Again, though, there are continuities and precedents. At one point in *Marina & Lee*’s confessional sequence, Robin Arthur cries, ‘None of this is true’ (Forced Entertainment 1991), and this play with the boundaries of truth, autobiography, and lies is identified by many commentators on the later piece (and the other durational) as one of its main appeals. Jonathan Kalb in *Great Lengths*, for instance, raises the question of who is represented by the ‘we’ which comprises the basic formula of the confessions, and identifies ‘the occasional suspicion that some confessions were autobiographical’ (Kalb 2011: 150) as featuring in making the performance compulsive, despite his initial scepticism. He also speaks of the alterations in the tone of the performance as the performers tired and became strained, as well as the effects on his own concentration as a spectator over the six hours of the durational performance he witnessed.²⁰⁶ While Kalb examines such effects in the durational

²⁰⁶ Kalb watched the webcast of the 2009 Essen production; like the recent (2013) 24-hour *Quizoola!* it might be interesting, albeit difficult, to compare the experiences of those who watched live but online, and those actually physically present in the performance space. Watching the 24-hour *Quizoola!* live online, I found the piece wove in and out of my day-to-day life in a dream-like way. Comments on social media suggest that other spectators found the experience similarly engrossing

performance, what I wish to analyse are the ways in which this long-form material was adapted, revised and (re)written into the theatrical piece of around 80 minutes' length which toured in the autumn of 1995.

Several discussions of the company's creative processes²⁰⁷ have identified two stages in the creation of their work: an initial creation of ideas, and a subsequent 'shaping' of that material. Cathy Naden, for instance, delineates these phases as 'a research and development time' and 'structuring time' (Naden 2003: 134). In the work of developing *Speak Bitterness*'s rule- and text-based improvisation into a theatrical piece of shorter duration, these phases are to a great extent blurred. It could be said that the idea-creation, 'research and development' phase has already happened before the moment I am choosing to explore in detail and that through it the notion of the 'confessional' performance was evolved, and Etchells began writing the initial material for the onstage texts. However, his writing for the piece, though extensive, was augmented by confessions written by the rest of the group in several ways: in the form of texts prepared prior to performance; through improvisation in the durational performance; and through improvisation in the subsequent development stages towards the theatrical version.²⁰⁸ So the actual 'idea-creation' goes on into the 'structuring' phase. This creativity takes place not only through the writing of the raw material of the confessions but also in the dramaturgy of the piece: moments of stillness, anger, shifts in the arrangements and attitudes of the speakers, and so on. Once the basic 'rules' of the piece have been derived, as they had for the durational version, this structuring and development in fact forms the majority of the 'writing' which happens in creating the performance, whether live in the durational version or through rehearsal and re-working, in the process which I will examine here.

As with the *Emanuelle Enchanted* footage, the dates of these rehearsals are at times unclear, with not all of the tapes being dated. However, within the recordings available, a process of improvisation and re-rehearsal is discernible. Several hours

and all-pervasive, and this performance form is interesting in the context of people's increased tendency to consume media while 'second-screening': following other media, interacting or checking websites while watching a film or television programme (Cohen 2013). As one example of *Quizoola*'s effects, @VNecessary tweeted on 13 April 2013 at 7:41pm 'Fell asleep listening to *Quizoola*, have lost all sense of how the outside world works.'

²⁰⁷ Naden (2003), as cited here, but also Mermikides (2010: 108).

²⁰⁸ As Etchells writes in *Certain Fragments*, the piece has 'multiple authors in a very straightforward sense. The performance text for *Speak Bitterness* contains a deal of material either written or made up by all of the performers in the piece as well by myself' (Etchells 1999a: 23).

of footage are available from lengthy sessions on 18, 19 and 20 July 1995, with further tapes undated, but containing yet more hours of runs and sections of the piece. Also as with *Emanuelle Enchanted*, the performers are rarely joined by Etchells, except when he enters the frame to whisper an instruction or suggestion to one of them.²⁰⁹ There are either six or seven performers for these sessions, drawn from the pool of Richard Lowdon, Terry O'Connor, Cathy Naden, Robin Arthur, Claire Marshall, Tim Hall, and Sue Marshall; the latter two had made their debuts performing with the company earlier in 1994 in the large-cast site-specific work *Dreams' Winter*.

Playing games to make and shape text

The process by which the durational performance was refined into a repeatable 80-minute show involved these performers 'playing' the game together for lengthy periods, watched by Etchells and recorded for reference back. The reams of paper containing the 'confessions' pre-written by Etchells and the company are distributed along the table. As well as the ways the performers read and react to the material they contain, the use, passing back and forth and scattering of these physical artefacts are also gambits in creating the material of the performance. Etchells has at times suggested that the piece is more 'focused on text', or 'just text' even (Etchells quoted in Burrows 1999), and there are certainly narratives in miniature contained within some of these intriguing pieces of writing. One evocative 'confession', for instance, announces that '[w]e ignored the screams and bumps and bangs from next door and told the press and the police that they'd always been a very quiet couple, keeping themselves to themselves.'²¹⁰ However, much of the appeal of the work comes from the juxtaposition and clash of different styles and scales of confession, as well as from the variations in tone with which they are delivered, and with which the performers react to each other, and it is this that comprises the main 'game' which the performers play in the development of the piece.

Thus there are several possible 'moves' in the game, and the video shows the performers working with (and coming up with) these possibilities. The most basic of these are to do with the pacing and interspersing of confessions. Often, short, one-

²⁰⁹ Etchells has performed in the piece in its durational version, for instance in the six-hour durational version live-streamed on 18 October 2014 from Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin.

²¹⁰ This line is used several times in the development workshops, by various performers.

line confessions are delivered in swiftly interlocking passages, building to an antiphonal and absurd clashing of ideas, from the apocalyptic and the political to the everyday, as commented upon by most reviewers and commentators, such as Clark (1995) and Nightingale (1995).²¹¹ At other times a performer will launch into an extended monologue of these single-line confessions, often ranting angrily, turning the material into a diatribe.

There is also the possibility of physical ‘offers’ (in Johnstone’s sense)²¹² alongside the delivery of the text, such as when Naden moves to join Lowdon, kissing him on the cheek and taking a seat next to him. Lowdon takes up this offer, sliding his chair along to move closer to her; she closes off this miniature physical narrative by sliding onto the next chair, away from him. This does not appear to be ‘scripted’ and does not arise from the content of the confessions themselves, but from the context of the performers’ previous decisions: Lowdon had previously been embarked upon a solo diatribe section, during which the others had moved away from the table to the back of the space, in a sequence which recurs, with different speakers, throughout the improvisations. Naden’s approach to Lowdon marks the end of this section and enables the other performers to move forward onstage, and to begin another sequence. Much of the visual interest of the piece comes from decisions such as this, and performers at times climb onto a chair, with others usually flocking to the individual who has thus drawn attention to themselves. On one such occasion, Lowdon, in doing so, draws the focus away from Robin Arthur, who had been working through a solo list of confessions. Arthur, noticing the rest of the group abandoning him, falls silent, looking dismayed, and Lowdon takes up a new list.

