

#2

# NOISES OFF

15 • 04 • 2019

Widening the NSDF community

In twenty years' time

Things We Do Not Know

Telling stories

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## Editorial #2

**In *ARE YOU STILL WATCHING*, time seems to continually repeat itself. Wigs go on, wigs come off, humans crawl out of sofas and horses refuse turnips. TV is a cataclysm and full of larger-than-life images and chaos. As our writers get to grips with it (pages 4-5), we've been settling into life at the festival. Time at NSDF is elasticky and strange: sheer minutes become invaluable and feel full of strength, but hours drain away (into shows, into discussions, into walking - all the walking!).**

The festival kicked off properly on Saturday night with the opening party – read Joseph Winer's piece on page 3 unpicking Guest Director James Phillips' opening word, and Sam Ross's piece on trigger warnings on page 9 for more hard thinking about what NSDF should, can or could be. On page 12, Liam Rees looks at what it means to sit in a dark room, surrounded by an audience, and feel disconnected from what you see. On pages eight, 10 and 11, our writers grapple with *Things We Do Not Know*; it's exhilarating to see student theatre that enacts change in the time of crisis we've all been talking about. Meanwhile, on pages 12 and 13, some light relief as our writers clown around with *Bost-Uni Plues*.

Chris Thorpe's remarks in the Sunday discussion about the importance of listening – to each other, till the end of the sentence, to the people we disagree with – have stuck with us. We are so determined not to listen to people we have been forced to listen to for generations. But how do we do this while still listening to those whose opinions differ from our own?

NSDF (and *Noises Off*) is such an exciting environment because it's about listening. It's rare to exist at a festival where you can go into each show with such an open mind. Conversation is central, and for that, we need to listen to each other.

NSDF is a place free from shame: we might disagree with each other, but the conversation is open to all, and we don't refuse to listen. I (this is Florence here) felt slightly ashamed after Chris's remark that anyone who put their head in their hands, muttered to themselves and refused to listen was as much a part of the problem. I (this is Naomi here) still felt slightly ashamed despite Chris's remark being that any white person who put their head in their hands was part of the problem. I'm so used to disengaging with arguments that I've heard many times before, is it not my task too to be part of those conversations?

But we move on: we hold our hands up and admit that we got something wrong, reacted wrong, spoke out of turn. NSDF is special because we can do that: change our minds without judgement. Changing your mind might be one of the bravest things you can do. Listening takes patience. But we've got all week.

*The conversation continues online [nsdf.org.uk/noises-off](https://nsdf.org.uk/noises-off)*

**Naomi and Florence  
 Editors**

**Text from Florence's Mum:** Hi, I hope all going well in Leicester. Good luck . Lots of love Mum



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# A factory of art

Joseph Winer analyses NSDF and the theatre industry through the lens of Fordism

At Saturday night's NSDF '19 Opening Party, Curve Chief Executive Chris Stafford said a bunch of wonderful things to welcome us to the week. He also described the festival as 'a factory of art'. I found this uncomfortable. When we think of factory work, we often think of the mass production assembly line: unfair working conditions, quantity vs quality, and repetitive labour. Using David E. Nye's breakdown of the assembly model (otherwise known as Fordism), I'd like to have a think through its conventions to hopefully highlight that NSDF is definitely not a factory.

1. *There is a division of labour – each worker has a set of well-defined relatively simple tasks to be performed on a car being moved along a moving assembly line.*

OK, so, yes, theatre is, a division of labour. There's a production team who take on different roles for each show, a group of actors, a management team, set of skilled technicians, selectors, judges, etc. But are the tasks of these workers relatively simple as Ford's model would suggest? Surely not. Take the role of the director for example. The car in our scenario is the show itself. There's no clear set of instructions for the physical labour involved in the task of making a show. Unlike cars, no two shows are ever the same. Nor is the task of making our "product" a simple one.

2. *The parts that the laborer applies in the assembly process are interchangeable. There is no ad hoc filing, grinding, etc., to make them fit in place.*

Ad hoc filing, grinding – shaping to make fit the part – seem integral to the nature of many performances we'll see this week. A production moulds its team, its set, its technology. It cuts together music tracks. It focuses its spotlights differently depending on the height of the actor...I think we can all agree that there is plenty of filing and grinding in this industry to fit everything into place.

3. *Manufacturing employs specialized machines that have a single function.*

Single function...

S I N G L E fun k shun. ?????

How many times have you been making a show and found yourself doing a job that feels completely out of your remit? I've seen technicians tearing ticket stubs. Front of House managers checking in on cast welfare. Actors sewing together their own costumes. In producing a show, even worker and machine become interchangeable in their functions. Our 'factory of art' sees creatives, technicians and all others involved both facilitate the labour and create the work itself. Unlike the factory, it is not the speed of the machine that defines our work pace. Our labour is cued by the demands of our fellow theatre-makers.

4. *Machines are not grouped by type (you don't put all the milling machines in one spot) but are placed where they are needed.*

Hmmmm.

The actors are blocked. The management team are on different doors. One technician's up a ladder. Another's behind a sound desk. But the point is, not one of us is stuck or stable like a machine?

5. *Parts and assemblies are moved automatically from one stage of production to the next – they're not shifted by workers whose job is assembly. There is no wearisome heavy lifting or towing.*

Just speak to any stage crew for this one. Try and run your show without a technician moving any heavy equipment around the building. We don't just build the show. We often find ourselves running the entire operation. Particularly in the DIY budget-restricted world of student theatre.

