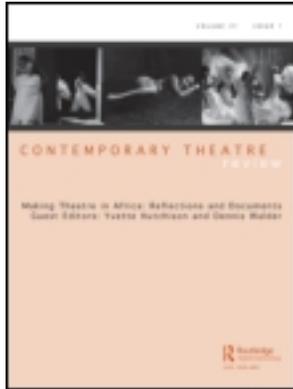


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## Backpages

*Backpages is an opportunity for the academy to engage with theatre and performance practice with immediacy and insight and for theatre workers and performance artists to engage critically and reflectively on their work and the work of their peers. Featuring short, topical articles and debates, polemics where necessary, it's a place of intellectual intervention and creative reflection. It's also where we hope to articulate, perhaps for the first time, the work of new and rising theatre artists in an academic forum.*

*This issue of Backpages is co-edited by Dominic Johnson and Caridad Svich.*

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### **The Situation Regarding Performance Art (1973)**

*Jeff Nuttall*

*Jeff Nuttall (1933–2004) was a key figure in performance in the 1960s and 1970s, as founder of the People Show. This previously unpublished document was written in August 1973 as an appendix to a report to the Experimental Drama Committee of the Arts Council of Great Britain (now Arts Council England) prepared by Roland Miller with Shirley Cameron. Published with permission of the Estate of Jeff Nuttall, courtesy of its executor, Jill Richards.*

*Many thanks to Graham Saunders for bringing this document to our attention, and providing a copy of the typescript; and to David Duchin at the People Show, London, for liaising with Richards.*

Performance art, a phrase tentatively tossed around like a cooling hot potato, means, I suppose, people performing who don't want to be defined as theatre [makers]. The old yardsticks of established skills, acting, producing, audience rapport, entertaining, do not apply, they imply, to them. Nonetheless, terms and the usage of terms being what they are, people talking about performance art in England now are likely to be referring to any one of a vast number of mutually contradictory directions that have sprung up recently, a lightly bubbling stewpot labelled, in many places, fringe theatre. Performance art and fringe theatre are confused in Great Britain. Not so elsewhere. This is because in Europe and America performing artists and Thespians not only feel separate in ideology and technique, but, in fact, *are* separate, knowing one another not at all. They drink, as it were, in different pubs.

When Ken Dewey and others unleashed the archetypal English Happening on the Edinburgh scene in 1963 [Edinburgh Drama Conference, MacEwan Hall] the British Thespians – dull-eyed in

the post-orgasmic miasma following upon the long slow death of English teabag theatre, and deserted by the anticipatable swing to the right of the Angry Young Men – flocked around this eruption of ambiguous bullshit with notebooks at the ready. Painters, sculptors and composers who felt compelled to exhibit real people were invited to those places with fixed seats, platforms, lights, entrenched traditions, into theatres in fact, because it was felt, by Charles Marowitz, Jim Haynes, Joan Littlewood and others, that here might be the shot in the arse English theatre needed. All this happened in the mid-1960s, and in the intervening decade the stewpot has shown some sign of boiling a bit. It might, then, be useful at this point in time, to try and enumerate the various ingredients.

First there are the theatre people (Group 1), ex-theatre school, ex-university, literate, predominantly *literary* insofar as they are fixated on the delivery of words and the communication of either message or story. These are the people who seek to restore the vitality of the traditional medium. They are to be found clustering in nomadic groups around the Royal Court, the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the various provincial ‘playhouses’, Leeds and Newcastle, for example, where the banner of the Metropolis is raised aloft and the Union troops hold the local barbarians at bay. They are, on the whole, more than just pretty good at their jobs, but they have an attitude to other groups that is at once timid and paternalistic. Completely ignorant about the use of the found object and non-figurative plastic values, they nonetheless talk to painters and sculptors in a tone that implies a certain bedrock sanity that must, sooner or later, be consulted. Best among them are Marowitz, the Portable Theatre, the Freehold, Pip Simmons, the pen-pushers Howard Brenton, John Grillo, Snoo Wilson, their producer-companion Chris Parr, Bill Gaskill I suppose, and newcomers like the Crowd. The mimes, with their massive backdrag of history, belong here, wherever they may wander, but Lindsay Kemp (and Jack Birkett), Tony Crera and George O’Brien have a wider appreciation because what they do is inherently non-verbal.

Then there are the left-wing preachers (Group 2), the beskirted, black-tee-shirted brothers and sisters (and often distant cousins) of the working-class, plagued by the magisterial shade of Bertolt Brecht and the quick-changing slogans of modish protest. They differ from teabag theatre because they worry the proscenium like a little boy who can’t leave his thingy alone. Surging out into the street with fantastic skill, they have recently been

surging back on stage again. An important pivot of this group is Roland Muldoon. Out of the properly exalted Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre came Pam Brighton (the beam of sunlight in Sloane Square). Close alongside came Albert Hunt, the General Will, Adrian Mitchell and David Edgar. The northern cell of Marxist infiltrationists is not irrelevant here: Alfred Bradley, Barry Hines, their connection with Tony Garnett and Ken Loach; the obvious debt of the whole thing to Littlewood. The group are cartoonists. They illustrate the cause. They overlap with Group 1.

Next there is the other crusaders (Group 3), the remains of the old late-1960s, blow-your-bone underground, their hair still lyrically long or Krishna-cropped, the Tantric symbols still swinging round their lovely throats. Where Group 2 has Brecht, this group has Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Antonin Artaud, Julian Beck (of The Living Theatre) and Jerzy Grotowski. They seek the root of being in body rhythms, voice ranges and transcendental awareness. They are the let’s-go-back-into-the-garden people, spinning telepathic cobwebs, reviving religion; they present the lifestyle of the collective as a creative achievement in itself, even (hilariously) to the Arts Council. You are apt to see inflatables around them. They create urban spiderwebs beside the psychic ones, ostensibly festive but ultimately dogmatic, by which unsuspecting proles are drawn nearer to the coleslaw and the meditation. By far the biggest and the best of this group is the Welfare State, but there’s also Donald Gardiner and the London Cell of the Living Theatre, the Moving Being, the Ritual Theatre, Genesis P-Orridge and David Medalla (both of them out of the germinal Exploding Galaxy), Intereaction, Playspace and WHST, involving Stuart Brisley, Jeffrey Shaw and Carlyle Reedy. They connect fairly closely to music groups that have a high quotient of performance and collective play in their make-up: Edgar Broughton, Hawkwind, Mike Westbrook, the People Band and even David Bowie.

These groups overlap with the comedy-trad-band strain in Group 4, which is the most purely British in its quality and limitations. It would be easy to say that Spike Milligan and the Goons were at the core of this direction but the truth is a little more complex than that. The art-school lifestyle of the 1950s and 1960s has a good deal to do with bands like the Alberts, the Temperance Seven, the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band, more recently Kilburn and the High Roads, Roxy Music and the whole field of mock rock. The spirit is one of shrill scatological anarchy with strong nostalgia-shots of

music hall and steam radio comedy. Absence of technique is, in this group, often a highly developed technique in itself. Involved are the People Show, John Bull Puncture Repair Kit, Soft Soap, Phillip, the Scaffold, Bruce Lacey, John Antrobus – and last but not least, myself and Rose McGuire, better known as Jack. The much-mentioned connections with classic Dada and Surrealism are seldom conscious in this movement. The English working class, on the shop floor, in the barracks, in the pub, have been concocting British rubbish for a very long time, never mind Monty Python.