In this way, the performers are clearly aware of the decisions others are making in the moment, the offers suggested, and the overall stage picture: unlike the sections of *Emanuelle Enchanted* in which they are closed off from each other on their own ‘tracks’ (in Etchells’s term),²¹³ they are often acutely aware of the shifting moods and visual images being offered on stage, and work in response to each other’s

²¹¹ Early in the rehearsal tape from ‘18/19 July’, the cast embarks on this sort of swift juxtaposition: Lowdon says ‘We were dance hall managers’, which Arthur follows rapidly with ‘We did PR for Pol Pot’.

²¹² See page 200 above.

²¹³ Cited in Kalb (2008b). See pp. 232-234 below for a fuller discussion of this.

implicit suggestions, to keep these elements of the performance refreshed and changing.

Another ‘move’, often (but not always) made by Lowdon, and which clearly affects the dramaturgy of the piece, is to call for the lights to be switched off. The performers then continue delivering the confessional material, moving around the stage and spreading papers out, in the dim light that remains. This continues for up to ten minutes at a time, after which, and with a less clear cue (usually when the performers reach stillness and silence, but sometimes at the request of one of the performers), the lights are switched back on to reveal the chaos of papers strewn across the floor. The availability of such moves is clearly pre-arranged and developed through the durational performance and discussions surrounding such practical work on the floor. But the structuring of the piece through the ‘playing’ of these moves is, to a large extent, up to the performers in the moment of the improvisation, not ruled by a preordained ‘script’: after one such improvisation Etchells tells the performers ‘That was a very nice place to get the light off’,²¹⁴ suggesting that this timing was the performer’s choice. Yet as Mermikides’s observations on 2001’s *The Travels* may be seen to suggest, this ensemble authorship is bound up with the directorial approval which Etchells here grants. As with *The Travels* (as Mermikides describes it), ‘the system’ ‘gives authorship to each individual performer’ (Mermikides 2010: 111). Nonetheless, the editing hand is ultimately Etchells’s.²¹⁵

Performers do also make ‘moves’ which edit the written material in clear ways. The most obvious of these is the use of interruptions; Etchells refers to these in one discussion as ‘frustrations’ to the text, ‘which are just basically performative – they’re not the text as such, but they’re very very important’ (Heathfield *et al.* 2006). In *Speak Bitterness*, the performers interrupt the text in a number of ways: halfway through a confession read from a sheet of paper by Robin Arthur, ‘We ate Chum for...’ the paper is removed and he grinds to a halt. Performers at other times also physically restrict each other, such as when Cathy Naden places her hand over Terry O’Connor’s mouth to cut her off. This is a tactic ‘learnt’ and shared from previous shows, such as the extensive interruptions of *Emanuelle Enchanted*’s ‘newsroom’

²¹⁴ This comment is quoted from the tape marked ‘rehearsal 19/07/95 tape 2 of 2’.

²¹⁵ I later examine Mermikides’s observations in more detail. See page 229 below.

scenes and moments at the curtain, in which performers are dragged away before finishing their sentence.²¹⁶ These interruptions lead to narratives of their own, such as when Richard Lowdon continually tries to read a section which begins ‘The daguerreotypes that we published...’ but gets cut off every time. Claire Marshall eventually reads the whole ‘daguerreotypes’ confession and Lowdon reacts by walking to the back and remaining silent, apparently upset, for some time. Hence the performers create narrative shapes of their own, not confined to the content of the confessions but created by the manner of the texts’ performance and interruption.

Verbal material is also generated through these games, and this strengthens the sense of a group mind-set²¹⁷ being developed. There are a number of improvised sections (without reference to the papers) in which members of the group develop ideas based on each other’s offers. These often derive from extended lists following a given format, such as when the performers all contribute to a foulmouthed sequence of brief confessions along the lines ‘We were dickheads’.²¹⁸ The replacement of the word ‘dick’ with various other expletives of varying force segues into a series of puns and word associations around the word ‘head’: ‘We were ahead of our time’, one performer offers when the ruder alternatives seem exhausted. This riffing continues and is extended: ‘We went to Headingley’, responds another, and as momentum builds, the performers pun around other body parts too: ‘We were armless’, ‘We were legless’, ‘We cut off our noses to spite our faces’. This organically-started associative game goes on for a few minutes, evolving into ever more trite and far-fetched rhymes, at which the performers begin to chuckle and then laugh openly. In this gleeful, silly mode, the following exchange takes place:

Lowdon: We were capricious.
 O’Connor: We drove a Capri.
 Naden: We lived in Mauritius.
 O’Connor: We did it for free! [Group laughter]
 Lowdon: We were poets... [More laughter]

At this point, Etchells’s voice can be heard from the auditorium, calling out, unamused but patient: ‘See if you can rescue it.’ Following this intervention, Arthur immediately launches into a longer, pre-scripted confession (he works without text,

²¹⁶ See page 217 above for a brief example.

²¹⁷ See Frost and Yarrow (2007: 56), as cited above (page 200).

²¹⁸ This material is from the tape marked ‘Speak Bitterness rehearsals 18/19 July 95’.

but the same verbal content is also performed almost identically elsewhere in these sessions). The mood becomes calmer – sombre, in fact – and among these confessions, Lowdon and O'Connor offer what may seem like apologies for or acknowledgements of their (collective) previous over-exuberance: 'We were timewasters,' says Lowdon, which O'Connor follows with 'We found something there is no use for.'