6. *There is enhancement of production by electrification and good lighting.*

OK, perhaps I'll give this one to Ford.

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The factory model sees efficient mass production. The focus is on product. And the focus on product is to turn a profit. This is not what theatre should be about. We should be interested in process. In the failure of something going wrong on the night. In the vast range of responses that different audiences can offer for a moment in a show.

This is not to say we don't have to work efficiently. Restrictions on money, rehearsal space, time-frames, etc., do force us to work under pressure. But I think it's really boring when work is performed in the exact same way night after night. In an article for WhatsOnStage, Matt Trueman described the long running *Les Misérables* as 'perfect, too perfect', commenting on the nature of play as a medium of 'discovery and invention'. We simply cannot play in a factory that pressures us into making product on mass. I also don't believe that labour should always be disguised behind seamless scene transitions and "magical" thirty-second costume changes. Why should our labour be repetitive, pressured and thankless?

Guest Director James Phillips also referred to the extra hour of labour that the festival worker might do that goes unnoticed. But should we really be glamorising this? Is NSDF trying to set us up for an industry which, like the factory, forces its labourers into working in unjust conditions? Art is about creative expression. A masterpiece can happen by accident. An arts council funded national production can be an absolute failure. And maybe that's OK? Maybe that's the point?

If NSDF is a factory of art, then I'm not sure we're doing it properly? I also demand a pay rise.

❧

## Jumping channels

Grace Patrick *channel surfs through ARE YOU STILL WATCHING*

**It's a bit ironic that the first show I saw at a theatre festival was so firmly rooted in television, but this in itself reflects a balancing act between these two different modes of culture. They have no choice but to interact, and the questions of how to balance them have to be unpicked.**

There were definitely some moments in *ARE YOU STILL WATCHING* which I felt could have been afforded more attention. An hour isn't a long time, and the nature of the piece means that many different perspectives are almost momentarily explored. In turn, this led me to a wish that they could have just given them a little more time, breaking them open and seeing what's inside.

However, perhaps that's at odds with the show itself. I may be wrong here, but the structure certainly seems to reflect a person skipping between channels, barely giving each one the time that they need to grow. That's kind of where the strangeness lies in creating a piece of theatre about watching television. In theatre, there's generally an acceptance that it's the

company calling the shots of what we watch and when. The viewing experience of an audience member lies basically in their hands, and the dynamic between performer and audience tends to be reliant on the viewer accepting that fact. By obvious contrast, television is the pinnacle of the autonomous viewing experience. With literally hundreds of channels and sources to flit between, the viewer entirely curates their own entertainment, but that doesn't mean that they do it well, whatever "well" means.

There's plenty of commentary in *ARE YOU STILL WATCHING* which focuses far less so on what people watch, but on why and how they watch it. Across these snippets of life, the emerging theme is definitely one of television offering a meeting point, or an easy form of interaction. The interesting thing to me here is the exclusion of other reasons: it's easy for us to read hundreds of words on the cinematic merits of *Fleabag*, but there's definitely a disconnect between this and how many people actually watch television, often giving up on shows seconds in.

In the case of this show, however, I wasn't fully

convinced by how the experience of jumping between channels translates to the stage. By removing the autonomy of the audience in what to skip over and when, it started to feel a little closer to chaos than it needed to.

At the same time, there were some moments which worked brilliantly in isolation. The image of a group of people rubbing onions on their eyes to make themselves cry whilst talking about "the sad bit" tapped into something extremely pertinent about the emotions we express when we watch things, why we do that, and how we do it. This is the kind of thing that could have been dug into so much more, as it's such an interesting starting point.

I think I know what The Arden School are trying to capture. However, it seems to be something so abstract and ephemeral that they haven't got it yet.



## Square-eyed

Joseph Winer on the televisual stories of ARE YOU STILL WATCHING

**I don't really watch much television. Part of this is probably because I don't own a television. But with Netflix, iPlayer, etc., I can access most content online anyhow. I think part of this might be because I live in London where the streets are loud, the people are loud, the tube stations are loud... and by the time I get back in, I've been so overwhelmed with the city's noises that I just want some peace and quiet.**

But I wonder if our engagement with television in general is changing at the moment? In recent times, we've seen *Black Mirror* giving viewers control over the fate of its protagonist, *Fleabag* breaking the fourth wall and making references to it, soap operas making live episode specials. Even the way we consume television has changed: the ability to binge-watch a whole series on the day of its release, for example.

*ARE YOU STILL WATCHING* (notice the caps and lack of question mark), devised by The Arden School of Theatre, deconstructs the

characters and imagery from a range of television programmes, playing with the bridges between character, persona, celebrity and idol. On the stage in front of us, the actors play dress-up, revealing characters from *Blackadder*, *Ru Paul's Drag Race* and *Game of Thrones*, amongst others. They very visibly and on stage change into costume. They vocalise famous lines. They sing the theme tune to *Family Guy*. And then a wig comes off. The foil shimmer curtain is birthed from the *Gogglebox*-style sofa. The "sad bit" happens and the actors stimulate tears by rubbing onions against their eyes. The television medium collapses in front of us. The truth rises to the surface and we witness the falsities behind the television magic.