And penultimately, to performance art proper, the brushers and chisellers and welders and sprayers who turned to the living flesh in the 1950s, who all owe a massive debt to John Cage and who must be subdivided. Some of them (Group 5) are mess-artists. They come out of action painting and assemblage. They are likely to use a lot of splashed paint and junk. Their use of accident is likely to be a means to achieving greater chaos. The American Happenings artists Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg and Jim Dine worked in this area. The absolute masters are the Viennese blood-and-shit artists, Otto Mühl, Günter Brus and Hermann Nitsch. Early practitioners in the UK were Mark Boyle, Gustav Metzger, Ivor Davies, Ian Breakwell and Stuart Brisley. I myself have been known to fling a bit of offal about now and then.

Finally, not just from painting and sculpture but also from music come those simple, clear cut, minimal acts and structures (Group 6), that call definitions of time, space and existence into question, that scoff modestly at the evidence and expectations of the senses. The connections are with those highly disciplined art works that try to ask again and again ‘What is an art work?’ Extended to performance the principle changes the question to ‘What am I?’ John Cage is followed very closely here: accident is used not to create chaos but to determine arbitrary, mathematical time-space forms (e.g. Shirley Cameron and Roland Miller changing activity exactly according to the throw of a dice; Joseph Beuys standing still for two hours). The Fluxus Group, now centred on Dusseldorf and Cologne, are the people who have taken this furthest, including Ben Vautier, Dieter Rot, Beuys and Robert Filliou. British parallels are Gilbert and George, Roland Miller and Shirley Cameron, Lawrence Accola, Kevin Atherton, Tony Costa and some of the conceptual artists.

If the phrase ‘performance art’ is to be used, I think it is most usefully applied to Groups 5 and 6 only, quite simply because what they do has *nothing to do with theatre at all*. Theatre is always

compromised because it is orientated to the public from the start. We must amuse the public, seduce the public and if, in the theatre, we are to *inform* the public – like Group 2 – then we are likely to be doubly compromised, not only to the public, but also to the Party, the source of the information.

Pure theatre then can never be pure art. *It is corrupt.*

Groups 3, 4, 5 and 6 are not primarily concerned with audiences. They are primarily concerned with enquiry into what is inside oneself, into what is beyond one’s ordinary awareness, into how language forms can be sabotaged and extended. They are then artists. Groups 3 and 4 are not pure artists. They have heavy quotients of theatre in their technique. They seek to use the collective situation as a means to cultural sabotage and research.

Groups 5 and 6 have minimal regard for the importance of their audiences. Performance is, for them, not a means to communication – much less communion – but it is quite simply the next step in their course of inquiry and experimentation. They are, therefore, artists in a simple uncomplicated way. They are performance artists. If they use no theatre techniques it is not because they are ‘bad theatre’. It is because they are not theatre at all.

It might seem that I am advocating a separatist policy, but this is not the case. Anybody who looks at my position on the scene must realise that I like the stewpot. All us different bubbles should, though, realise that our common purpose is cultural revolution. In terms of cultural revolution, we are all in danger of being dubbed ‘the aftermath of the 1960s’, unless we stop wasting our energy trying to persuade or condemn one another according to our own narrow fields and concentrate on work that, far from winning the biggest pittance in the Arts Council stakes, will stop the pigs from insulting us with charity at all.



## Performance Art in Northern Ireland

*Slavka Sverakova*

*Slavka Sverakova is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Ulster. She is the author of Art and Nationality: Inside, Outside (1993) and co-author of The Visual Force: Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art (2009). She has contributed articles on Irish art and performance to various journals and exhibition catalogues.*

Relentlessly obsessed with differences grounded in the past, Northern Irish society centred itself on traditions, national signifiers and the justification of violence during the so-called Troubles. Its 'silent majority' did not find its voice. This coincided with a belief, held by some artists, that performance, as a 'break-through' or progressive art practice, was particularly suited to become that voice, to integrate memories that neither compete nor erase each other. Not for lack of trying, however, it never reached that expected 'larger audience'. Substantially linked to the Fine Art degree course at Ulster Polytechnic (later University of Ulster) the practice aimed to produce references capable of dual signification: both local and global. Anne Carlisle recalled that 'live or performance art' appeared in 1974 in a local comprehensive school syllabus. Vernon Carter, an artist and musician, found performance art suitable for the multi-sensory art education of the new generation, owing to some shared characteristics: ephemerality, open-endedness, absence of high skills or expensive materials, and incompleteness (see Anne Carlisle, 'A Pluralist Approach to School Art', *Circa*, 3 (March–April 1982), pp. 4–8).

Using risk to test the imagination of the audience, the mainstream performance art, supported by visiting artists, focused on various venues in Belfast. In 1978, the Arts Council Gallery hosted performances by Nigel Rolfe, Kevin Atherton, Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Dan Graham, Margaret Gillan, Kieran Lyons, Stuart Brisley and Alastair MacLennan (see Jaroslava Sverakova, 'The Polish Link: An Appraisal', *Circa* (January–February 1982), pp. 7–8). Each brought a different focus, namely, disturbing physical actions, virtual performance and Proustian celebrations of time. Durational as well as small-scale performances were conducted in the foyer of the Belfast Campus, on the streets of Belfast by MacLennan and his students. They explored the capacity of the performance art to wiggle out of the restrictions set by discursive legibility. In recognition of the complexity of the culture in the region, pulled apart by hatred, violence and fear of the Other, the idea of freedom took central stage in MacLennan's *The Hanging* (1981). Naked, he slowly walked for 12 hours under suspended wires holding plastic bags and all his clothes, giving them away afterwards (see Micky Donnelly, 'Live Performance, Crescent Centre', *Circa* (January–February 1982), pp. 24–26). Sacrifice, vulnerability and charity resonated with the religious beliefs that permeated the culture in the region, while signifying inner emigration from mindless consumerism. For decades his

durational performances developed as dissipative structures maintained by continuous influx of energy.

A similar model appeared in a Polish link at the Art and Research Exchange soon after it was established in 1981. Zbigniew Warpechowski knelt down, alternatively whipping his body and carrying heavy building blocks, in a metonym for Wojciech Jaruzelski's military regime crushing Solidarity (the Polish trade union federation) in Poland. Warpechowski's image appeared on the cover of the second issue of *Circa*, the only journal of contemporary art published in Belfast (*ibid.*, pp. 7–10).