Creative strategies and the outside eye

As mentioned above, and suggested by Mermikides's account of *The Travels*, the authorship of the ensemble is tightly bound up with Etchells's, in the choices he makes when watching, intervening, and commenting on the performers' improvisations. These rehearsal tapes at times highlight the difficulty for performers of judging the performance from inside – or, perhaps more to the point, the strength with which Etchells's own aesthetic judgements impact upon the performance. The above-cited commentary by Etchells on the timing of the lighting change continues: 'That's a very nice place to get the light off, but then it begins to *stink!*' One of the company, unseen, replies that 'it was pretty much the same as it had been before', to which Etchells insists 'it was simply *not* the same'.²¹⁹

Here, Etchells's language in the rehearsal room is less concrete than previously witnessed, and greatly concerned with the 'feeling' in the room. In this way, the aesthetic concerns of the company's work started becoming much more related to the moment-by-moment interpersonal interactions between the performers than to effects caused by disconnection as in previous shows.²²⁰ In retrospective discussions about this and subsequent performances, Etchells has expressed the importance to him and the company of this almost inexpressible sensation of 'temperature change' (Etchells 2009b) in the rehearsal room. He goes so far as to say that the early stages of the rehearsals for a piece involve 'casting about [...] trying to find some things to *do* in the room together that feel like they have some kind of charge. [...] It's *all* about being in that room with everybody and trying things' (Heathfield *et al.* 2006). He talks of looking for a 'heat', 'dynamic' or 'charge' in certain 'actions or combinations of actions and texts' that 'become the kernel of the project' (*ibid.*). He

²¹⁹ These comments are quoted from the tape marked 'rehearsal 19/07/95 tape 2 of 2'.

²²⁰ See, for instance, the previously-cited review pinpointing *Emanuelle Enchanted*'s 'fastidious refusal to allow performers to relate' (Armitstead 1992).

is talking here about the generation of the initial material, but in fact these vocabularies permeate his analysis of the ‘refining and rehearsing’ of these pieces too, and as I have suggested, these phases are not necessarily clear-cut. The language Etchells employs for this refining, both in rehearsals as captured on the archive tapes, and in such retrospective analysis, is at times reminiscent of the ‘Oblique Strategies’. These are tools intended to stimulate creativity, generated and used by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt (first published in 1975)²²¹: echoing the Oblique Strategies’ instructions, Etchells considers ‘where else could you push it?’ and ‘what else could we do?’, and suggests they ‘extrapolate from what you do have’ or ‘start again in a different place’ (Heathfield *et al.* 2006).²²²

As over time the company has moved more towards this form of extended improvisation around pre-arranged rules, Etchells’s use of such vocabulary has become more prevalent, in response to the sense that such intangibles are of increased importance to the performance: while there is ‘a preceding idea’, often the most recent shows have derived from freer improvisations in which ‘you’ll feel that something’s happening’ (*ibid.*). In the absence of (many) props and material effects, the company can be seen focusing more intently on the creation, sustaining and manipulation of interpersonal atmospheres.

The heart of these performances hence became (and remains) the close examination of recorded moments of improvised interaction: hence Etchells’s ‘writing’ of the piece has over time become far more about coaching the performers in their improvisations than about creating text for performance. In the *Speak Bitterness* rehearsals, he can be heard encouraging them to try to find the ‘sense of an ending’, suggesting ‘let’s take it right down’, instructing the performers to ‘start leaving’, which they do, slowly, one by one.²²³ Etchells nudges the ensemble towards a particular narrative or formal development or resolution; the performers seek and take up opportunities for monologue, movement and other offers made and accepted (or blocked) ‘in the moment’ in response to other individuals and the stage picture as

²²¹ The Oblique Strategies are presented online, preserved and contextualised by Gregory Taylor (Taylor 2003).

²²² Etchells is not alone in adopting such Eno-inspired creative ‘strategies’, of course. Ledger (2013) outlines those found in James Yarker’s (of Stan’s Cafe) notebooks: ask a question ‘as if knowing the answer already’; ‘you may know the answer but not trust yourself with it’, and so on (Ledger 2013: 157-8).

²²³ These comments are quoted from the tape marked ‘Speak Bitterness rehearsals 18/19 July 1995’.

a whole. This combination of simultaneous generative and shaping methods is deeply reminiscent of the (more physical) Viewpoints system developed by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau (Bogart & Landau 2005; Herrington 2000). As Forced Entertainment's members feel encouraged to bring out 'some stupid bit of yourself that you're wanting to live out in this performance or another performance' (Lowdon in Heathfield *et al.* 2004), Viewpoints is also a way of encouraging actors to do things which 'might be ridiculous or might be brilliant' (Bogart quoted in Herrington 2000: 157).²²⁴

Etchells's suggestions concerning the tone and timing of certain moves, coupled with the performers' inventions and captured and rewatched thanks to the video recordings, gradually develop into a more-or-less set structure agreed and re-created from rehearsal to rehearsal. Within this, though, there is space to retain 'play': at (pre-agreed) points in *Speak Bitterness*, sequences were left more open and games were played in performance, with offers made and taken up by the performers. Similarly, in some later productions, though the overall structure is roughly fixed, the exact wordings and deliveries of different sections are flexible. O'Connor's observations in *While You Are With Us Here Tonight* attest to this for *First Night* (2001): as mentioned above, she describes how she would make changes night by night based on current news stories, and '[s]ome current news items come and go; some get stuck' (Etchells 2013b: footnote 41).

The improvisations witnessed in the *Speak Bitterness* rehearsals were repeated and developed into enough of a fixed order that sequences could be worked and reworked: the rehearsals recorded on the morning of 19 July end with a sequence in which the three male performers stand side by side, holding hands, and Claire Marshall comes to the front to announce 'We're going to stop for a while for some adverts', a sign for the performers to re-set their chairs into the original line-up. Etchells calls an end to the session once the performers are seated, and the tape ends. The afternoon rehearsal then begins with the men again holding hands and the same announcement from Marshall. It is hard always to tell where improvisations turn

²²⁴ I am not the first to remark upon this link: Murray and Keefe briefly refer to Etchells in discussing Bogart's methodology. 'As director, Bogart will then take charge of the process of selecting, editing, changing, extending, linking and recontextualising this material as it builds towards some overall structure. Here, again, she is working in a very similar way to directors such as Simon McBurney, Tim Etchells and Lin Hixson' (Murray & Keefe 2007: 144).

into scripted sequences, but another tape²²⁵ records undated but presumably later rehearsals which involved rehearsals of shorter sequences, many of which end at moments clearly pre-arranged by the company: several of the sequences, for instance, end with a section in which Sue Marshall is sobbing on the floor. At some points, though, Etchells calls a halt to proceedings – once after less than a minute, with him calling for the sequence to restart, and Sue Marshall then taking a calmer tone from the outset.