But not all the characters are in on the act. A horse head is attached to the tea trolley from Father Ted and one of the character's becomes distressed when the inanimate horse fails to respond. She falls to the floor and wails, in what I found to be perhaps the most striking moment of the show. The audience has suspended its

disbelief. It is not until we are told the horse is dead that the horse is actually dead. And then we laugh.

In tonight's performance, actors frequently failed to stand in the spotlight and voices were lost under music that was too loud. Within a show that plays with technology so heavily in its concept - a microphone replaced by a hairbrush fails to make much noise over two men ranting about cars - it feels like a trick was missed in the way they play with light and sound. I wonder if these moments of error were intentional? They felt like genuine mistakes, which is a shame as the technologies of live performance could have been experiment with a little more.

*ARE YOU STILL WATCHING*'s title doesn't ask us, it tells us. We don't have a choice. There's no standby on live performance. It ends when it-

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## Don't switch off

Nathan Dunn takes a closer look at the pixels of ARE YOU STILL WATCHING

**Gogglebox must have been a difficult pitch: "let's show people watching television to people watching television" – yet ARE YOU STILL WATCHING actually has a very alluring concept. Although it isn't simply the Channel 4 favourite ported to the stage, there's something seductive about seeking to interrogate our relationship with our own viewership. The presently daunting relevance of media in all its forms makes it seem like a dirty word; in a world that has evolved from *Big Brother* to *Black Mirror*, our engagement with the things we watch and why we watch them has never been more pertinent. But this piece is left full of potential and little resolve.**

The show has its redeeming qualities. Moments of vulnerability and honesty are handled with a great sense of sophistication and there's a mature use of language. However, these moments are fleeting and I feel the piece hides behind gags and gimmicks in order to make the statements it wants to make. You can toss around arguments

about comedy being subjective all day long and the truth in that sentiment will never change, but nor will the naivety of when it's clumsily constructed. It seemed to expect laughs for unimaginative reincarnations of jokes, quips and catchphrases – a practice only accentuated by some jarring audience engagement.

That's not to say the piece should take itself more seriously. I admire its efforts. Its form (again, more so in theory than in practice) is strong. It allows the light and dark to play off each other with relative ease and with a familiar flavour to its demonstration. However, leaning comedy against harsh reality is no new trick. It's a dichotomy that when navigated carefully can produce devastatingly brilliant works of art, although *ARE YOU STILL WATCHING* doesn't seem to have come to terms with its light and dark sides fully. There's an uneasy sense of uncertainty among cast members at times and I found myself questioning how confident they were with their own work.

I have warm feelings for *ARE YOU STILL WATCHING*. I'm grateful for the impressive confessional elements that were oddly touching given the context and there were theatrical devices used that I appreciate the ingenuity of. The metaphorical significance of hands reaching out the back of sofas providing assistance and the incessant sprawling of tape might not be the most intellectually provocative images, but they're theatrically appealing all the same. The justification for my detailed investment in its shortfalls lies in my faith in its potential. It's certainly a piece that feels like it comes from a good place, and I think with the right amount of guidance and reflection can go on to be quite a powerful piece of theatre. With a revised consideration of comedic function and in taking confident strides towards the heart of the work, I see a potentially bright future. Hopefully this festival will prove a healthy hunting ground for its faults.

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# In twenty years time

**Grace Patrick** *reflects on the opening ceremony*



**Last night, Guest Director James Phillips said something that stuck in my mind. In introducing NSDF and its contributors, he announced to us all that “these are the people you’ll be working with in twenty years’ time”. In a room full of creators and actors and writers, there’s something very comforting about knowing that there’s a community waiting. The arts are so lonely. A large proportion of people work primarily on a freelance basis, and that can be both isolating and pressurized. The toll on the mental health of creators is profound, but also often avoidable.**

With this in mind, there are few things more important that cultivating some sense of togetherness. At the same time, in the formation of this community it can be hard to prevent it from becoming insular. It’s wonderful that this circle exists, but is it a community people would actually want to be a part of? It’s dominated by white, first language English university students, and we have to think about the consequences of that. By standing up at the National Student Drama Festival and identifying this room as a

finite community, the word “student” stands out. Every show here comes from a university and the vast majority of participants are current students or recent university graduates. This is the main theatre festival for under 25s, but where’s the space for all the under 25s who aren’t pursuing higher education? Where’s the way in?

I talked to Alan Lane about this problem: he’s the artistic director for Slung Low, a theatre company whose work is built around community outreach and widening engagement. He pointed out to me that the problem perhaps isn’t with Guest Director James Phillip’s words, because they’re true. Many of us will work together in twenty years, but we can avoid working with only the people here. In both my opinion and Alan’s, the issue is less that this is a tangible, if temporary, community, and more that we need to constantly be looking for ways to open it up.

It’s often easy to blame what’s right in front of us, but the problem begins far before NSDF. To change the makeup of the theatre scene in twenty years’ time, it has to start much smaller and more directly than this. Yes, the community

here at NSDF is limited, and that’s clearly something to work on, but it’s unproductive to blame it entirely for its own composition. In other words, NSDF is as much a symptom as a cause.

Talking to Alan was galvanising, and definitely expanded my own thinking around this subject. I believe that we need to make and cultivate this community because if theatre is going to survive and thrive, community is paramount. However, the process of opening up that community is equally important, because we need that mix of voices and we need to invite in everyone. If we aren’t at least trying to do that, then really what’s the point? Who is this really for?

