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## **Igniting response-ability: Co-creating one-on-one audience experience**

Stripped away and pared down, the One-to-One format focuses attention and heightens the potential of the performative meeting, activating further performance's agency to ignite response-ability in its audience (Zerihan 2008, 3).

### ***Co-creating Memories***

**MP – 2008.** I'm walking around Colwick Park in Nottingham and I see a bench by the side of the lake with a plaque that reads 'Sit with me for a moment and remember'. It's an invitation and a dedication and, as I recall, it doesn't have a specific name engraved on the plaque so it speaks to anyone about the loss that inspired it. I take this plaque as an impulse to make a piece that continued my investigations into themes of memory and loss that started in 2004 with *The Long and Winding Road*.

**2004.** I'm sitting in a car outside the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London after performing *The Long and Winding Road* for the first time (fig.1). The one-to-one performance lasts 5 minutes and involves a narrative about death. I've told a personal story about the loss of my brother to the audience member. I'm in the driver's seat. He's in the passenger's seat. The back seat's down and the boot's filled with objects wrapped in brown paper and string, the belongings my brother left behind when he died. The text explores how the loss took its toll and my attempt to recover. The piece finishes and we sit in silence. He doesn't want to leave the car yet. He tells me that there was a lot to take in, perhaps too much, perhaps too much history, too much personal information. He recommends I make the story more about the car and less about me. He says maybe the car is a metaphor. He suggests I use the rear-view mirror to deflect the story and double the distance between me and the audience, driver and passenger. He's a filmmaker and says the mirror could be a lens to show the audience what is behind us, as McLuhan wrote, 'we look at the present via the rear-view mirror' (McLuhan et al.1975, 74-75).



Figure 1 – Michael Pinchbeck performing *The Long and Winding Road*. Credit: Julian Hughes.

**2006.** Attending the finished piece two years later, Rachel Gomme recounts: ‘what makes the performance, for me, so affecting [is] an affect born in my empathy with what is not revealed to me’ (Gomme 2015, 290). She suggests that ‘Though I feel deeply touched by the performance, I leave with the sense, not of a close interpersonal encounter, but rather of having been offered a space for personal contemplation of loss’ (Gomme 2015, 290). I recall this encounter and how it both reminded me of my responsibility when sharing this story (how to tell a personal story of loss to a stranger), but also ‘performance’s agency to ignite response-ability in its audience’ (Zerihan 2008, 3). It’s this shared temporal space that audience and performer in one-to-one performance cohabit. The potential meeting place between what’s not revealed and what’s co-created, that sparks ignition of audience agency.

**2014.** I’m touring a one-to-one performance called *Sit with me for a moment and remember*. The piece involves one performer, Nicki Hobday, and myself as an invigilator. I give the audience member a pair of headphones and they listen to an audio recording that reflects on memory whilst seated on the bench. At a certain moment, they’re invited to close their eyes and Nicki sits next to them so when they open their eyes they realise they are not alone. The voice on the recording is Nicki’s and the text suggests that ‘I am here now. I have always been here. I am smiling’ (Pinchbeck 2014). Nicki smiles at the audience member here and they usually smile back. There are other moments where the relationship between the two is directly

addressed, and the mirroring technique developed in *The Long and Winding Road* is continued in three dimensions, with body language and gaze reflected (fig.2).



Figure 2 – Nicki Hobday performing *Sit with me for a moment and remember*. Credit: Julian Hughes.

At certain points, Nicki looks out onto the city. The text draws attention to the landscape where the bench is sited, making passers-by into performers, referring to the city and how we experience it. The implication is that Nicki is the loved one to whom the bench was dedicated: 'When I left this city, I left you, and this bench is all that I left behind' (Pinchbeck 2014). Towards the end of the encounter, the text instructs the audience member to close their eyes again and count to ten. At this point, Nicki touches their hand for a moment before leaving. When they open their eyes, she's gone and their view of the city is experienced alone. We leave audience members to sit on the bench until ready to leave and let the experience crossfade back into reality, birdsong or traffic noise fade out of the audio. Nicki hides around the corner ready for the next audience member to arrive and I walk one audience member back to the venue and bring the next one to the bench. Over four years, I present the work hundreds of times in different contexts, with different performers, each time the audience is 'authorised' (Bottoms 2016) and given 'response-ability'.