Crescent Resource Centre became a key site for performance. From 8 January 1982, each Saturday for six weeks, Angela McCabe and Nick Stewart invited local and visiting artists to test out new practices of performance in relation to various topoi, creating phenomena outside of traditional art: these artists included Tony Hill, Viv Crane, Nick Stewart, James King, Danny McCarthy and Nigel Rolfe (*ibid.*, p. 5). Viv Burnside, Damien Coyle, Helen Cruiks and Julie Stephenson participated in the *Newcastle Diary*, while others appeared in events organized in Dublin, Cork, Poland, London and Glasgow. The core group of performance artists were Belfast Fine Art graduates and postgraduates: John Carson, Moira McIver, Trevor Cromie, Damien Coyle, Sean Taylor, John Byrne, Brian Connolly, Amanda Dunsmore and Anne Seagrave. Many participated in reviews such as Edge (1988), The British Art Show and the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (1985) and the National Review of Live Art (1987).

The socio-political contexts actively reinforced the relevance of each performance. While social formations in Northern Ireland remained divided, violent and entrenched, live artists focused on opposing strategies: sharing, exchanges, openness and mutual respect. A commitment to aesthetic experience contributed to social bonding and emotional resonance in the next decade.

Marginalia organized the exhibition *Immagini del Silenzio* in Novalesa, Italy, 1988 in an ancient monastery, and accommodated all artists in the same hotel. The artists were encouraged to make art in response to the site and follow their work with ad hoc seminars, discussions and exchanges of ideas. The poignant name of the site, suggesting 'new light' or a newly ploughed field, connected with the concept of a ritual in a sacred place. *Immagini del Silenzio* inspired Brian Kennedy, Nick Stewart, Alastair MacLennan and Brian Connolly to organize *Available Resources*, in 1991. *Available Resources* was realized on the



Image 1 *Beyond Performance Monthly* (26 June 2011): photo by Jordan Hutchings.

streets of Londonderry and in an abandoned funeral parlour. A catalogue for *Available Resources* was published by The Orchard Gallery in 1992 with an introduction by the organizing trio, entries for each participating artist by myself and John Nixon, and synopses of two seminars. Eighteen artists from six countries took part in ‘research for living’ and an open ‘facilitatory and collaborative’ project, according to MacLennan and Connolly, in the catalogue (pp. 6–7). The group included the four organizers and artists from Canada, Italy, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Richard Martel and Alastair MacLennan accentuated social bonding, while Thomas Ruller promoted ‘captivation’ and intellectual stimulation. Alana O’Kelly explored a kind of indigenous vocal performance, the *keening*, in a prehistoric fort near Londonderry. The rest combined performance with installation or video. The powers of visual force (language, symbols, archives, literature) were called upon to undo the damage recorded in local histories.

Established in 1994, the artists led Catalyst Arts hosted groups from Poland, Canada, Italy and



Image 2 *Beyond Performance Monthly* (26 June 2011): photo by Kasia Pagel.

Mexico, and launched the biennial of performance art FIX (annual from 1994–2004, with subsequent editions in 2007 and 2009; see [www.fixcatalyst.org.uk](http://www.fixcatalyst.org.uk)). It became a kind of laboratory for MFA graduates, such as Ruth Jones, Sandra Johnston, Dougal McKenzie, Brian Patterson, Dan Shippides, Fiona Larkin and Peter Richards. (See my ‘Performance Art in Ireland, 1975–1998’, in *Art Action 1958–1998* (Quebec: Intervention Editions, 2001), pp. 412–27.)

In 2001, Richard Martel came to Belfast to launch the Art Action, 1958–98. To mark the event, Brian Patterson and Malgorzata Butterwick co-founded Bbeyond as a performance art event held in the fully functional St George’s Market in Belfast. The unconventional site paralleled the artists’ concern about the art market. Twelve artists from Poland, Northern Ireland, Finland, Spain, the UK and the Republic of Ireland mingled among shoppers, among the vegetable and fish stalls, stopping and performing on the go or in any available space. Brian Connolly set up his own stall playfully selling centimetres cut from a measuring tape. Tajber carried a huge TV monitor on his shoulders, and others produced diverse visual marks signalling difference. People were remarkably tolerant of these apparitions, often managing a smile or cracking a joke. This was the bearable lightness of being in Northern Ireland.

Bbeyond became the leading organization of the decade with a preference for regular Performance Monthly events by the local cadre of up to twenty-six artists and dense international events like the well-documented *In Place of Passing* (2005). *Open Relations* in 2004 and 2005 included Japanese artists (the Operation Ambassadors in 2006, 2007 and 2008) and artists from Canada, Chile,

Denmark, Finland, the Republic of Ireland, the UK, Germany and the USA. In subsequent editions the Exchange Places were between Belfast and Quebec, Canada (2006), Belfast and Finland (2008) and Belfast and Norway (*Inbound*, 2010). The growing confidence that works of art do create their own context outside both the identity and intention of the artists has not erased strongly personal and regional biases. The two interacted in productive ways with a range of indeterminacy. Bbeyond produced international collaborations with artists from Poland in *I AM* (2008) and *AIMING* (2009), and with Canadian artists in *Chaos* (2010) and *Crossings* (2010). An aptly named festival called *East–West* (2009) included artists from Malaysia, Burma, Indonesia, Mexico, Japan, Singapore, the UK and Germany. In a paradigmatic shift, the various local ‘themes’ asked questions about how to be, here and everywhere. In a kind of *détournement*, the problem of how to think through the visual formed its stable centre.



## Live Art in Scotland: *The Salon Project*

Laura Bissell

*Laura Bissell teaches at the University of Glasgow and delivers the Critical and Contextual Studies strand of the Contemporary Performance Practice BA Honours course at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (formerly the RSAMD).*

*The Salon Project* was performed at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in October 2011. The event, created by Stewart Laing and Untitled Projects, was devised around the concept of the salons of the 1900s where the upper classes of society would gather to discuss science, art, culture and music. *The Salon Project* was framed as an ‘immersive’ experience in which audiences were costumed in full period evening dress before entering the salon – a white space reminiscent of a Parisian salon complete with chandeliers and a grand piano – to witness a series of visual and aural ‘provocations’. As well as piano and operatic performances and the appearance of a *tableau vivant* (a ‘living picture’ made up of nude performers), a series of guest speakers provided provocations for discussion and debate. I was invited to speak at one of the performances and, as my research explores technology and contemporary performance, was encour-

aged to speak about ‘the future’. The audience was simultaneously being asked to frame the present and future in conjunction with the past while being immersed in the costume and setting of a nineteenth-century salon.

*The Salon Project* – rather than being a historic re-enactment – was closer to an experiment in style and form that situated it in proximity to Live Art. The different speakers and fluctuating audiences created a fluidity and randomness in the interactions and encounters that occurred: no night was the same in terms of pace, theme and temporality. The event began weeks before the performance itself when audiences submitted their measurements to the wardrobe team so that on the night a costume specifically fitted and tailored to their own body awaited them. These carefully planned details created a sense of expectation and anticipation for the event and when audiences turned up at the Traverse the first performance space they encountered was the dressing rooms where they were ritualistically made up in period dress and thick white make-up in the style of the era. The audience’s entry into the salon space was staggered with each group being led into the salon in turn. The first group to enter experienced Donna Rutherford playing a DJ set on three gramophones and were encouraged to converse with others in the space. The last group to enter did not get to see this moment and the nature of the piece means that no group would have the same experience of the evening.