Naturally that’s going to be hard, and perhaps we’re not even going to fully succeed. But surely we have to try, not just because it could be beneficial but because it is absolutely, unavoidably necessary.



# Power surge

Marina Johnson investigates power dynamics at NSDF (in three parts)

## Can you make work free from power dynamics? Do we want to?

Much theatre and performance in the UK is shaped by key figures of power. The old school hierarchy of creative importance in the rehearsal room: writer, director, designers, cast – in that order – dominates the work created across NSDF 19. A tiny microcosm of the state of UK theatre as a whole.

At its toxic extreme writers are untouchable deities whose words cannot be questioned, a director's job is to bring the writers aims to live, designers make that world real and actors simply inhabit it. There are plenty of people who believe this is the best way to work. Let's talk about that.

We in theatre want to make work in an open and welcoming way. However, there is a misconception that making a show is many people slaving together to recreate one person's vision. Sometimes this myth is so strong people believe that a good show cannot have democratic values. This is an incorrect paradox. In fact many shows benefit enormously by being a collaboration between all involved.

Key to this is the role of the director. Who does the director have a responsibility to beyond their own vision: the writer? the committee that selected them? the fee paying audience? When you hand the reins to one individual, who has the ability to give you a job - even in a small student show – that is a power. The way such a power is used, is often the source for gossip. At what point does working with artists repeatedly, become nepotism?

That power and the effect it has on the people around you does not disappear after casting. The aim of a show is to make the director happy, and that might mean not questioning their choices and bending to their whims.

## Leaving the Nest: power dynamics in bringing a show to the festival

You could have got this far thinking: we have such a good working relationship our rehearsal room is free from all these struggles. Congratulations! I really hope that is true for everyone on your team. Your show has moved into the wider dramatic community, and with that comes an ideology, institutions and expectations. It may be the first time you realise that you can ask for something, and 20 people will need to jump to make it happen.

Things that may have worked at home now carry different contexts. For example – you are now working within a festival with people who do not know you and Tech and Management Teams. You are one of the chosen few to take part in the festival. We are all both paying to be here and here to learn. This can cause a tension when in order to allow people to learn and make mistakes – things can move slowly. To some slow progress can be alarming.

We are theatrical people – we get excited – we exaggerate – we catastrophize, but when you are in a position of power, things you may have felt were personality quirks can have a real effect on the people around you. I have a story about a previous NSDF, with one particular director who reduced me to an anxiety attack because of his management style resulted in him wielding his power in a hurtful way.

At the end of the day what we make is important, we all really care about it, from the people who built your venue to the team who managed your audience. But also, this is a theatre festival – and nobody is going to die. Always remember to be considerate to those that jump to make things happen, and never let confidence tread into entitlement.

## Being part of the system: taking part in the factory of art

If your show has made it to NSDF. You are part of the capital S System. Your show is part of a festival that has been running since 1956, that has produced a lot of famous alumni. You have been given a seal of approval by an institution of quality in your field. You have joined an old-boys club. NSDF shows ride on a prestigious reputation. They go on to fringe and get published by Samuel French by the next year. This is what your show has joined, this is a power and influence you now wield.

One of the reasons I love NSDF is, at its core, it is trying to usurp the power dynamics inherent in the dramatic community. Those of gatekeeping, expense of access and accessibility to a wider more diverse audience. For me over the years, artists and strangers have become friends and colleagues. NSDF is working as the phenomenal networking and educational tool that it is.

It is also a tool that you need a paid ticket to access, so there is a limit to the effectiveness of attracting a diverse crowd. It's time to use that newly found power and influence to put pressure on or make changes you want to see in the world. Perhaps, show that NSDF is important and worth supporting, whilst also continually challenging NSDF to grow change and improve year on year, by tackling their own challenges as an institution.

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## Telling stories

Lucy Thompson reflects on the authenticity of *Things We Do Not Know*



**If *Things We Do Not Know* simply aims to raise awareness for One25, a charity supporting sex workers in Bristol, then it succeeds. And they do a fantastic job. But if it also aims to grasp those women's experiences, their characters, the reality of their situations, and make the audience feel – I'm not so sure.**

Process Theatre are aware that these are not their stories to tell, and it's honourable that they're opening a dialogue about our (or: society's) attitudes to sex workers, who are often denied a voice. Even so, perhaps they aren't the right people to portray these narratives. Or perhaps they haven't approached it the right way.

How can you tell someone's story if you don't meet them? The point of this play – if I'm not mistaken – is to humanise a group of women who are forgotten about or demonised within our society (sex work itself is legal in the UK, but despite a government investigation and recommendations in 2016, soliciting is still not). Process Theatre draw out harrowing stories in their piece. We're told it's part verbatim theatre and part based on real events, but the words

feel disembodied and it's hard to get a clear sense of character. Haunting music weaves the monologues together beautifully, hitting home about how deeply certain attitudes to women, sex, and sexual violence are embedded in our culture, and the play gives a comprehensive idea of sex work in Bristol – but individual voices get lost.

Part of this is because the actors have worked from anonymised written testimonies, and character development hasn't been delved into. Part of it is because, for young university students, it seems hard to convey the painful lived experiences of women who have done sex work. The audience are given statistics – 99% of Bristol sex workers are addicted to one or more Class A drugs and 92% suffer from malnutrition – but we aren't shown how that really feels. Maybe Process Theatre feel safer sticking to figures than extrapolating, but a challenging subject requires challenging yourself.