In this sequence, in both runs, Cathy Naden interrupts Marshall at the same time and in the same way, and over these runs of the same material, it is possible to discern physical moves and tones of delivery solidifying into a consistent, repeatable performance. At times, the scripting becomes even more evident: during one run of this more rehearsed sequence, Cathy Naden breaks off part way through a confession to announce ‘I’ve lost a page.’ While the other performers continue with their material, Etchells halts the run shortly afterwards. He even ‘prompts’ at one stage, when Claire Marshall begins one section ‘We tied cans...’, before breaking off, looking perplexed; Terry O’Connor shakes her head at this, and Etchells’s voice is heard prompting ‘We tested...’ Marshall picks up the cue and completes the line: ‘We tested the role of strategic hypothesis in the construction of knowledge.’ After the at times gleeful improvisations of the earlier tapes, this is a more concerted effort to repeat a preordained sequence of material (some read from the physical texts, but some learnt by the performers, as Marshall’s ‘fluff’ confirms). The ‘writing’, however, has been carried out in the previously described mixture of pre-prepared text and group improvisation, and the repetitions of sequences visible on these later tapes bear witness to the performers’ efforts to recreate not only verbal text but the physical text of the onstage interactions which occur around and through the verbal. At times, then, the company moves into different overall moods (more tired-seeming, more combative), or recreate moves which arise simultaneously with (but without obvious semantic links to) certain lines.

It is important to Etchells and to the company to acknowledge the group origins of these interactions and of much of the verbal material of the later productions, and

²²⁵ The tape is labelled ‘Speak Bitterness rehearsal “51.37 – 1.28 crap run, backwards/forwards, good end, no line feeding’.

this is as much a necessity for the ongoing enabling of creativity as an acknowledgment of the realities of the rehearsal room. Etchells says,

We have grown, I think, to trust the doing, the bodies in space, the impulses of the people in space and time. Which is why we spend, on the theatre shows, a painful amount of time watching back the video tapes of improvisation, to understand why it was that that worked or that happened. (Heathfield *et al.* 2004)

Robin Arthur makes a point about the politics of this:

Because the pieces are sort of collectively authored, we take responsibility for the whole show when we go out on stage. [...] You're sticking your material in front of people and saying 'do you like it? Does it make any sense to you?' [It's] different from the job of an actor who learns a role in a play and does it well or badly. There's a different kind of risk in that. (*ibid.*)

Arthur's latter conception of 'the job of an actor' can also be related to that of the director interpreting a writer's text, and is reminiscent of the anxieties over interpretation, or intention, expressed by Graham with regard to his and Hoggett's work on *pool (no water)*.²²⁶ Hence both companies seek, in different ways, to avoid such questions of faithfulness to a text – the risk of 'do[ing] it well or badly'.

The generative process behind the performance of *Speak Bitterness*, at least, seems to bear out what Etchells has said much more recently about the nature of the company's methods in general. Etchells's piece about the creation of *The Thrill of It All* (2010), suggests that the processes behind the performance do not occur in separate phases, but rather in a cycle of improvising and discussing, doing and debating – as Etchells puts it, 'tuning and turning, doing and waiting, acting and not acting, pretending, playing, inventing, insisting, listening and taking chances' (Etchells 2009b).

The introduction penned by Etchells for the reproduction in *Certain Fragments* of selected texts from *Speak Bitterness* also suggests this cyclical passing of material back and forth between Etchells and the performers. The rehearsals confirm that the performers 'augmented' his written material with improvised text of their own, as well as through the tones and moves which they performed around the text, and

²²⁶ '[I]t is a very strange thing to disagree with a writer about what his characters would do or would want!' (Graham 2006a: Day 6). See page 121 above.

Etchells states that even before this stage the performers ‘augmented’ the material he had written with writing of their own, though ‘[t]his writing was edited by me’ (Etchells 1999a: 179).

This seems to give the lie, in the case of some of the company’s performances, at least, to the notion of separate directing, writing and rehearsal phases. Increasingly, and related to the company’s increased use of video recordings in rehearsal, Etchells writes through his direction, while the performers write mostly through improvisation – in other words, through performance.

The impact of Etchells’s leadership and priority within the company must not, therefore, be underestimated. In her piece on *The Travels*, Mermikides identifies that Etchells again has editorial control: she points out that he had to give approval for the choice of locations visited by the performers (Etchells himself stayed in Sheffield and collated and re-shaped the material he received from them) (Mermikides 2010: 111). In other areas her reports feature gaps which arise by necessity due to the creative processes at work. ‘I learn from Etchells that the company members have decided to set the performers “projects” that put them in touch with “the real world”’ (2010: 110). However, Mermikides does not herself witness this decision being reached collectively, nor does she see how such a collective decision-making process would work, and at other points her reports suggest a different hierarchy in operation: ‘Etchells explains to the group that he has been dwelling on the notion of “mapping and forecasting”,’ (*ibid.*) or ‘[s]omewhere in among these trials comes Etchells’ instruction [...]’ (*ibid.*), for instance. Any work of this nature from tapes, or observations in a rehearsal room, is lacunary, as is any account from the participants in the process. Decisions are constantly happening away from scrutiny, such as in taxis on the way home from rehearsals (as per Hope 2012: 188), and in other versions of Forced Entertainment’s ‘sub-club’ (as reported by Benecke 2004: 33 and discussed above).²²⁷ However, by piecing together these elements, we may try to assemble an increasingly accurate picture of the processes at work.

²²⁷ See page 172 above.

Nudging – and freeing – the collective

Mermikides makes astute observations on the nature of directing, writing, collaboration and authorship concerning *The Travels* (2002), in which she argues that Etchells is ‘far from a dictatorial director’, and gave little ‘explicit direction’ regarding the performance of the piece (Mermikides 2010: 116-8). In some ways this would bear out Etchells’s assessment that over the years he has become less of ‘a control freak’, in the context of his growing recognition of ‘what characterises each performer and makes them different from anyone else’ (quoted in Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 27). It is certainly clear from *Emanuelle Enchanted*’s rehearsals that Etchells’s interventions were important for the visual aesthetic of the piece, and involved detailed attention to the positioning and actions of the performers and set, but that *Speak Bitterness*’s development involved a more nudging, coaching role for Etchells as the ‘outside eye’.

Etchells’s role hence varies, in part depending on (what he conceives as) the ‘needs’ of the piece. It is important to all of the company members to see their creative processes as adaptable; for instance, in the early 1990s, O’Connor explained to Oddey that ‘[t]he process for this show is different to the last one and the one before’ (Oddey 1994: 85). This insistence on flexibility recurs over the company’s history, and admits of a range of attitudes towards writing: Robin Arthur stated in conversation with Adrian Heathfield in 2004 that the collaboration is ‘different for different shows. *The Voices* – Tim wrote that. Like a real playwright! A proper playwright!’ (Heathfield *et al.* 2004).²²⁸

In fact, the ‘writing’ of the shows would appear to have become more and more intimately tied to their ‘direction’, with, in *The Travels* for example, the overall decisions concerning the sorts of material performers were to collect, and the ways in which they are woven together, creating the aesthetic and mood of the piece, as opposed to more easily discernible directorial interventions concerning the playing of particular lines or actions.