Artistic director Stewart Laing played the role of ‘host’ in the salon and was complemented by salonnière Rose English. The spontaneous and unscripted conversations between Laing and Rose punctuated each evening and served to frame some of the performance moments. While there was no one ‘performance’ to watch, the visual spectacle of the event was primarily the transformation of the audience itself while moments of performance occurred frequently and seemingly haphazardly as the evening meandered on. There was an uncertainty of role, of who was performing and who was spectating. When a particular body in the salon began to do something there was a sense that everyone was in disguise, that we were all incognito. On the night that I was invited to attend, I felt myself being watched in this way, when having been in the salon for some time I moved to the front of the space to speak. When I returned from delivering my paper my eyes scoured the room for other usurpers complicit in the unfolding events.

*The Salon Project* was also staged as a social event. Conversation was encouraged and perfor-

mers in period maids outfits, in keeping with the setting, brought round trays of drinks. The framing of *The Salon Project* as an event that mirrored the gathering of the societal elite (as well as the £25 ticket price) sat uncomfortably with me as I was being served wine by a performer dressed as a servant, but one of Laing's aims was to highlight the 'associations between the golden era of Salon Society and our own era of economic excess'. At many moments throughout the performance the past, present and future were blurred as elegant ladies draped in crêpe and satin used digital cameras to record the event, ladies in frocks and gentlemen in coat-tails spoke of such diverse subjects as the future of scarecrows and cryogenics. Proust's claim that 'only through art can we emerge from ourselves and know what another person sees' was literally performed through the destabilisation of the historical continuum that occurred throughout the piece.

Towards the end of the evening the audience was gathered together to have their photograph taken. Coalescing at one end of the salon space, the entire audience faced a gentleman with a camera. Behind him a mirror spanned the length of the space and the audience looked back at their own reflection, their own double made strange. Behind them was another mirror reflecting their image again, repeating to infinity. The image of an old-fashioned posed group was juxtaposed with a video playing on the flat screen plasma TV that was wheeled in previously – a montage of naked, cold and blue bodies, blood, hair-covered faces, and more blood. The quaint portrait that was mirrored back across the room jarred with the ultra-modern contemporary stylings of the video work. While costume was paramount in the live space the nakedness of the filmed bodies seemed stark in contrast. This final disruption to the salon event echoes the earlier tableau vivant with many of the performers featuring in both. In the event that I took part in, the performers of the nude tableau vivant entered the salon towards the end dressed in period costume and watched themselves on a screen. The audience who had seen them as a 'living picture' earlier in the evening now watched them observe their own images from a distanced perspective, their heavily costumed bodies the antithesis of the earlier nudity on display.

By chance, on the evening I was presenting, there were many performers and theatre makers in the audience. Past and present students of mine from both the University of Glasgow and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (formerly RSAMD) were in attendance as were a number of performers and

artists. Laing discussed how the choice and combinations of speakers changed the event on a night by night basis and how on the evening where Swedish architect Katarina Bonnevier spoke 'On the Art of Dream Building' about feminism and the built environment, theatre critic Joyce Macmillan discussed feminine values in Scottish culture to an audience made up largely of gay women. In every performance the speakers and the audience would give the night a certain flavour or feel that was unique to that event and on the night I was speaking the theme seemed to be 'performance'. I spoke about my experience of working on Belgian company CREW's 2007 performance *U\_Raging\_Standstill* which was performed at the Tramway in Glasgow. I had chosen this particular piece as I felt that it would have some resonances with the 'immersive' experience that *The Salon Project* was trying to evoke as this was a performance that incorporated virtual reality technology to create an immersive experience for participants. I was also intrigued by CREW's interest in using technology to look back, to return performance to an experiential art form through technology. Director Eric Joris claims: 'Most people see technology as a way to progress. We wanted to explore it as a way for people to regress.' I spoke about this performance and how parts of it evoked Freud's theory of the *unheimliche* – the uncanny – in showing participants a virtual version of themselves that they were not expecting, a technological *déjà-vu*.

During *The Salon Project*, as familiar faces moved around the white salon space their bodies were rendered *unheimliche* by the elaborate costume and mask of make-up. There was a solemnity, a sense of ceremony about this piece that was palpable. The role that costume played towards the 'immersion' in this experience was vital and by putting on a costume the experience was altered. Once adorned in period dress people moved differently, held themselves differently and there was a vulnerability about the bodies in the space that seemed to reflect the situation that we had all found ourselves in – complicit in this moment of authorised 'dressing-up'. Arguably the change in posture and gait visible in many bodies in the salon was due to the boned and corseted dresses that many were wearing (myself included) but I believe that the initial stage of the event where audiences were dressed and made-up shifted the audiences' perception of where they were and who they are. The performance is not at all nostalgic and the twenty-first-century disruptions to the salon space disallow *The Salon Project* to become sentimental, but the costumes do seem to facilitate a mode of enquiry. Perhaps the

combination of disguise, the shared vulnerability of the audience that have been stripped of their own clothes and moulded and squeezed into corseted bodices and starched collars, and the uncertainty of the space where the performance moments were punctuated by lengthy periods of standing around, cultivate the theatre of conversation and debate that Laing was striving for.

*The Salon Project* serves to remind us that our futures are inextricably entangled with our pasts. In this complex durational evening of salon culture and entertainment audiences are placed *inside* the image, not outside looking in. This ‘aesthetic vision that attempts to re-configure the conventions of theatrical space’ also re-codes conventions of time and what ‘theatre’ or ‘performance’ can be.



### Live Art and the Domestic: Abusing the Monogamous Heteronormative Nuclear Family Unit

*The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*

*The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home is run out of a council property bedroom in Everton, Liverpool. Founded in 2008, it has hosted a number of events, residencies and conversations in relation to homemade aesthetics, the private/the public, the family, class and money matters.*

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, founded in 2008, is a domestic initiative, run out of the spare room of a council house in Everton, Liverpool, UK. The Institute is run by a family of two adults: Gary Anderson and Lena Simic; and three children: Neal, Gabriel and Sid (aged ten, eight and three, respectively, at the time of writing). It is a self-sufficient and sustainable art-activist initiative drawing from 10 per cent of all income from its members. Gary and Lena work as university lecturers as well as freelance artists while the children donate a tenth of their child tax credits and child benefit. This document will feature a contextualising introduction to the Institute, followed by some concluding remarks about the broader context of struggle against capitalism within which the Institute sits.