*Things We Do Not Know* just doesn't feel connected enough to the stories it tells. The actors say, "we don't know if [ ]

reconnected with her children" or "we don't know what [ ]'s father was like." The candour is important, again acknowledging that they have never experienced the life these women have. But ought we not know? These women are much more than their profession, but that's all we hear about. Is it helpful to tell a story if you don't know so much?

It might be better to converse with these women, and retell their experiences with their involvement. There are, of course, issues with confidentiality in making parts of these women's lives public, and they might not be able to speak about it, but it can be possible: Open Clasp Theatre in Newcastle create plays in collaboration with the women and girls whose stories they explore.

*Things We Do Not Know* does a thorough job discussing the work that One25 does. But its content lacks a deeper emotional connection to share with the audience.





## Saying what's what

Sam Ross reflects on the importance of trigger warnings at NSDF



**The moment I realised I had gone too far was when I noticed one of the audience members on the front row. She was in tears, which was not an unexpected reaction for the show I had taken to the National Student Drama Festival last year, can't stop can't stop – a highly emotional exploration of living with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).**

What struck me suddenly in the middle of performing was her dissociated stare into the space. Her eyes were glazed in shock; her body was stiff and shaking. It honestly scared me. It was obvious from her gaze that I had pushed too far. Earlier in the day of the second performance, I had decided to tweak it a little. The moment in question was towards the end of the show, when I emulated a mental breakdown onstage. The scene's power lay in the uncertainty as to whether it was really occurring or not (it wasn't – the scene was carefully rehearsed). After a technical fuck up on stage during the first performance, during which my sound operator came on stage to rectify the issue, I foolhardily considered that having a member of tech walk on stage would add a further dynamic of uncertainty to the image of my breakdown.

What I had failed to consider was whether people of a nervous disposition would react badly to this. It didn't help as well that the show was staged in-the-round which allowed little room for audience members to walk out. Nor that my explanation of my intrusive thoughts also included discussion around sexual abuse. As well as that traumatised woman, a couple of other audience members were also severely affected.

One walked out towards the end. I felt like shit immediately after that performance. I knew in advance that the scandal from that performance would reverberate around the festival. The next few days saw widespread discussion about the lack of trigger warnings and the prevalence of provocative issue-based theatre. Ava Wong Davies' response critiqued the management of NSDF for failing to signpost triggering content within shows. Iona Cameron's opinion piece meanwhile bemoaned the pervasive and problematic culture within theatre of "trauma as a spectacle". As for me, the following day I had extensive discussions with the Festival Director and Technical Officer about how to reduce the emotional weight of my show without dampening its impact. First off, the onstage tech member bit was cut. The performance space was widened to give the audience more room. Most important of all, a comprehensive content warning was drawn up by management to be read out before each performance, which listed the triggering element of the show, stressed the performative aspect of my onstage breakdown, and gave audience members who felt uncomfortable an excuse to leave the space.

Looking back on last year's festival, I find it a shame that it was my show that provoked this discussion about trigger warnings. My show was far from the shock-for-the-sake-of-shock genre of theatre. The challenging staging of can't stop can't stop was as a way of evoking the internal trauma of mental illness and was not intended to be this distress-inducing. I have taken this notion to heart more deeply in further developing and performing the show, especially when I took the

show to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe last year.

This feeling of awkwardness around this issue resurfaced in me when the subject of trigger warnings was brought up at this year's Festival induction. Clearly the NSDF management team have also learnt tough lessons from the incident: they've made sure that the selected shows at this year's festival provide advance notice of the potential distressing content that may be found within them – although you still need to ask at the welcome desk if you wish to get a comprehensive content warning.

The creative teams of the more challenging shows at NSDF '19 are also keenly aware of their duty of care towards their audience. Process Theatre, for example, provided a brief content warning within the NSDF programme for their show *Things We Do Not Know*, and the stage space is decked out with blankets and cushions, providing a sense of comfort to help their audience be in the right frame of mind to take in the discussions of sex worker exploitation. It's great that these discussions are increasingly taking priority within the festival, and certainly deserve to happen across the theatre industry as a whole. Mistakes do happen however, and it's important that we admit to them when they happen and endeavour to learn from them. But to that woman that my show affected: I'm sorry that I made you feel this way. I take responsibility for my mistake and for making it better. I hope you are okay.





# Hearing voices

*The sound of Things We Do Not Know brings up things unheard, says* **Emma Rogerson**

**Audio is a key part of Process Theatre's *Things We Do Not Know*, in the interest of giving voice to the unspoken stories of Bristol sex workers. The show recognises this, and sound is manipulated throughout the play, fluctuating between recognisable and distorted. This tension drives the play but it also drives me. My familiarity of being a woman living in Bristol, and the fact I've heard about the show's previous run, conflict with my complete lack of familiarity with the issue explored and the piece presented.**

Walking in: I hear chatter between friends, actors, audiences, over a very deliberately curated playlist of some well known pop songs with feminist under (and over) tones, like 'God is a woman' and 'When the sun goes down'. These sounds, refusing to remain background noise, fight to be heard in the play. The pop songs link the verbatim sections, sung by the six strong ensemble who perform gorgeous harmonies and poignant solos, to demonstrate the implicit, ingrained sexualisation of women that forms the media, paralleling the formation of the play.

