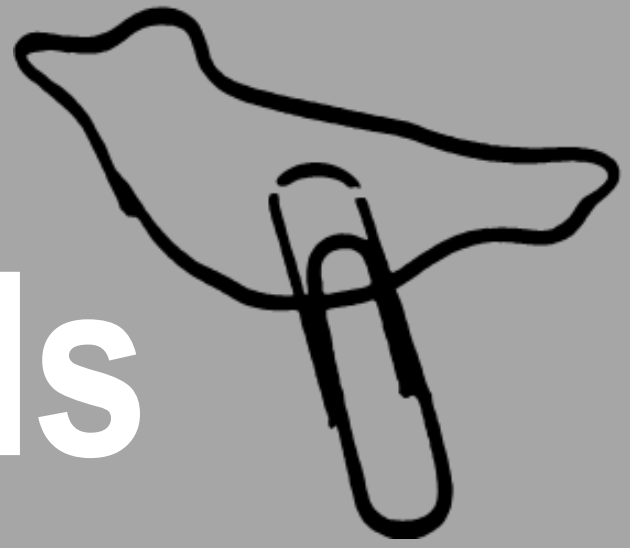
The Paper Birds



Devising Theatre Company

Who are The Paper Birds?

- The Paper Birds are a devising theatre company that explores social issues happening in the world today.
- They use real interviews to inform their devised work. Often this means spending time listening to people and collecting stories within communities across the UK.
- Their style of theatre is often called ‘Verbatim Theatre’ as it places real testimonies directly into the script. ‘Verbatim’ literally means ‘word for word’.
- Their style incorporates movement and visual imagery to tell stories; without relying solely on voice and language.

History

- The company was founded in 2003 by a group of 6 women who trained together at Bretton Hall, Leeds University.
- Two of the original founding members remain; Co-Directors Jemma McDonnell and Kylie Perry.
- They have made professional productions that have toured across the globe.
- The Paper Birds is a female-led organisation.

Is it Political Theatre?

- Their use of verbatim and exploration of social topics is akin to Political Theatre.
- But Political Theatre doesn't have to be literally about politics; The Paper Birds explore topics that they see in the world around them, and this in itself is political.
- Eg, they have produced shows that explore human trafficking in 'In a Thousand Pieces'; Britain's booze habits in 'Thirsty'; and debt and poverty in 'Broke'.

Verbatim Theatre

- Verbatim Theatre is a form of ‘documentary’ style performance where real people’s exact words form the content of the script.
- The playwright or theatre-maker conducts interviews around the given theme with real people.
- Famous examples of verbatim plays include The Laramie Project; Black Watch and London Road.
- The Paper Birds pick and choose when to insert verbatim; their scripts are a patchwork of verbatim interviews, research and original material.
- They try to signpost to an audience when verbatim is being used by clearly staging it in a specific convention.

Movement & Physical Theatre

- The Paper Birds use movement as another layer within the narrative.
- The style of movement adapts with each production depending on what the show demands.
- For The Paper Birds, using movement as a convention serves to create a non-naturalistic setting for dialogue and verbatim content as well as enhancing the visual aspect of the work.

In Depth: Mission & Vision

Our Mission

We are quiet rebels who use thought provoking theatre and engagement as a catalyst to spark conversation and change.

Our Vision

To creatively empower people to think, talk about and act on the things that are important to them.

In Depth: Methodology

The Paper Birds never start working from a script. All of their work is devised from scratch and explores a particular theme. Each topic is chosen carefully and must be something relevant and interesting, must be something that relates to the company or that they can make an interesting comment on; and is often a political or social topic.

The topic then serves as an ‘umbrella theme’ and beneath the ‘umbrella’ they begin to explore many strands that link back to that theme. Eg, with 2014’s ‘Broke’ which explored debt and poverty, the strands to explore included each of the company’s own relationships with money, UK national debt, how money is made, verbatim testimonies about money, and representations of poverty in popular culture.

In Depth: Methodology

The company then set about making as much material as possible that incorporates different styles. Utilising the research they have compiled; verbatim stories and questionnaire answers, found research such as books and articles, or scenes or text lifted directly from fiction or film; they aim to generate a range of different fragments.