Of course, there are further ways to shape the performance beyond these evident interventions to do with, for instance, the reading of a line. Naden hints at the

²²⁸ Etchells, too, frequently answers questions about his role in the creative process as he does in conversation with Woels in 2011: ‘It depends a lot on the project’ (Woels 2011).

influence wielded by Etchells as experienced by performers who by this stage were becoming confident improvisers together: ‘If Tim asks us to improvise around “a hope” tonight in the show as we did tonight in *Bloody Mess*, that gives you a cover [...] and within that you can play with extremes’ (Naden in Heathfield *et al.* 2004). Etchells’s suggestion of an improvisational topic is thus cited as a positive intervention for the performer, who expresses her reassurance, and feeling of freedom to ‘play’.

Yet as Etchells claims that he increasingly recognises ‘what characterises each performer’ (quoted in Giannachi & Luckhurst 1999: 27), the company members have settled into more distinct roles over time. The performers have certain regularly recurring performance personas, with, for instance, Robin Arthur usually appearing morose and down-to-earth,²²⁹ and Claire Marshall playing on a mixture of power and naïveté.²³⁰ Etchells’s comment points towards this growing awareness and exploitation of the performers’ onstage personalities in the performances. While this is claimed as a mitigation of Etchells’s ‘control’ over the performers – he is no longer creating personas through his writing or directorial interventions but recognising the performers’ own ‘characteristics’ – it still prioritises Etchells’s recognition of their qualities, and the ways in which these can be used in generating performance material.

For instance, Etchells has identified the ‘strand’ in the company’s work in which ‘someone (often Richard) “comes to the front” or “takes centre” to frame or MC the pieces’, though this is ‘rarely weighted with the kind of actual authority that a narrator/MC might be expected to project’ (Etchells 2004a: 278). The development of this tactic and positioning – one early example of which has been discussed above, in the form of the ‘introduction’ to *Emanuelle Enchanted* as stumbingly read by Lowdon²³¹ – could be seen as a consequence of Lowdon’s early prominence as co-director (and frequent member of the smaller, decision-making ‘sub-club’). As Etchells explains,

²²⁹ Notably, as the skeleton-suited narrator of *Spectacular* (2008).

²³⁰ As in the ‘sexy’ but bored stripteases of *First Night* (2001) or her frequent girlish giggles and protestations of ignorance in performances of *Quizoola!* (such as in 2011 and the 24-hour versions in 2013 and 2014).

²³¹ See page 210 above.

we don't try to create characters, rather people making versions of themselves, like a stand-up comedian or a musician even. When you look at what Richard does in five different shows, you'll see it is the same set of qualities, reactions and impulses, even though they are framed differently and function differently. (Etchells in Woels 2011)

Etchells, as examined previously, seeks ways of widening the notion of 'writing' to encompass the contributions and interventions of other group members and to deprioritise his own position. However, while he has always insisted on the collective nature of the creative process, he has also, recently, more freely recognised the centrality of his 'outside' role:

I'll watch, but I'll also look for opportunities to run in and intervene. I'll come onto the stage whispering 'say this now' or 'keep going in this direction' or 'interrupt him now and take it off in this direction'. It is not writing in a sense of sitting at a computer. What we arrive at is jointly made. I'm pretty instrumental in making the shape of the performance because I'm on the outside. (Etchells in Woels 2011)

In the rehearsal footage for *Speak Bitterness*, Etchells can be seen doing exactly this: during a sequence of slow, seated confessions in which each performer takes a single line each, he comes onto stage to whisper into Cathy's ear, clearly out of the hearing of the other performers.²³² After roughly a minute in which the sequence continues as before, she picks a moment to begin a vehement, speedy, extended sequence of confessions. This then shifts the group into other interactions and tones, and visibly re-injects energy into the performance. In this way, Etchells 'shapes' the piece and injects his own impulses alongside those of the performers actually taking part in the improvisations and rehearsals.

It is instructive to examine the performers' viewpoints on this function as carried out by Etchells, and there are many descriptions from the rest of the company of his interventions, similar to those mentioned by him here and observable in the rehearsal footage. Since the extended improvisations of *Emanuelle Enchanted*, 'keep going' is a frequently-cited incantation. Terry O'Connor mentions this in *While You Are With Us Here Tonight*, the work based on the monologue delivered by her in 2001's *First Night*: '[...] Tim comes over, makes a circling gesture and says 'keep going' – something that happens often in rehearsal' (Etchells 2013b: footnote 4). Several of

²³² This material is from the tape marked 'Speak Bitterness rehearsals 18/19 July 95'.

these observations point out his influence on the overall direction of the piece, without the individuals' being aware of the bigger picture in the same way. As Etchells himself tells Kalb in relation to the long-form durational pieces, 'everybody's kind of on their own track [...] They don't know each other's tracks' (Kalb 2008b). This is another variation of the 'performer blindness' described by Cope (in Harvie & Alexander 2010: 54) and discussed with reference to Frantic Assembly above. A later 'footnote' from O'Connor in *While You Are With Us Here Tonight* is revelatory of the effect on the performer of these compartmentalisations. Despite the emphasis on the use of video in rehearsals and of group discussions in which, Mermikides argues, 'transparency' makes the process 'less hierarchical' and Etchells less like 'an auteur' (Harvie & Lavender 2010: 118), 'performer blindness' persists at times even into performance:

During performances of the show Cathy would be moving beside me here but I'd never turn to look. Sometimes the audience would laugh, but I couldn't be sure why. Forced Entertainment shows are full of moments like this; where as a performer you don't necessarily know what other people around you onstage are up to [...]' (Etchells 2013b: footnote 119)

Likewise, Robin Arthur acknowledges the importance and precedence of Etchells's ability to function in the above-mentioned 'outside eye' role:

When we're improvising, there's always a kind of feedback situation with Tim who's watching and who'll be thinking I think strategically then, being able to see the whole picture, which for the most part we can't. (Arthur in Goat Island *et al.* 2006b)

So Mermikides's conclusion that the process is 'less hierarchical' should not be interpreted as arguing that there is no hierarchy whatsoever in this process. The crucial difference between the case of Forced Entertainment and that of Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui is that the participants in Forced Entertainment's productions are trusted (and trusting), long-term collaborators who willingly agree to the compromise between submission and steering which creates the belief in 'a very genuine collective ownership of that making process', and the creation of 'an environment that will allow [...] strange things to happen' (as Robin Arthur says (in Heathfield *et al.* 2004)). Unlike some of the dancer-performers in Cherkaoui's productions who are interviewed by Cope, Forced Entertainment's performers see the lack of overall

control and awareness of the others' 'tracks' as *energising*, not disenfranchising, as O'Connor goes on to explain in her 'footnote' cited above:

[...] what [the other performers] are doing both is and isn't a part of the reality you're dealing with. Strangely, a shift in the audience's attention can give you a sense of space onstage, a privacy even, a more felt sense of your own task. These moments are often my favourites. (Etchells 2013b: footnote 119)

It is important to note how the evidence of *Emanuelle Enchanted*, *Speak Bitterness* and other company members' comments nuances Etchells's own claimed mitigation of his role in leading and shaping the creative process, without detracting from the value to them of his authority and tastes. One final observation suggests Etchells's priority in not only the aesthetic decisions of the rehearsal room but also the organisational functions of the company, and the impact of the company members' private lives on their methods. Claire Marshall comments on the birth of Etchells's first son, Miles, in 1992: 'suddenly we discovered weekends' (Helmer 2004: 58). The era I have investigated in detail here saw a renegotiation of the rules of engagement for the company – not least as they began to work more regular hours, and as the individual members moved out of shared accommodation and '24-hour absorption' (Etchells quoted in Max Prior 2005: 10) in the work to live with partners and form their own families.

Forced Entertainment – conclusions

Many of the anxieties identified within Etchells's (and the company's) rhetoric can be seen to indicate an urge to create and maintain a spirit of 'radical openness' which is considered by the company's members to be crucial in generating performance material. The ongoing passing back and forth of material and concepts for performance leads to (and is encouraged by) a democratisation of its content, which is often self-reflexive and drawn from an ever-growing mesh of (mostly internal) references. The attempted maintenance of flat structures (despite Etchells's somewhat prioritised presence) is geared towards maintaining these kinds of 'dialogic' relationships, which Turner describes as enabling 'writing space' (Turner 2009b).

In this continued collaboration of a relatively constant group of individuals, the paradox has arisen that, though their group mythologies rely in part on a denial of the role of skill, working together for this length of time inevitably *becomes* a development of skills, and a shared language. The hours of improvisations together have led to deep-rooted abilities to read each other's impulses in performance and to accept (or block) such improvisational 'offers'. Hence, on the occasions that new performers join the company, they find themselves up against 'unwritten rules' to which they have to habituate themselves.²³³ Etchells recently made a comment to the other company members that he found it remarkable that they (himself included) did not prepare or rehearse in any way for performances of *Quizoola!* (in this case, the 24-hour version); he reports Richard Lowdon's reply: 'We've been preparing for it for almost 30 years' (Etchells 2013a).

In his use of various metaphors and his extension of the concept of writing, Etchells seeks to

open the door to a broad, adventurous description of what writing for performance might mean – beyond ideas of playwrighting which is still, sadly, the measure too often employed in the UK [...] (Etchells 1999a: 98)

²³³ Davis Freeman, a guest performer in 2004's *Bloody Mess*, referred to the 'unwritten rules' which meant that when, in an improvisation, he tore the gorilla head off Claire, she was shocked and 'offended, [...] because they would never do that. [...] So catching up was a struggle' (Heathfield *et al.* 2004).

This is laudable, and in different ways, both Forced Entertainment and Frantic Assembly seek to ‘open the door’ to conceptions of writing for theatre which incorporate the physical, the visual and the performative. In Forced Entertainment’s rhetorics, these broader descriptions of writing may also be seen as serving another function: primarily, that of encouraging creativity through a mythology of collectivity. Though I have argued that Etchells has a certain degree of priority within the company’s processes, it must be remembered that the collective is made up of a number of creative individuals who exert their own influences. Any changes in the group are, by necessity, incremental, due to the nature of the company as a whole as much as the dispositions of any of its members: as Robin Arthur said in 1998, they move with ‘little grandmother-like footsteps’ (McGuire 1998: 12). Claire Marshall, in a statement which is simultaneously a pledge of allegiance to Etchells and a statement of defiant individuality, added: ‘you can only do those big leaps if you brought in a new director and you did what they said. And we wouldn’t!’ (*ibid.*)

CONCLUSION

This thesis has analysed the creative processes and rhetorics of Frantic Assembly and Forced Entertainment over lengthy time periods and drawn a number of conclusions about the nature of devising and writing in both companies' evolving methods. I have signalled the different compartmentalisations of the creative process in the two companies, and the ways in which both construct tactics for the avoidance of issues of faithfulness to a text.

A great deal of existing work on devising in the British theatre remains relatively generalised in ways which mask the specifics of the actual processes operating in particular companies at particular moments. Recently, however, there have been some perceptive studies which advance our understanding of certain companies in the context of specific single productions. These include Helen Freshwater's work on *Complicite* (e.g. Freshwater 2001) and theatre O (as one of several such company studies in Mermikides and Smart's 2010 collection *Devising in Process*) and Gay McAuley's *Not Magic But Work* (2012), a detailed 'ethnographic account' of Company B's *Toy Symphony*. I have been influenced, in part, by the approaches developed in their work, and sought to adapt and nuance vocabularies from the wider literature as well.

I have also carried out a closer reading of company rhetorics than any other study of my case companies. Many existing overviews (of these companies and of 'devised theatre' in general) perpetuate what I argue are false dichotomies, between 'text-based' and 'devised' theatre, or between 'devising' and 'the mainstream'. I have considered the various uses of specific terminologies of physicality, devising and authorship in the differing contexts in which these practitioners employ them. This analysis contributes towards my discernment of various 'anxieties' within company rhetorics. While these spring directly from the specific cases in question, they are not intended as criticisms, nor as critiques merely of these two companies, but as being potentially more widely applicable wherever such vocabularies are employed (within the UK context in particular). Many of these anxieties relate to issues around funding or representation in the press, and to the marketing of productions to certain venues or audiences. However, they also touch on issues relating to the preservation

of creative momentum, particularly within companies such as these which have worked over lengthy periods of time and in evolving circumstances.

Both Frantic and Forced Entertainment have built upon models they inherited from now lesser-known predecessors (Volcano and Impact, most directly), but with close inspiration from some well-documented practitioners such as DV8 and Pina Bausch. They have both become major producers of original work, and both operate in ways which encourage the combination of the physical and the verbal from an early stage of the creation of their theatrical output. Frantic Assembly has evolved from group-based work in which their members contributed text for editing and augmenting by an embedded writer, to the adoption of a dramaturgical approach encouraging close collaboration with writers from outside the company. Forced Entertainment have sought to preserve collectivity in creative and management decisions, even when Tim Etchells emerged (from an early stage) to fulfil functions of artistic directorship.