Making the topic familiar in this way was when these fluctuations of familiarity and unfamiliarity worked best. When the actors contributed their own verbatim to the piece, as the phrase "I would only become a prostitute if..." was finished one by one, this created familiarity to the extreme and made the disturbing and dark become dull, comical and flat through its repetition. Aspects of sex work explored, like monotony, dismissal, abuse and lack of empathy, were echoed in some of the more subtle sounds on stage, like the fading spray of a nearly empty graffiti can, carelessly replaced so the sound was immediately fuller, and the cringe-inducing grind of chalk on paper paralleling the uncomfortable statistics concerning Bristol sex workers that were being prescribed.

Later, an actor places her chair in front of an audience member, hands him a piece of paper and asks him to read as the interviewer, asking personal questions about her life as a sex worker with the original interview played back over the top of this. It exemplified one thing that I noticed across all the individual monologues from sex worker's perspectives: how easy it

sounded to say. There was no hesitancy, no time given to articulate words, no stutters or stumbles. This was really apparent when original recording was played over the top, and featured this hesitancy, this difficulty to articulate, which conflicted with the really solid, confident performance. It didn't sound very authentic – I wanted more realism, more emotion, more exploration. Providing some more information or context in how the verbatim pieces were sourced, across the play in general, might have helped with this, to contextualise the emotion.

While I think this is perhaps an oversight, the play achieves something quite important with this – it sparks a desire in the audience to make more familiar the material explored, to close the distance, to get closer to the issue, to understand. The sounds constantly shifting from familiarity to unfamiliarity meant that, as an audience member, I couldn't consistently connect to the play emotionally, however I left the room wanting more. I started talking, starting asking.

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# Knowns, unknowns

**Marina Johnson** *struggles to source the truths behind Things We Do Not Know*

**I desperately wanted to be on board with Process Theatre's piece of verbatim work exploring the lives of sex workers in Bristol. I was intrigued by the show's concept. It's exactly the kind of work I want to be encouraging the making of: political and socially angled experimental work, stories of women told by women and work that is tackling an injustice that needs addressing.**

The ensemble wholesomely and earnestly tell us the stories of these women, shaped specifically to make us care about a really pertinent social issue by an important and effective charity. They weave together the more harrowing points of the personal tales against beautiful harmonies and gentle physical percussion, deftly undercutting the sadness with hope.

However, just when the message of the show has worn you down with the sad repeating tales of abuse, addiction and abandonment and when the facts have piled up against your psyche. That is when the show chooses to step away from what they have built with an epilogue that claims "we do not know why society failed these women". But we do, don't we? We have just spent an hour

looking a variety of repeating reasons for the taboo around sex work in our current society, haven't we? This is the the exact reason this show exists. Isn't it?

This really puts a shadow across all that has come before. If you can hear these stories in the women's own words, if you can see the facts chalked out onto the ground in front of you, and if you can watch the ensemble run out of words and get reduced to desperate gestural movement reminiscent of sign-language and onwards into more abstract dance as they struggle to communicate with words alone. If you can make this show, how can you claim to not know why society failed these women. By you are naming the show *Things We Do Not Know*, you deconstruct the power of the message you have built so far.

The reasons the show has been made are a bit unclear. There is a perceived distance from the performance group and the women they portray. The text and audio sources drawn on in the show are from women Process Theatre have not met and who are presented to us under a pseudonym. They are women who were interviewed by an

individual unreferenced in the show. Process Theatre were then approached by One25 with the recorded interviews for them to work with. These women, the real humans the show wants us to remember, are performed in a distant manner. They are presented to us, rather than deeply characterised and it is a presentation that borders on impersonation. This makes them come across to the audience not as fully formed people. I find it hard to buy this fresh-faced student with a clipped voice as a fifty year old thickly-voiced-Londoner. It is unusual in a verbatim piece, for the people at the heart of it to feel conspicuously absent.

If the show was made simply to promote the charity, great job – but it feels like something bigger is being attempted. The show is treading the tried and tested route of trying to reach universality through a finely-focused lens on locality. Here they managed to build a show that spoke truth to power – but they undermined the message by refusing to claim responsibility for the stories they show.

↪



14.04.2019

Emma Rogerson on day two at the festival



### Three things that happened today:

**2:30pm:** the discussion hour saw a controversial comment about BAME – only opportunities in the arts, and the consequent restrictions this places on white theatre makers trying to access the same opportunities. It was a discussion that was tense, uncomfortable and so so important.

**4:30:** I saw Ugly Bucket Theatre's *Bost-Uni Plues* that sees "three clowns as they leave the comfort" of university, going off into the deep dark real world.

**5:30:** I panicked about graduating from university and going off into the deep dark real world. My panic and fear associated with leaving the practical and financial security of uni isn't a million miles away from a fear that's often associated with clowns. I heard that the reason why coulrophobia (phobia of clowns) is so prominent is because the associations of entertainment and childhood can be manipulated to mean vulnerability and lack of power.