The Institute is interested in social transformation away from market-led logics towards self-determined, sustainable and ethical everyday prac-

tices and, in the interests of which, has refigured a part of the family living space – the spare bedroom – into a meeting place for artists, activists and cultural dissenters locally, nationally and internationally. From 2007, the Institute has hosted a number of artists’ residencies and events, ranging from individual encounters with activists to group conversations with internationally acclaimed art-activists, to theatrical family performances in their Liverpool home with other local artists. The Institute self-identifies with other Live Art initiatives in domestic spaces, a context which includes, in no order of preference, 25SG in Newcastle; Home Live Art in London; 161 in London, in particular Bobby Baker and her projects *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home* (1976) and *Kitchen Show* (1991); I’m With You in Clapton; Balin House Project in London; Space@ Clarence Mews in London; 2 Penrhiw in Abercych, Wales; the Centre for Suburban Research in Belfast; Deveron Arts, a contemporary arts project in Huntly, a small rural town in Aberdeenshire; Springhill Institute in Birmingham; and My House Gallery in Nottingham, among others.

What we feel might distinguish the Institute from other domestic initiatives is the fact that we perform as a nuclear family. It is through our public performance practice that we question the naturalization of the heteronormative nuclear family unit, which has, despite numerous intellectual and performative incursions, retained its dominant position in our current neo-liberal social order. In order to critique the role of the heteronormative, nuclear family unit’s complicity in the current neoliberal social order we will now turn to an aspect of the Institute’s public Live Art shows, something



Image 3 The heteronormative family unit: photo: Mark Loudon, WECC, Liverpool, 2010.

we have come to call our ‘family picnics’. The family picnic is a performance methodology that grew out of a concern to lay the groundwork for an embodied critique of the heteronormative family’s enforced role in consumer capitalism and its sister structures while at the same time providing a critical but loving environment for the children to participate in, and contribute to, that critique. It has been important for us as parents to think through the various problems of involving children in our performance work. There are a host of ethical issues that, rather than ‘solve’, we deploy in our performance work in an attempt to assure a continuous reassessment of our role as parents and performers. It has also been important for us to deal with issues in performance in a child-friendly way – meaning the children are not bored or reluctant participants – while at the same time exposing the violence of a conservative nuclear family structure. In this sense, tactically, we over-identify as a ‘classic’ family unit of heteronormative proportions in order to expose its many problems.

So what happens in an Institute family picnic? After the initial set up of each family picnic, during which Daddy shouts directions to Mummy and children, the first section includes Mummy feeding the children from the picnic spread while Daddy is busy making political speeches to the audience; an enactment of the male-public/female-private binary that so much of feminist praxis has sought to undermine. The second section sees Mummy and children interrupting Daddy’s speech by throwing picnic food at him and questioning his position as public speaker. The third section sees the children taking over the performance space by ‘misbehaving’ while Mummy and Daddy debate specific issues pertinent to the specific locale of the performance – for example an art gallery or a public park. All of this takes place under a thirty meter red banner that is painted upon by members of the Institute in white paint during each family picnic.

We argue that the site of the family is a site-in-waiting for critically informed interventions in the norms of the ‘domestic’ and the ‘familial’ as part of a broader intervention into hegemonic, capitalistic patterns of everyday practice enacted by millions of people across the world, everyday. In other words we attempt to fight capitalism by ‘abusing’ one of the key repositories of a capitalistic system: the heteronormative family unit. We have found Live Art, the people who self-identify as Live Art practitioners and the institutions that offer support to them to be healthy and productive spaces to house that abuse and, from that base, call upon other heteronormative families to stand up, come

forward and perform the heteronormative family unit to liberation!



## Five Brief Reflections on International Live Art

### Tim Miller

*Elaine Avila*

*Elaine Avila holds the Robert Hartung Endowed Chair at the University of New Mexico, where she heads their MFA Programme in Dramatic Writing. Her plays have premiered in Europe, Panama, Canada and the USA and are about to be published in a collection by NoPassport Press.*

Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2010: After performing his latest piece, *Glory Box*, a cry for marriage equality, performance artist Tim Miller asks about sixty students of dance and theatre to find a gesture from a time they had said ‘no’ – when they had stood up to oppression. Next he guides them in creating dances for these moments in their lives. Finding a way to say no to oppression allows for a larger ‘yes’, a yes to the wisdom in our bodies, our souls, to live theatre, to each other. By putting his live, artistic being on the line for his right to love and live with his long time partner, Alistair McCartney, Tim Miller is continuing to believe in democracy, in the dream of America, of a finding a way to create justice in our society.

My hands and body find their own gestures as Miller galvanizes his audiences, students and faculty to come out, come out, whoever we are ... to love fiercely, passionately, to fight for our society to work – for all of us. He crosses America with these performances and workshops, inspiring the next generation – despite, as he writes, performances where there were ‘death threats against me, bomb threats to the theater and white supremacist protesters waving confederate flags in front of the theater’ (from personal e-mail correspondence between Tim Miller and the author).



### Miet Varlop

*Carl Lavery*

*Carl Lavery teaches at Aberystwyth University. He is co-editor of ‘Good Luck Everybody’: Lone Twin:*

Performances, Journeys and Conversation (2011) and the author of *The Politics of Jean Genet's Late Theatre: Spaces of Revolution* (2010).

When I worked at Lancaster University (2005–08), I was lucky enough to have access to the Nuffield Theatre, which was run by the great Matt Fenton. I remember the 2007–08 season well, because Matt had decided to step aside for the year and had invited other artists to curate the programme in his stead. The one show that sticks in my mind was a performance by the young Flemish artist Miet Varlop, whom Tim Etchells had recommended. She was small, had great hair and wore a pair of rubber boots. She walked around the room very slowly and arranged objects into a canvas of grotesques. She took great care doing it, and we just sat there and watched her commit what might clumsily be called 'objectal violence'. It felt perverse; I was affected; and I've never been able to shake the feeling. It wormed its way in. There were a lot of young British Live Art practitioners in the Nuffield that night. They seemed stunned, as if the game had gone up a notch, or something like that. The show was called *Reanimation*.



## The Escapists

*Sean Edgecomb*

*Sean Edgecomb is the Convener of the Bachelor of Creative Arts and a Lecturer in Drama at the University of Queensland. His research focuses on developing alternative queer historical narratives of theatre, abjection and performance.*

On 30 March 2011, I was fortunate enough to attend the opening night of the electrifying *Boy, Girl, Wall* presented by The Escapists at the LaBoite Theatre Company in Brisbane, Australia. Showcasing actor Lucas Stippard, the performance was a theatrical and literal palimpsest featuring a chalkboard-covered set on which Stippard improvised sketches and writings as the story unfolded. Based on a vivid yet simple Pyramus and Thisbe-esque narrative (closer to Bottom's droll reinterpretation rather than Ovid's tragedy) about lovers brought together by the anthropomorphic wall that separates the boy's apartment and the girl's apartment, the evening was a concoction of original text, histrionics, energy and clear aesthetics. It was that rare gem of a performance that made me forget my other life as a scholar and

critic for the length of the play. A distinct memory that still remains with me is the image of the stage covered in the chalk drawing that became an ephemeral celebration of what Live Art can be: magical.