**RB – 2020.** It's been a while since Michael and I last met and we'd planned to have this conversation about audiences, in person, side-by-side on a bench, *the* bench. Now we're working separately, we're 'social distancing' and we're remote, and I'm trying to remember the details, the what-happened-when-and-how. It's so much easier to recall something when someone who *was* there, *is* there. Our memories might be unreliable, our experiences will have differed, but somewhere 'betwixt and

between' lies a truth. In every encounter with another, we each leave with the responsibility for holding the experience in our heads, we each have parts of the detail. A 'transactive memory', where we 'form message-passing, directory-sharing memory systems' (Wegner 1995, 326), only fully activated when we are together again. When we meet with another, we can retrieve *their* memories, (re)discover details around our own, and perhaps access those memories we didn't know we'd forgotten.

We turned *Sit with me...* into *Sit with us...*, a piece for a single performer became a piece for multiple performers, and in so doing we discovered even more about moments of contact, about connections between performer and audience and 'place', and about the action of remembering. About how the piece, and one-to-one performance, works to give its audience response-ability. How do I remember what we did?

**2017.** I'm sitting opposite Michael in the café in Lincoln Performing Arts Centre (LPAC), trying to describe a new shape for The Lincoln Company to him and the LPAC tech team. I've just taken up the post of Creative Engagement Producer for the School of Fine and Performing Arts at the University of Lincoln, and have big plans. These plans are reliant on the support of the assembled people. I'm probably enthusiastically drawing pictures in the air with my hands.

The Lincoln Company had been a sort of brand applied to student work that was extra-curricular and/or heading up to Edinburgh Fringe that year. I thought it could be more. That it might run year-round like a 'proper' theatre company. That the student members could take on roles, creative responsibilities, and management of the company, and in doing so, they'd have ownership and investment in the company's successes. That this new model could support 'the career preparation and aspirations of [the] students', helping them develop 'the skills and qualities that will be useful' (Neary et al. 2014, 14) beyond the university.

Step one is to work with a professional artist to make something together. I wanted the students – who had just begun to sign up to the new look company – to raise their aspirations, to see the work they were engaged in as important, and to make

something that connected them to their audiences. I casually drop into conversation that I have someone in mind, and that it's Michael. This is cheeky and I'm worried I've rather put him on the spot. I think he might say no. Instead, he says he has a piece about sitting on a bench that is personal, but he's thought about revisiting it, and that he'd quite like to see what happens if you open it up.

### ***Co-creating Encounters***

**RB – 2018.** We have 14 performers from The Lincoln Company assembled to meet Michael and me, to begin the process of opening up the piece and remaking it for a new context. They're going to take turns performing it for each other as it stands – with the recording of Nicki's voice – to think about how it is performed, and how it is to experience it as an audience member. After that we'll consider how they might adapt the text, or write their own texts, record their voices, and make the work anew. First though, they want to see the piece from the 'outside'. They want to understand how it functions mechanically. Who hides when? Where do you place your hand on the bench? How do you know if their eyes are shut? At this point I have heard a recording of the piece, and watched a short video recording, I have not 'had' the experience so I am sitting on the end of a long white desk (standing in for a bench), in a long white seminar room (standing in for the outside), legs dangling, wearing headphones, listening to a voice, and staring at a sea of faces waiting to see the 'effect' of the piece on me. Emily from the company has received some quick instructions from Michael and will 'sit with me' at the appropriate point.

Despite the rehearsal setting, and despite the observation, when I open my eyes and look into Emily's, mine fill with tears. It is, as Sheila Ghelani says of one-to-one, a 'beautiful connection' (Ghelani 2010). There is focussed attention, presence, and a subtle mirroring of my posture that reinforces the feeling of togetherness – that our experiences of loss may not be identical, but they are universal. There is space enough in the encounter for me to bring my own meaning and experience to bear.