Here, Ugly Bucket Theatre manipulate the clown form to mean something entirely different, as the three strong ensemble explore the progression of university from freshers week to graduation. The majority of the time, the form is adhered to pretty closely – language is suspended for the majority of the play, with actors communicating via garbled noises, or lip synch to verbatim interviews. They also adhere closely to the historical roots of clowning, by employing some really gorgeous and hilarious mime sequences. Most of these involve setting up scenarios which demanded certain expectations

that they would then go on to break and subvert, from really awkward freshers encounters to a really committed, energetic, lengthy dabbing sequence.

This concept of going against a status quo to engage with the very heart of what the status quo actually is felt really reminiscent of the discussion hour a few hours prior. Regardless of personal political opinions, on a panel exploring representing diversity, when a diverse opinion was presented the room reacted strongly and audibly against it. Disclaimer: this is something I fully contributed to myself, almost instinctively – I covered my mouth, I visibly cringed, because the opinion raised was so different to mine that I didn't want someone to presume that this was being said on my behalf. Having a room of predominantly young, liberal, left wing artists means that there is a substantial majority in terms of political persuasion, that it felt kind of redundant to have any real political debate. When someone reacted against this, it resulted in a diversity of opinions, fired up voices and conversations which haven't yet ended.

Similarly in *Bost-Uni Plues* – the characteristics associated with clowning, like mime and comedy and lack of verbalisation were broken in the end with a really clear intention: that communicating and talking about the isolation and depression many face after university breaks the social convention, which consequently unites people and is, therefore, all the more important. It was a beautiful decision, and one which really resonated with the audiences, which gave two standing ovations today. It felt like a show that communicated and connected with its audience (admittedly, a predominantly young, arts student

audience – I'd be really interested to see how a different audience, older or younger would react, as it felt like it addressed a really specific millennial problem that I'm not sure if people outside of this bracket could resonate with). Sometimes even a little too much – I'm not sure if one of the actors meant to look the four critics in the eyes as he nearly bludgeoned another actor to death with a blown up plastic hammer. God, it sounded painful. Some sort of threat maybe to make us write good reviews? Not necessary. The breaking of clowning convention to advocate communication and connection seemed to speak to the audience – only today I was having a conversation with a friend about how desensitized this generation seems; it's inability to connect.

Breaking out of that culture, being a different voice in a room, starting an uncomfortable conversation is something that seems to have saturated today, and it's only day two. Setting political opinion and artistic taste aside, it's only by doing this that we have a shot at achieving progress (a progress that we, as young artists and future programmers get to determine) and try and compromise some of this lack of connection that causes post uni blues. The show was entertaining, emotive and significant for me, in this very specific, isolated 2-3 years of my life. I don't think it will have much relevance for me beyond that, but right now, it felt important. Theatre, good theatre, aligns with individual subjectivities to resonate emotionally, and that's just what it did.



# Attach a covering letter

Joseph Winer is looking for some applicants to help with the Bost-Uni Plues



## Job Description

Thank you for your interest in the role of [insert graduate job here].

## About the Company

*Bost-Uni Plues* is presented by the red one, the yellow one and the green one (Grace Gallagher, Angelina Cliff and Canice Ward) as part of Ugly Bucket. They enjoy making work which lets people laugh at serious moments.

## Job Post

You will use clowning, physical comedy and verbatim voiceover lip-syncing to reminisce on your university experience. You'll be working on a set of three free standing pieces of scaffold, dressed with red curtains and fairy lights, which you'll turn on for comic effect. Your audience will recognise these fairy lights from their own campus bedrooms. You'll also work with other students, recording their responses to questions about university life, and you'll mash these up with music which you'll provide funky dance moves for. It is crucial that the successful candidate(s) for this job post makes our audience feel a mix of emotions. You will possess the ability to make sudden shifts in tone with the jerk of an arm.

## Key Responsibilities

### *Communications*

You will work with others. Sometimes, you will work physically with each other. For example, you might go in for a hug or handshake, and end up throwing each other around your bodies. Sometimes you will end up in awkward or compromising positions, which must be carefully choreographed for full comic effect.

### *Operations*

You will leave a banana in a single spotlight which will be strangely moving, for all the best reasons.

You will add in little comic twists, such as eating the banana, or turning the letter the right way around. These will be lovely surprises that will make the audience chuckle.

### *Health & Safety*

You will, in one instance, beat a co-worker with an inflatable hammer. This will be shocking and then funny and then maybe not so funny and then maybe the audience will laugh but it might be scattered or awkward.

You will end the show by firing a confetti canon and this will be a very exciting moment, bringing the show to a celebratory conclusion.

## Person Specification

### *Essential*

- Awesome team-player
- Bundles of energy
- Funny bones
- Willing to sometimes get audience members involved
- Can use your voice to make silly noises

### *Desirable*

- The ability to encourage a standing ovation

## Terms & Conditions

*Working hours:* fuck knows, gotta get the job first

*Salary:* hopefully

*Holiday pay:* please

*Notice period:* I DON'T KNOW IF I'M READY TO LEAVE YET THOUGH

*Closing date:* too soon, too soon

To apply for this post, please graduate first. Look amazing in your gown. Take some awkward family pictures. Make your family proud. Make yourself proud.

If after reading this job description you would like more information, PLEASE DON'T CONTACT US AS WE DON'T REALLY KNOW WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN AND WE'RE ALL JUST ROLLING ALONG IN THIS BIG SCARY WORLD TOGETHER AND HOPING FOR THE BEST.