## Institutet and Nya Rampen

*Peter Petralia*

*Dr Peter S. Petralia is the artistic director of Proto-type Theater (www.proto-type.org) and Course Leader of the BA (Hons) Contemporary Theatre and Performance degree at MMU Cheshire.*

Earlier in 2011, while in Stockholm at an IETM meeting, I went to see a theatre/Live Art performance called *Conte D'Amour*, which was a combined effort by the young companies Institutet and Nya Rampen with video by Markus Öhrn. It was a three-hour long aesthetic assault on the audience about romantic and familial love that pleasurably rode the fine line between absolute tastelessness and incredible genius. In the piece, four performers sing covers of pop songs, beat each other, simulate (I think!) sex, role-play and explore the power dynamics of a family of men based on the particulars of the Joseph Fritzl case, basement prison included. I remember being really uncomfortable watching *Conte D'Amour* because I knew that what I was watching was not acceptable behaviour and I was aware that I was finding it entertaining. For me, there is nothing better than work that makes me aware of the contradictions of spectatorship and of the always-complicated way that our systems of morality (and pleasure) function. I've been obsessing over *Conte D'Amour* for months trying to convince someone in the UK to present it because I think I need to see it again to understand fully what it is about the piece that made it sit so neatly on the line between awful and great. Until someone takes up the challenge, I'll be rehearsing it over and over again in my mind.



## Owen Maseko

*Ian Rowlands*

*Ian Rowlands is a Welsh theatre director and playwright.*

During a recent visit to Zimbabwe I attended a Live Art event at the National Gallery, Bulawayo. It was not a true ‘Live Art’ event – no sperm, sweat, piss or blood, merely an artist painting a picture to the accompaniment of spoken prose. Dead art possibly! However, were you to know that the artist in question was Owen Maseko and the event took place in a space immediately above the gallery which houses his banned exhibition (*sub judice*, and closed for the past two years), then this was the most ‘A-live’ an art event could ever be. For creating his exhibition *Gukurahundi* (in Shona, a reference to the massacre of thousands in Matabeleland by Mugabe’s Secret Police), Maseko was charged with ‘undermining authority’ under the Public order and Security Act. ‘Maseko was slapped in leg irons, taken to prison and held for days’, Josh Sanburn reported in *Time* magazine; he was ‘interrogated in 12 hour sessions [and ...] could face up to 20 years in prison’. Within the room where the reading took place were two gaping holes in the floor. Through these holes, both the audience and the CIO (secret police) could glimpse details of Maseko’s banned installation in the gallery below. His wife, Sian, began to read as Maseko painted; several cameras recorded the event. We searched for further treasons in the lines of his painting, there were none. From the canvas emerged two old Zimbabwean women returning home from market – hardly cause for the CIO to write home about. However, though the nature of the image was uncharged, the act of its creation was charged with the defiance of an artist in a country where art has more than a dollar worth; ‘Live art’ in the true sense from an artist who, for his beliefs, has faced death.



## In Memoriam: Ruby Cohn (1922–2011)

*Peter Lichtenfels*

*Peter Lichtenfels is Professor of Directing, Acting and Performance Studies at the University of California-Davis. Material is taken from Linda Ben Zvi’s essay on Ruby Cohn in Notable Women in the American Theatre: A Biographical Dictionary, and Elin Diamond in TDR The Drama Review.*

The American scholar Ruby Cohn, who died in Oakland, CA on 18 October 2011 at the age of eighty-nine, will be best remembered for her early

and lifelong scholarship and critical devotion to the work of Samuel Beckett. In addition to her many books on Beckett, Cohn wrote other books about contemporary playwrights, including descendants of Beckett like Edward Albee, Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill. She was close to a number of theatre companies including New York’s Mabou Mines and the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Cohn was appointed Professor of Comparative Literature, Theatre, English and French at the University of California, Davis in 1972. For twenty years she taught courses on modern and experimental theatre, Shakespeare’s legacies in modern drama, dramatic genres and on Samuel Beckett and his contemporaries. Before then, her first academic appointment was as Professor of English and Comparative Literature at San Francisco State University in 1961. In 1968 she joined a student strike to bring ethnic studies into the SFSU curriculum, and in protest to the reactionary policies of the administration she resigned from her position in 1968. The following year she joined the faculty of theatre at the California Institute of the Arts, where she taught the American actor Bill Irwin the joys of close reading Beckett until arriving in Davis. She retired from UC Davis in 1992, yet continued to teach and write after that.

She was born Ruby Burman on 13 August 1922, in Columbus Ohio. By the time she was a teenager, the family had moved to New York City, where she remembered ‘sneaking’ into theatres with the intermission crowd. In high school, Cohn began seeing the works of the Federal Theatre, where she was particularly impressed by Orson Welles’ production of *Voodoo Macbeth*. A graduate of Hunter College, she interrupted her studies to join Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES) to fight Hitler during World War Two. Soon after the war she moved back to Europe, earning her first doctoral degree from the University of Paris. It was there on a cold evening in early 1953 she attended the world premiere of an obscure play called *En Attendant Godot*, a play Elin Diamond has noted ‘would establish the reputation of “absurdist” theatre in Paris with its heady mixture of Sartrean alienation, linguistic experimentation, music hall antics, and an emphatic refusal to pander to conventional theatre audiences’. Soon after, Ruby Cohn took a second doctorate at Washington University, St Louis. She wrote her dissertation on Samuel Beckett, which became her first book, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (1962). Her book was the first full-length study of Beckett, and set the intellectual standard for the vast industry of Beckett criticism that was to follow. As a young scholar, she and Beckett became

friends after she wrote to his American publisher Grove Press pointing out several errors in the texts of his books. They subsequently exchanged many letters and saw each other regularly until his death in 1989.

As Diamond notes, Cohn ‘believed the critic’s job was not to import structures of value or theories of meaning to the text, but to read and interpret with acuity, accuracy and imagination. Literary theory bored and angered her, but she read a great deal.’ There is a delicious irony in that a number of the leading scholars that helped establish Performance Studies within the USA were her students.

Her first book was followed by: *Casebook on Waiting For Godot* (1967), *Back to Beckett* (1974), *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism* (1975), *Just Play: Beckett’s Theatre* (1980), *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (1984), *From Desire to Godot: Pocket Theatre of Postwar Paris* (1987) and an opus in retirement, *A Beckett Canon* (2001).

Throughout her life Ruby Cohn was an indefatigable theatre-goer, often seeing several productions a week. She was always hopeful when seeing a new play, or the work of a new writer. She was a great champion of new American and British theatre writing. She travelled often to New York, and in the 1990s lived half of the year in London. Her non-Beckett writings include *Edward Albee* (1969), *Currents in Contemporary Drama* (1969), *Dialogue in American Drama* (1971), *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* (1976), *New American Dramatists 1960–1990* (1991), *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* (1991) and *Anglo-American Interplay in Recent Drama* (1995).

Ruby Cohn could be prickly and hard-hitting, always had an opinion but was never malicious. I got to know her in the early 1990s and was struck by her youthful energy, her strong backbone, a readiness to laugh and her ability to make inter-generational friendships. She loved being with theatre-makers, actors, writers and directors, including friends such as Joseph Chaikin, Bill Gaskill and Herbert Blau. I was also struck that in her non-fussy way she cared fiercely for the voices of women scholars. There was a depth of generosity, loyalty and an embracing of all her friends.