As the companies' central practitioners have matured, their focuses have shifted. Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett have stepped away from performing (as has, to a lesser extent, Etchells). Frantic has latterly become a vehicle for the development of ideas and stories suggested by Scott Graham and – until recently – Steven Hoggett, with a looser constellation of performers and regular collaborators contributing to the production of new work in carefully compartmentalised ways. Graham's rhetoric now emphasises his interest from the early days of the company in actively shaping the work they made as performers, with his and Hoggett's appearance in the shows depicted as a necessary by-product of their lack of funds. This has to some extent formed their approach to the development of their work through the engagement of the creative performer.

My thesis refutes the over-simple divisions (encouraged by rhetorical statements by the companies' practitioners themselves) between the processes behind Frantic's and Forced Entertainment's works. There are differing focuses, methodologies and structures, and the companies' outcomes are tangibly different in a number of ways. But there are comparable tensions and anxieties at work, and it is possible to consider their working methods as existing on the same continuum. They also developed from some initially surprisingly similar concerns and approaches.

Both companies began with productions which involved group contributions marshalled by an active writer interested in ‘curatorship’ rather than ‘playwrighting’ (Etchells 1999a: 98), generating performance material over which the whole company could claim ownership. This was reflected in various ways in their attribution and the surrounding company rhetoric. However, while performative concerns beyond the verbal remain key to both sets of practitioners, Graham and Hoggett moved swiftly to develop ways of working with writers from outside the company in generating texts for performance. Forced Entertainment, on the other hand, sought to maintain collective ways of creating performances, although the process can be seen as prioritising Etchells’s contributions, especially in shaping and structuring the pieces.

While swiftly becoming central to the collective’s methods and public representation, Etchells sought ever further to defer authorship and to share the processes by which the performance material was generated. He and the other company members employ various tactics and rhetorical devices to this end: they broaden their notion of ‘writing’ to encompass creative aspects from the building of a set to spur-of-the-moment improvisations in lengthy rehearsals or durational pieces; they pass written or improvised text back and forth between performance and writing stages, and between performers; they construct narratives through performers’ inflection or ‘interruption’ of text; and they envisage the performance, prior to its creation, as a personified entity with its own desires and instincts, or as a ‘machine’.

Interrogating the exact formulation of these ‘ensemble’ or ‘collaborative’ processes has suggested the ongoing prioritisation of the directors’ input and tastes, in ways which are various but often comparable. Graham in particular has emphasised his respect for the writer, and other skilled collaborators, as part of what I argue is an increasingly compartmentalised process. However, this process is jeopardised when the authorship of the performance or the ‘intentions’ behind the text are open to question: the directors seek in most cases to assert clearly their own authorship (though they do not phrase it as such) in the form of the initial impetus for the production, which is then served by the contributions of others. This leads to a complicated relationship with text and attribution, though through careful management of the processes and astute selection of their collaborators, the pair has

sought to integrate their perhaps exceptional processes with existing cultures and structures of British ‘new writing’.

Etchells and Forced Entertainment have managed the balance of authorship in different ways, though these still stem from the company’s (more politicised, but similar) collective roots. Etchells avoids notions of intentionality, or shifts them, as mentioned, onto a personification of the performance. The company seeks to avoid, rather than compartmentalise, prior intentions. This they attempt through lengthy development sessions in which coincidence and exhaustion are rhetorically emphasised over skilled work on a prior concept.

In Frantic Assembly’s productions, the writer’s work is described in the majority of cases as beginning long after the genesis of the initial idea. In Forced Entertainment’s, on the other hand, the writer (who is also the director but regularly plays down the import of both of these roles) is present from any given project’s inception, often providing crucial impetus for its development. Forced Entertainment’s collective processes have in part evolved to mitigate the control, and creative pressure, that otherwise might be inherent in such a privileged position within the company.

Through these rhetorics, both companies are seeking to create an environment in which performers can generate ideas without fear, and in which writers (and other contributors) can edit, shape, and augment these ideas, while preserving (in Frantic’s case) or denying (in Forced Entertainment’s) the integrity of the ‘original idea’. This in itself is, however, a problematic notion which is tied to difficulties in ascertaining the ‘beginning’ of any given creative process.

Frantic’s own aesthetic influence has been apparent through the numerous high-profile collaborations in which they have participated, with Graham and Hoggett providing movement work for non-Frantic productions, either as a company (such as for *Market Boy* in 2006 and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* in 2012) or separately (such as Hoggett’s work on *Black Watch* in 2006 and *Once* in 2011). In aesthetic as well as approach their influence is bound to continue to be felt throughout the UK theatrical landscape. Already companies such as ThickSkin are emerging, whose artistic director Neil Bettles has reported the importance of a visit to an early Frantic show when he was still at school (Bettles 2014). Bettles is

himself now well established within Frantic Assembly.²³⁴ There will be countless others across the country (and beyond) who, though not directly linked to the company in the same way, will find the experience of being taken on a school trip to see a Frantic show ‘formative’: Frantic’s education and training programmes have drawn large numbers of schools groups to its performances and workshops. So it is likely that the coming years will see a growing number of practitioners acknowledging a debt to the company’s work. Graham has recently commented (affectionately) in interview that

one of Frantic’s oddest but most cherished compliments is the sheer number of ‘really bad Frantic Assembly-style student productions’ that he gets to see or hear about. (Gardner 2015)

Just as *Volcano* were ‘clone[d]’ (Graham 2011a) by Graham and Hoggett at first, Frantic now provide a dynamic and accessible, youth-oriented style which is inspirational to younger generations.

More pertinent than their style, though, is the influence of Graham and Hoggett’s approach to working with text within an energetically physicalised and visual creative process. As Bettles says, echoing Graham, ‘[t]he script is always the starting point. Whether it’s a pre-existing play [or] it’s being devised and written by the company, it’s the foundation of a good show’ (Bettles 2014). There is a direct lineage in this particular case, but Graham and Hoggett are also part of a wider field of practitioners interested in physically-based and devising-related practice, who through the 1990s and 2000s have taken up higher-profile positions within the UK’s theatrical landscape. Through Graham and Hoggett’s spreading influence (as well as that of Simon McBurney, Tom Morris, Rufus Norris, Paul Hunter and others), the understanding of the interweaving of devising, writing, physicality and R&D looks set to become more widespread within public discourse in coming years.²³⁵

²³⁴ He got his ‘break’ (Bettles 2014) as an assistant director for Frantic’s 2005 piece *Dirty Wonderland*, and he now has a Creative Associate position with the company, leading many of their UK and international workshops.

²³⁵ Theatre-maker, blogger and academic Andy Field has written a brief rallying-cry in the *Guardian* blog under the title ‘All theatre is devised and text-based’ (Field 2009). Lyn Gardner, writing regularly in the *Guardian* and on their blog, also frequently evidences a more nuanced understanding of the overlap between apparently different creative terminologies.