## Actors vs tellyboxes?

Liam Rees asks if theatre can compete with TV and whether it's even trying to



**In and of itself *Gogglebox* makes for a fascinating viewing experience cum social experiment so a live-action recreation of it seems like the ideal way to dig into contemporary consumer culture full of endless prequels, sequels, remakes and repeats – commenting on and cannibalizing itself. At its simplest *ARE YOU STILL WATCHING* is a scattershot sketch show, ripping recognizable taglines and catchphrases from TV in a style that's amusing and never boring but often empty and unsatisfying.**

As each parody's facade breaks down and everything gets a little bit too real another one begins, anxiously avoiding anything too close to home – a decision that's clearly intentional and makes total sense as a concept but in practice it doesn't quite work. The cast and creative team have certainly given themselves a tricky task: how do you make something genuine out of something so fundamentally artificial? I'm not sure any of us have the answer yet but the cycle of artifice being stripped back to reveal a glimmer of authenticity only to deny anything deeper is a fascinating approach that I'd love to see developed further. It feels as though the cast have aimed for so many targets that it doesn't manage to hit them all but even if the show itself feels like a work-in-progress, I'm glad to have seen it at the festival for the questions and conversations it's raised. I'm quite firmly of the opinion that it's more important for NSDF to select work that's interesting and thought-

provoking rather than “good, well-made pieces of theatre”. After all, if you can't ask difficult questions to which you don't know the answers and fuck some shit up as a student company then when can you?

After the show I chatted to Chris Thorpe about what theatre can do that TV can't – with the general consensus that film and TV have long since superseded theatre as the ideal medium with which to emotionally manipulate us. Neat (if contrived) plotlines, swelling soundtracks, perfect camera angles and editing all the best shots together – it's a whole arsenal with which to make the narrative and characters as engaging as possible, ensuring maximum feels with pinpoint precision. How can theatre compete? Well, I'd say it shouldn't bother. Just like photography didn't kill painting – it challenged it, forced it to become something more expressive and ultimately it liberated it from its previous restrictions. In the same way could film and TV not free theatre up to do something different – to be something more fundamentally theatrical?

It's an opinion shared by Ali Pidsley, whose work with Barrel Organ constantly interrogates what a live theatrical experience is. That means at the start of every rehearsal process they have to ask if this story or idea or whatever it may be could be done better in any medium other than theatre and trying to find the live-est way of putting it onstage.

Sharing stories of our experiences working in mainland Europe, I remembered a Belgian director who said that we're so bombarded with stories nowadays that we're emotionally burnt out, so theatre doesn't need to tell more stories and add to the noise but should embrace that it's a space where we can all be present and sit with an idea or a feeling. Something closer to a collective meditation than an evening of storytelling using the same tools as film and TV. I still believe theatre should make you feel something, otherwise it's just an essay put onstage, but it can use different tools (like the physical presence and interaction between actor and audience in a specific time and space) to get different, and I think, deeper results.

At one point in *ARE YOU STILL WATCHING*, Kellie Colbert, playing a gratingly obnoxious Alyssa Edwards from *RuPaul's Drag Race* finally gave up on the act and just talked to us as herself. Her stories and anecdotes about wanting to be more confident and able stand up for herself were simple, intimate and honest. If we are inundated with ironic stories about stories and emotionally burnt out then maybe the most vital and radical thing theatre can do is be completely and utterly sincere, no matter how messy and awkward that may be.

It's a difficult question and I'm not sure I have the answer but if NSDF isn't the place to ask it then where is?

2



## Forums

*Forums take place on the Curve Mezzanine by the Noffice, 1.30pm-2.15pm*

**Tuesday:** To train or not to train?

**Wednesday:** Female identifying and non-binary meet up

**Thursday:** People of colour meet up

**Friday:** Makers vs. critics / LGBTQIA+ meet up

## Funnies

### Spotted in Leicester

Guest Director James Phillips, trying to convey a very important message via a radio that wasn't switched on.

Dame Harriet Walter in the Curve cafe, insisting on switching her shoes.

Chris Thorpe during a discussion, hiding his vape in his sleeve.

To whoever took two Yorkshire puddings at the Ramada Encore last night - the Noff editors got none. o Yorkshires. We are quite disappointed.

### Corrections

It has come to the attention of the Noises Off team that there was an unfortunate error in a previous issue. An article accidentally referred to Jez Butterworth as an 'idiot', but in fact meant to refer to him as 'one of the nation's most preeminent playwrights'. This was due to an accidental typing error by a writer. We extend our most formal apologies to Mr. Butterworth, and hope that in due course we will be reconciled.

*Knock knock?*

*Who's there?*

*James Phillips*

*James Phillips who?*

*James Phillips, Guest Director*

*Knock knock?*

*Who's there?*

*James Phillips*

*James Phillips who?*

*James Phillips I don't know how to use my radio*

*Knock knock?*

*Who's there?*

*Improv*

*Who's improv?*

*I don't know. I just panicked. I was trying to improv.*



## Meme of the day



#2

# NOISES OFF

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What is  
our duty to  
people who  
disagree with  
in our work?

- Chris Thorpe

'You have to be activists. You have to be angry. You have to be ragingly angry. You have to share your talents. Don't just think: it's my and my career...We need to look in our communities...Be angry. March. Talk to your MPs. Demand your theatre is not closed. Demand that your old cinema isn't closed down. Demand your community has access to culture.'

- Tracy Brabin MP