## Remembering Ruby

*Janelle Reinelt*

*Janelle Reinelt is Professor of Theatre and Performance at Warwick University.*

Over the sink in the kitchen of her Liberty Street flat in San Francisco, Ruby Cohn had a poster that was an ad for ruby port with the tag line, ‘Our Ruby Should Get Drunk More Often’. It was a droll and always amusing example of her love of irony and clever humour – in this case, punning on her name. When I heard she had died on 18 October 2011, this was the first image that came to me as I reflected on her remarkable life. Ruby was eighty-nine when she died of Parkinson’s disease after several harrowing years. The poster and the flat were long gone by then; she had been living in a care facility for the last three years as she battled the Beckett-like symptoms of her illness: gradual immobility and eventually an inability to speak.

With her death, the theatre community and the academy lost an internationally renowned theatre scholar and Samuel Beckett specialist. For many years, she made her home between San Francisco and London, and taught at San Francisco State University, California Institute of the Arts and University of California Davis until her retirement in 1992. At her death Ruby was the author or editor of over twenty monographs and anthologies, among which was the first of many influential studies on Samuel Beckett and on modern and contemporary US, British and continental drama. Her incisive engagement with Beckett’s work set the standard for scholarship, creating a lucid critical dialogue between author and critic, and enhancing and stimulating readers’ reception of both. She also wrote extensively about American and British contemporary writers.

There will be many tributes to Ruby’s brilliance and contributions to our field; here, I would like to remember the distinctive personality that marked her scholarship and her friendship with so many. Close personal friends with Samuel Beckett, Joe Chaikin, Bill Gaskill, Ruth Maleczek, Joan Holden, Herb Blau and countless others, she was also fiercely supportive – and occasionally critical – of younger scholars and artists whose lives she touched. I was one of those whom she befriended, early in my career, when she allowed me to stay rent-free in her London flat during my sabbatical in the autumn of 1985 (while she herself was teaching at Davis), enabling me to stay six weeks conducting research for my first book. Years later, in 2000, she made it possible for me to buy a flat in her building in Crane Court, Fleet Street. I will always regret that by the time I was able to live there, she was no longer able to travel to her beloved London because of her illness.

Ruby was one of a handful of female scholars of her generation who established careers and

garnered accolades at a time when women were not easily accepted in our field. But Ruby was not sympathetic to feminism when it arrived, and refused to call herself a feminist, stubbornly insisting she had never experienced discrimination. This might be surprising considering how many young feminists she mentored and assisted in developing their own careers: Elin Diamond and Sue-Ellen Case were her students, and although I was not her student, she helped me at key points in my life, as I've indicated. And there were lots of others. While she denied political content in her work, she championed civil rights, and went out on strike at San Francisco State in support of the establishment of ethnic studies. Ruby set an example of elegant scholarship combined with personal integrity and firm conviction. She could be a hard critic – Elin, Sue-Ellen and I sometimes had our feminist work dismissed by Ruby with a sweep of her hand, and she was not sympathetic to the turn to theory in the 1980s and 1990s. However, a look at her bookshelves would have revealed that she read a good deal of the work she

purported to disdain, carefully annotating and underlining key passages. At least she knew what she was rejecting.

Ruby was unsentimental, even austere in her tastes, disliking birthday celebrations and deliberately working on Christmas Day as a matter of principle. She loathed flowers, as I found out early on much to my dismay, when I arrived at her flat with flowers which she promptly threw out. This posture made it difficult to express gratitude and affection to Ruby – one had to sort of sneak up on her. The exception was her seventy-seventh birthday on 11 August 1999 – it happened to coincide with a solar eclipse, and Ruby decided to celebrate by inviting a number of close friends to join her in Rouen, France, where the eclipse was predicted to be especially clear and visible. Joe Chaikin, Bill Gaskill, Theodore and Adele Shank, Sue-Ellen Case and Susan Leigh Foster are just some of the friends who gathered together for this wonderful occasion. A group photograph taken in Rouen was one of the last possessions Ruby kept in her room at the end of her life.

In my own flat in Crane Court, I have a photo of Ruby next to a poster of Samuel Beckett from the Pompidou Centre exhibition (2007). It is a photo of Ruby sitting in the dining car of the train from London to Edinburgh. She often went to the Edinburgh Festival by train and always enjoyed a meal on the journey. I accompanied her in 2000, and the photograph, although not taken when I was with her, recalls for me her delight in the journey and the prospect of the Festival adventure. I choose to remember Ruby in this active, anticipatory mood – the gleam in her eye is the combination of intelligence and discrimination that made her an excellent travelling companion – for life.



## Shelagh Delaney: Honey and After

*Polly Thomas*

*Polly Thomas is a Sony and Radio Academy Award-winning radio drama producer, making radio drama for BBC Radios 3 and 4 as well as community stations. Current productions in development include Anthony Burgess' unperformed Napoleon Rising, dramatisations of The Lost Honour of Katherina Blum and Rosemary's Baby and a new trilogy by British dramatist Dan Rebellato.*



Image 4 Ruby Cohn on her way to the Edinburgh Festival, circa 1995. Courtesy of the author.

Writing one of the greatest, most significant plays of the twentieth century doesn't happen to many of us, and it is a difficult title to wear at times. Shelagh Delaney was 19 when *A Taste of Honey* was first produced at Theatre Royal Stratford East in 1958. It was an immediate sensation. Her real life, funny, sharp dialogue, her vivid characters, as grimy as the Salford streets where it was set, the uncompromising picture of young people straining at the leash to live, to defy tradition and the irresponsible adults who did not play by the rules – real, working class life was unleashed on British theatre in a way it had never been before. The rest is history. Shelagh's second play, *The Lion in Love*, followed soon after and was less well received, despite some very good comments.

Shelagh went on to write screenplays for television and film, as well as fiction. *Charley Bubbles* (1967) is a treat, starring and directed by Albert Finney, with the incomparable Billie Whitelaw and a delightful early performance from Liza Minnelli; *Dance with a Stranger* (1995), her dramatisation of the story of Ruth Ellis, the last woman in Britain to be hanged, is a highly acclaimed film. By and large, however, she was forever seen as the writer who broke the mould with *A Taste of Honey*, and her later work was dwarfed by that mighty first achievement.

However, the common assumption that she stopped writing after *Dance with a Stranger* is very wrong. Radio drama in Britain is a thriving industry, and Shelagh found a natural home there in her later years. BBC Radio 4 broadcasts in the region of 500 single plays and series over the year, and every weekday afternoon, nearly 1 million people listen to the Afternoon Play – more than the combined audience of all three stages at the National Theatre in a year.