A typical devising process can last anything between 6-12 weeks. Around two-thirds of the way through, they begin to sequence what material exists and see what kind of arc it creates. Where are the highs and lows? When do we engage with the characters? What's missing?

After identifying what scenes may be 'missing' they are able to fill in the gaps and generate the next batch of material that can serve the function still required.

In Depth: Terminology

Umbrella Theme – used to describe the chosen topic or stimulus of the piece. The Paper Birds never choose just one image or poem or song to devise from, but rather a theme that serves as an umbrella to cover a whole array of strands.

Strand – within a Paper Birds show there are always several strands that layer together to create a complex and multi-faceted exploration of the theme. Each of the performers has a different strand, (this relates to their individual intentions and journey throughout the piece); and there can be up to 4 or 5 other strands that all contribute to a wider and fully rounded exploration of the theme.

In Depth: Terminology

Frame – used to describe how all the scenes sit together. What is the frame that holds them? What does the material 'hang' on? In 'Broke' the frame is fast-forwarding and rewinding through research to find the crux of one story. In 'Others' the frame is that the company wrote letters to 3 women that they are trying to understand and represent on the stage.

Function – every scene serves a function. If the scene has no function, it doesn't go into the final cut! Everything placed on stage is there for a reason. Functions may include obvious things like 'introduce main character', but they might also include things like 'get that block to stage right in time for next scene'. The function may be trivial or vastly important to contribute to one of the strands.

In Depth: Influences & Practitioners

- Artistic Director Jemma McDonnell cites Theatre de Complicite and Director Simon McBurney as a key influence, as well as the work of German choreographer Pina Bausch.

- The process of many postmodern artists such as Robert Wilson, Forced Entertainment and The Wooster Group influenced The Paper Birds early practice. Today, the company are influenced by their peers and other artists. These may include Gecko, Lone Twin, Chris Thorpe, Kirsty Housley, Ontroerond Goed.

- There are many conventions of Bertolt Brecht's theatre that are resonant with The Paper Birds work; political themes, alienation effects, and breaking the fourth wall.

TASK 1 – Naturalistic Verbatim

- Interview your partner and write down everything they say; don't change or shorten their words. Write everything down EXACTLY how they say it.
- Then interview again but this time copy their gestures and body language. Conduct a 'character study'.
- Use their words on the page and your observations to re-create a NATURALISTIC version of your partner. You can't add anything else in to the text.
- Perform your naturalistic representation of your interviewee as close to the original as possible.

TASK 2 – Heightened Verbatim

- Swap texts with someone else in the room, NOT your partner.
- Read the interview and make assumptions about what type of person could have said these words.
- Use your artistic licence to create a new character that speaks this text; make the character heightened, verging on stereotype.
- Be bold; think larger than life, use your vocal range, play around with accent and dialect.
- Perform your character as though it were a video recording; start on pause and then deliver the speech.

TASK 3 – The Spectrum of Verbatim

- Choose someone's 'heightened stereotype' excerpt (Person A) and watch it performed.
- Find the person who originally said this text in the room (Person C), and also the person who wrote it down and prepared a 'Naturalistic version' of Person C (Person B).
- Place all 3 versions up on stage one after the other – Person A, B & C. Witness the 'Spectrum of Verbatim'.
- Which are you most engaged with as an audience?
- Is it ok ethically to use someone's real words and re-interpret them in a heightened manner? When might you do this?

TASK 4: Dot to Dot Choreography

- Choose 3 words that relate to your stimulus. They can be emotions, actions or images.
- Create a still frame for each word. Try a couple of variations, but settle on one still frame to physicalise each of the words.
- Join the still frames together in a sequence; think of it like a ‘dot to dot’ colouring book, each of the frames is the ‘dot’ and now you need to draw the lines between. Find the physical journey between each of the dots.
- Visit each dot several times, mix up the order, use repetition, vary the tempo. Play your sequence on a loop 3 times; slow, regular and fast.
- How does the meaning of the movement change as the loop continues?