**2018.** The new texts have been recorded, and we've moved rehearsals outside. We're swapping locations, benches, performers, and hiding places all around campus. Testing the variables and seeing what effects and affects we can achieve.

We're making the piece by doing the piece and it becomes different in each new permutation. We've now realised each performance requires a team of three to fully enact. One is still known as the 'The Performer' – the one who sits on the bench and shares the moment – the other two roles become known as 'The Docent' and 'The Fisherman'. The Fisherman gets the name from the action of trying to 'reel in' passers-by whom we can 'borrow for 5 minutes to help us test something we're making'.

The Docent starts as a functional role, someone who minds the bench, resets the audio, helps the audience member operate the headphones, but it becomes much more. Many 'hooked in' audience members during these rehearsals are moved to tears, and one profoundly shaken, recalls sitting alone on a bench – in Edinburgh – after the loss of a relative. In all instances, the audience member shares their immediate thoughts and feelings with The Docent – someone they see as 'outside' of the piece but seemingly now imbued with a pastoral responsibility. As Caroline Wake notes, 'the one-to-one performer owes the spectator both a legal and moral duty of care. That is, they are obligated not to harm the participant physically, mentally or emotionally' (Wake 2017, 166), we realise that The Docent is a witness to proceedings, and someone the audience member, bereaved of The Performer, instinctively turns to because of their new response-ability to share their remembrance, to pass it on.

**2018.** I'm in Edinburgh producing (alongside the company's new student co-producer) three shows at the festival this year, and have gone ahead to collect keys, check in with the venues, troubleshoot. I'm sat on the bench we've been allocated outside ZOO Charteris (a former church), and it's perfect. In front of the venue, in public, but a step back from the street, enough life passing by to add to the experience, a lovely view out over the busy park opposite. I am assured of the success of the piece. One day later, I'm sitting with Michael on the bench we've been allocated, struggling to be heard over the building festival traffic, and staring out at the large hoardings covering the railing that have appeared overnight and now completely obscure the view of the park. We're concerned. The performers arrive and Michael begins to rehearse with them. I take a dejected walk down the side of the church, impossibly hoping for a 'perfect' bench.



Impossibly, there is one. At the end of Brown Street, opposite The Richmond Café, is a tiny community park, with two benches, facing Salisbury Crags and up towards Arthur's Seat. Quiet, and with a view. A place to sit, and remember (fig. 3).



Figure 3 – The 'perfect' bench in centre of the park on Brown Street, Edinburgh. Credit: Google Maps, 2020.

The Fisherman role expands due to this new distance between the bench and the venue. Each audience member will now be collected in person from the box office, and escorted down to the bench. This journey, and the conversation *en route*, became part of the piece. A transitional journey that will add a feeling of escaping the 'race'. Of finding a moment out-of-time, and out-of-the-ordinary, to pause.

### ***Co-creating Meaning***

**MP – 2020.** *Sit with us for a moment and remember* was described by *The Guardian* as something that '... may well stay with you for years' (Wiegand 2018) as it gave audience members an escape from the everyday, especially away from the hustle and bustle of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.<sup>1</sup> More than anything, the piece curated time, to remember, to reflect, to reset. The performers described the different performative encounters the piece ignited, some of them were experiencing performing one-to-one for the first time and found how it 'heightens the potential of the performative meeting' (Zerihan 2008, 3).





Figure 4 – The bench and plaque. Credit: Alexander Reed.

In *Performance and Place*, Helen Paris asks 'How close can you get? How close is too close...' (Paris 2006, 179). We spent a lot of time discussing the duration of the moment of touch at the end of the piece, to let it linger at the edge of the audience member's 'comfort zone'. Paris argues that one-to-one performances are 'explicitly created to push, pull, provoke and tease at the borders between audience member and performer' (Paris 2006, 179). She suggests that 'intimacy, proximity, language and the placing and displacing of performer and audience facilitate this border manipulation' (Paris 2006, 179). *Sit with us ...* was not so much a 'border manipulation' as an invitation to co-create a safe haven on the border. Our mirroring device enabled the performers to allow the moment of touch to take place safely, to share the response-ability.