Shelagh loved radio and it loved her. She listened non-stop. Whenever I spoke to her, she had just heard a good play, or a bad play, or an indifferent one, or some intriguing new piece of music. Her listening came in handy for her writing. When we worked together on *Out of the Pirates Playhouse* in 2003, she had specified garage music in some of the scene breaks. This is not my area of expertise, I have to confess, and I was rather taken aback when Shelagh proceeded to list several options. When I asked how she happened to have such specialist knowledge, she said she listened to the music channels late into the night when she couldn't sleep. During the day, it was more likely to be Radio 4. She knew her medium as well as she knew life.

When Shelagh died, in late November 2011, there was a flurry of media commentary and analysis

of her talent: her mark on British drama. Many observers suggested that she had never again found the right production ensemble or creative environment in which to fulfil her potential after the Stratford East experience. I have to disagree. Over ten years, she wrote six new plays for BBC Radio 4, all of which I produced. It is a perpetual frustration for all those who care about radio drama that it is such an overlooked dramatic form. Once a radio play has been broadcast, it rarely is heard again and is almost never available as a published script. Critical interest is low, and reviews of the work are rare. It is however, a vibrant and enriching area in which to work – Shelagh valued it highly.

I first worked with Shelagh Delaney in 2000, when I was asked to produce her radio dramatisation of her short story *Sweetly Sings the Donkey*. I was a little nervous. *A Taste of Honey* was a landmark play, a rule-breaker – it certainly suggested a woman who knew her mind and had no trouble in expressing it. Shelagh and I corresponded by email and then finally telephone. I had sent some notes and we agreed to talk them through. She rang, and a polite, fairly reserved voice greeted me. I talked through the email notes and Shelagh said very little apart from 'Yes ... uhu ... yes ... hmm'. When I had finished, she smartly said 'That was very good, thank you, I shall get on with it.' The call was over. I was mildly stunned. One of my dramatic icons, a giant of British theatre, had just accepted my notes, seemed positively pleased even.

*Sweetly Sings the Donkey* was Shelagh's first radio drama in a long time. The cast was primarily thirteen-year-old girls, to whom Shelagh's name meant very little. The original story had been written as part of a memoir collection in 1963, and served as the basis for the Lindsay Anderson's short film *The White Bus* (aka *Red, White and Zero*) (1967). In the radio play, Shelagh concentrated on the young girls in the story, the sharp contrast of their convalescence home in Blackpool and the Salford urban skyline they had left behind.

The studio experience was joyous. Shelagh hadn't been in production for a while, and loved it. The young cast were full of life and spirit, perfectly suited to Shelagh's world and dialogue. One of them had a birthday during the production, and Shelagh presented a cake with candles. The final scene, where the lead girl meets a homeless soldier in the dunes, was profoundly moving and we got it in one take, a rare event.

We liked working together, and I knew Shelagh wanted to write more radio. Inevitably, I asked her if she would write a modern follow up to *A Taste of*

*Honey* – a question she must have been asked over and over again, by every producer she ever met. Shelagh thought courteously for a moment and then replied that she really couldn't, because she'd have no idea what those people would say these days. Rather than try to repeat her initial glory, Shelagh was a true craftswoman and artist, someone who drew her inspiration from what she saw around her now.

Inspired by the *Sweetly* studio experience, Shelagh wrote another piece, *Tell Me Film*, which was produced in 2003. Shelagh took the young characters of *Sweetly* and imagined a return visit to Blackpool to celebrate their sixtieth birthdays. Again, her sharp, glittering dialogue and eye for real, textured characterisations made the play a success. Shelagh wrote a third play for the same characters, produced in 2004. *In Baloney Said Salome*, one of the characters is dying, and the other three friends come to look after her. In the final scene, Nina dies. The other three toast her with champagne, fling open the windows to let the air in and her spirit out, while an exotic belly-dancing song plays. It is this exuberance for life and refusal to behave in a conventional manner that typifies so much of Shelagh's work.

She is strikingly English, it seems to me, as are her characters, but they are not the stereotyped English of the well to do or aristocratic classes, so often the mainstay of British drama, even now. Her characters refuse to comply, are often eccentric and very often working class. Like the unique filmmaker Terence Davies, Shelagh put the working class mores of her early life centre-stage, but never patronised or stereotyped them. Her gift for portraying people who are straining at the leash of life makes her a standout dramatist. Shelagh's radio plays are peopled by quirky characters who on paper could be a disaster of idea over reality: a lapsed-Catholic-turned-Communist Irish cook; a gold-digging ex-convent girl; the pianist genius mixed race offspring of a British film-star and Black American jazz-playing mother. All of them ring true with authentic voices and stories. Her characters are utterly individual – as was Shelagh.

In her next radio play, *Out of the Pirates Playhouse*, Shelagh wrote for a new cohort of actors – five eleven-year-olds. The play was about the rite of passage of children moving from junior school to the next 'big school'. It is incredibly touching and simple, life seen through the eyes of a gang of children, before puberty, academia and adult life intrude. The play highlights one of Shelagh's singular talents – her ability to pick absolutely right music that isn't the obvious choice.

The opening track for this is Tomorrow, an *a cappella* track from the powerful vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock, that captures the intensity of the children's experience, yet seemingly belongs to a completely other world than that of Salford eleven-year-olds. In the chase sequences, where the children run from the local bullies, we hear a lively ragtime trumpet solo. Shelagh made connections that the rest of us often miss – and we are the richer for her perception.

Then in 2005, *Country Life* hit the airwaves. Starring Barbara Marten, one of the four talented actresses for whom Shelagh wrote the *Sweetly* trilogy, *Country Life* was about a maverick sheep-rearing spinster who has retired to the countryside but still gets embroiled in her film-star brother's complicated family disasters. Set during the terrible foot and mouth epidemic that hit Britain in waves in the early 2000s, the play explores close family relations in a complex and often funny way. The soundtrack also combines Joe Cocker with Sidney Bechet.

The final radio piece Shelagh wrote was Whoopi Goldberg's *Country Life* (2010). Inspired, yet again, by the characters in the previous play, Shelagh wrote a sequel, where the Black American mother of the film-star brother's son comes to stay in the heart of the British countryside. She drew on the experiences of a Black American friend who had visited her in the small North Yorkshire seaside town where she lived, and been followed wherever she went by gawping locals. She did indeed get asked on several occasions if she was Whoopi Goldberg. The dramatic finale of the play was brilliantly carried by Shelagh's choice of track – Alison Moyet singing Henry Purcell's *Dido's Lament*. Every time one of Shelagh's plays went on air, I knew we'd get listener requests for music details. Her eclectic and precise choice of music perfectly mirrored her individual dramatic voice.

The point of all this is to mark Shelagh's passing, one of the truly great dramatic writers. It is also to mark the fact that Shelagh never stopped writing, and her later years were marked by a prolific and successful flowering of new drama. BBC Radio 4 Afternoon Plays are the hidden jewel in the crown of UK drama. They work best when they have clever plots, smart dialogue, sharp characters and above all, are guided by piercing intelligence. Shelagh delivered all of those and more.



**Backpages is edited by Caridad Svich. The Backpages editorial team is Karen Fricker, David Greig, Chris Megson, Aleks Sierz and Ken Urban.**