This is not, however, to say that simplistic views of the interactions between writing and theatrical creation have been successfully renegotiated. Paul Hunter's anecdotal evidence – along with a closer reading of Nicholas Hytner's comments as suggested above²³⁶ – indicates that structural shifts will be slow and possibly only partial, and that prejudicial vocabularies will persist. Frantic's example can be particularly instructive here. Their specially negotiated royalty agreements with Lavery (and, presumably, other collaborators) are still unusual in the industry. Graham and Hoggett receive some of the royalties from every performance of *Stockholm*, even though Lavery is the sole named writer, and while the full details of these arrangements are necessarily somewhat private, it is important for an understanding of the field that more light is shed on such areas, to encourage alternative ways of negotiating the (creative and legal) contracts behind new work. Graham admits that they have been lucky in collaborating with Lavery in particular, who 'doesn't see it as *her* work – she sees it as *our* work' (Graham 2011a).

While it is arguably rarer (and perhaps more difficult) for new practitioners to copy an aesthetic directly from Forced Entertainment, the number of such companies (and, as with Frantic, student productions) openly indebted to them is likewise growing. These younger practitioners also often draw inspiration from that company's methodologies: those of collective creation through the reliance on chance, duration and effort. So when the founders of Third Angel and Unlimited Theatre (Alex Kelly and Chris Thorpe respectively) were interviewed by Radosavljević they admitted Forced Entertainment as 'formative influences' but pointed out that it was the company's operation 'as a collective [...] with Tim kind of shaping it more from the outside' that formed the inspiration, 'not necessarily an artistic influence' (Radosavljević 2013b: 167).²³⁷

Both companies have thus affected the realms of what is considered possible within the theatrical landscape of early-21st century Britain, and they continue to innovate. Forced Entertainment has introduced into more popular currency the notion of

²³⁶ See pp. 21-22 and 37 above.

²³⁷ Many other companies engaged with live art and experimental forms of theatre have cited Forced Entertainment (and often, specifically, Etchells's 1999 text) as inspirations. For example, Hester Chillingworth of Getinthebackofthevan called reading *Certain Fragments* 'door-opening', 'not just to Forced Entertainment but a whole kind of way of thinking' (Gorman 2013). Getinthebackofthevan's website announces their mission statement: 'We play with glory, endurance, artifice and the banal' and make 'broken genre performance' (getinthebackofthevan 2015).

lengthy performances improvised according to strict rules in which the duration of the piece itself is a key dramaturgical tool.²³⁸ Their most recent and significant interventions have been through the livestreamed six- and twenty-four-hour performance events they mounted in their thirtieth anniversary year, such as *Quizoola!* (performances in 2013 and 2014) and *Speak Bitterness* (2014). These saw vast numbers of audience members – those physically present in the venue as well as those watching from their homes or on mobile devices – engaging actively around the performance. Critics such as Lyn Gardner, bloggers such as Andrew Haydon, and many practitioners and interested parties tweeted favourite phrases and moments from the performances and took part in debate and commentary online.²³⁹ This is a new engagement with a large and geographically dispersed audience, though arguably the processes of creation I have considered here are not themselves massively impacted or nuanced by this new development.

Frantic Assembly is entering a distinct new phase in its development which was to some extent anticipated by the developments in the company outlined in this thesis. With Hoggett's departure, Graham is now the sole founding member of Frantic who is still an active part of the company. The company's growing focus on education work, which Graham has always been active in promoting, seems likely to continue.²⁴⁰ While the return to previous shows *Beautiful Burnout* and *Othello* allowed the company to take stock to some extent in the past few years, Graham has recently undertaken his first solo directing project for Frantic, *The Believers* (2014). This show had been in planning since my 2011 discussion with Graham. Its title had at that stage already been decided, but it was unclear whether the directing and writing personnel had been finalised. In any case, collaboration is set to continue as a watch-word for the company: Graham and Lavery again worked together on *The Believers*, making her, after Hoggett, Graham's most regular collaborator on major

²³⁸ I have, above, outlined for the first time in some detail the processes by which these performances developed from rehearsal room devising techniques into durational performances, and have been taken back into the company's theatrical practice through the editing down of material into the theatrical version of *Speak Bitterness*.

²³⁹ According to Forced Entertainment's website, for *Quizoola!* 24, '2796 tuned in from 43 countries /3.6 million twitter impressions were made' (this information available online at <<http://www.forcedentertainment.com/notebook-entry/live-streaming-snapshots-from-our-30th-birthday-year>> accessed 8 January 2015).

²⁴⁰ I have pointed out the significant development of a new Masters programme in conjunction with Coventry University (see Coventry University 2014).

Frantic productions.²⁴¹ It will be interesting to observe how Graham renegotiates the terms of his creative processes given the absence of his regular directorial collaborator.²⁴²

I have cast light on some previously untouched archive materials from both companies, making use of this rehearsal footage, interview material, script drafts and other evidence to provide a new understanding of the companies' histories and specific processes. There is, however, more excavatory work to be done in the extensive archives of Forced Entertainment and Frantic Assembly, and yet fuller individual histories remain to be drawn up. As well as such historical studies examining the companies' development over time, in future I hope also to see more detailed ethnographic work on their processes from embedded observers along the lines of McAuley with Company B.²⁴³

My study has, however, used detailed readings as well as comparison between the companies to make observations and distinctions which previous studies of these case companies, and overviews of devising, had overlooked or blurred. By telling these histories from the point of view of anxieties, innovations and shifts in rehearsal process and rhetoric, I have not only mapped and analysed these particular companies' significant contributions but also proposed new ways of describing and defining the role of writing within devising processes. As I have argued, such processes are becoming increasingly common across many kinds and scales of theatrical production in the UK, and this thesis helps towards disseminating a much-needed new understanding of these widespread but often misrepresented practices.

²⁴¹ The caveat concerning 'major' productions is necessary as some other creative relationships stretch back many more years. Steven Kirkham, for instance, worked with Frantic on *Klub* and to date continues to deliver workshops for the company as a Learn and Train Practitioner.

²⁴² It may also be seen as significant that the title of the company's forthcoming Master's programme is not 'Physical' nor 'Devised' but 'Collaborative Theatre Making'.

²⁴³ Martin Holbraad, a social anthropologist at University College London, spent a short time observing Frantic Assembly's work on *Stockholm*. There is a brief reference to this in the *Frantic Book* (2009: 8), and in conversation Lavery mentions Holbraad's presence (he had observed that Graham and Hoggett were 'the pattern of the Polynesian twin kings – of course! You never know who's in charge' Lavery 2011b). But so far I have been unable to trace any published research resulting from Holbraad's time in the rehearsal room.

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