**RB – 2020.** As one of The Lincoln Company members reflected afterwards, 'It isn't the shows. It's the people'.<sup>2</sup> The performers had repeatedly encountered Ghelani's 'beautiful connection' with audience members, discovering for themselves how one-to-one 'allows you to pay attention to them and adjust what you're doing to suit them and what they need' (Ghelani 2010). They encountered afresh the act of co-creation with each new performance, with the 'spectator' given room and space to become a participant, and a new relationship between all present begun each time: 'This relationship – this performance of the *between* one and another – is intertwined with

and inseparable from the sensitive, generous and demanding work of collaboration; collaboration makes the work' (Heddon et al. 2012, 121).



Figure 5 – After 'The Performer' has left. Credit: Alexander Reed.

**RB – 2020.** I'm in lockdown. I'm writing this at my dinner table (which is also, for now, my work desk) in Lincoln. I think about how apart we all are right now, and how the simple act of sharing a bench, and a moment with a stranger, is somehow deeply transgressive. A dangerous thing. I think of how, even before lockdown, Adrian Howells said that: 'It's an unavoidable irony that we lead increasingly solitary existences the more sophisticated our technology has become ... [people are] increasingly isolating themselves from human, face-to-face, flesh-touching-flesh contact' (quoted in Harari 2011, 148). I think about how important physical presence is within one-to-one performance. How important it is to an audience's experience to feel that they share the moment with someone. How the intimacy of the small encounter points up the absence of others from the moment, and the temporal precarity of the situation. Here we are, now. This will not last. I think about how important it is that audiences have – and share – the response-ability of co-creating, and holding, the memory and meaning of what occurred.

**MP – 2020.** I'm in lockdown. I'm writing this on the bench in my back garden in Nottingham. I think about all the people who sat in the car between 2004 and 2009 and all the people who sat on the bench between 2008 and 2018. I think about how the audience are the hyphen between co and create. I think about how the pieces

connected with the date and space they were shown and somehow hyphenated time and place. I think about what my brother would have thought about the work I made. I think about how the response-ability was ignited and how it continues to spark. As Zerihan suggests: 'One-to-One performances feel personal, and if we commit ourselves to them, they can affect us in a myriad of ways' (Zerihan 2008, 3). It's in that 'affecting' that co-creation resides, and it's in the iterative, multiplicity of events that the encounter feels personal, that it *means*. And the co-creation continues ...

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<sup>1</sup> *'This interactive encounter enables fringe-goers to find their own fleeting moment of stillness amid the relentless hum of the festival. Created by Michael Pinchbeck and performed by members of the Lincoln Company for an audience of one, it's a brief encounter that's both sweet and sorrowful in its reflection on how life is lived both alone and together. You're left taking in the immediate moment – grass blowing in the wind, butterflies dancing, Arthur's Seat in the distance – and considering the times that have gone and those to come. It costs a pound, lasts 10 minutes and may well stay with you for years.'* – Chris Wiegand, 'The best shows at the Edinburgh festival 2018'. *The Guardian* (24 August 2018)

<sup>2</sup> *Sit with us for a moment and remember* was performed at ZOO Venues as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018. It was performed to one audience member at a time, throughout the festival, by members of The Lincoln Company 2017/18: Poppy Adamson, Rosie Bingham, Chloe Denby, Harriet Gruender, Emily Johnson, Samantha Stephens Lawson, Charlie Leeder, Mary Legge, Esther Morell, William Quirk, Alexander Reed, Marcus Regan, Kieran Spears, and Lydia Warrilow. Written by Michael Pinchbeck and The Lincoln Company. Produced by Rachel Baynton and Lauge Thomsen.