

3 years ago I made a piece of theatre in Manchester called WHITE TRASH. I'd attended the European Urban Theatre Conference in Amsterdam the year before and, in amongst many hours of debate about what 'urban' meant, I sat up and really listened when social researcher Gerard Lemos referred to a group that, in his opinion, sits far out on the margins of European culture – young, white, poor, working class men.

Lemos talked about the shift in urban cultural landscapes and the push by governments and arts funding bodies to take account of new or changing populations – a grey area of course where some people fall into the cultural diversity net and some into that of social exclusion. Then he began to talk about "white trash", in particular the young poor white working class men who get pretty much ignored by the 'arts system', whose culture we don't see fit to be part of our 'diversity'. This is the group, to paraphrase Lemos, who are rebelling most aggressively and often violently against the cultural mix (in Britain specifically, but of course it's a Europe-wide issue) that they perceive as pushing them further out onto the margins.

For some time I'd wanted to try to make a piece of theatre with people who are from a background similar to mine – white, male, working class, not affluent. These are voices we don't hear until they riot in Ordsall or vote BNP in Burnley. It feels important to me to deal with issues that I think I can understand from a personal perspective – to take the skills that I've developed and the wider world that I've experienced and the imaginative vision I sometimes have and use them in a process of working with a group of people who are a bit like me, but perhaps more disenfranchised from creative experiences and public platforms. I wanted to know what the world looked like through the eyes of young men a generation younger than me.

WHITE TRASH is a dirty ballet of reality. 100 people gather around the perimeter of a grubby white room. In the centre is a pool table. A stuffed dog, muzzled, is tied to the table. 7 young white men sit anonymously among the audience, part of the world. They play pool and we watch. Out of the extraordinary banality of their game and their relationships we gain a sense of who they are – a quiet theatre where we are privileged

to eavesdrop on reality. True stories arc out of nothing and fade back into the game.
Lies fizz and linger.

WHITE TRASH interrogates whiteness. What is 'white' and who is 'white'? What does it mean to be young and white and working class and British? Whose definition of cultural diversity shall we use?

We tried to make a piece of theatre which took no moral position. It presents this group of individuals for who each of them are – shows all their sides, beautiful and ugly, and doesn't judge.

I devised WHITE TRASH with 7 young men, aged between 16 and 22, who all live in areas on the outskirts of Manchester's city centre. 2 of the men, from Salford, were friends before we started working together. The rest had never met each other before. I found them by running a series of workshops in a variety of settings – a group for "young men at risk" in Wythenshawe; a youth theatre in Moston; an open workshop in Hulme – 4 months before rehearsals were due to start. Finally, I ran a workshop to decide who the performers in WHITE TRASH would be, and invited anyone who had attended my earlier sessions to turn up. 8 young men came along. One of the 8 wasn't able to commit himself to our rehearsals so he decided to pull out. The remaining 7 became our cast.

This way of deciding who performs has become pretty much the norm for Quarantine. I liken it to something we did in a nature class at school – throw a hoop on the ground, get on your knees and look closely. All manner of life is there if you only take time to look and listen.

Of the 7, 1 - Wez - was at college doing a BTEC in dance and drama; Terry had completed a similar course a couple of years before; Harley and Danny had been involved in amateur theatre groups for some time; the other 3 – Will, Dean & Matty – had never done anything like this before. Will hadn't worked since leaving school at 15;

Matty and Dean had just been turned down for apprenticeships and were killing time. Dean was into Tupac and wanted to be a fireman.

We made the deal absolutely clear with them before we started. This was a job, a contract. They'd work with us full time for 7 weeks – 5 weeks rehearsal, 2 weeks of performances at Contact in Manchester. We paid them. Just above the minimum wage, and more than any of them had ever earned before.

In other ways, we made the deal absolutely clear with them before we started. The show was to be created from their own stories, their history and experience. We begin every process – whether with experienced performers or otherwise – with the same statement – you are your own editor and censor. We want to delve as deep as you'll let us, but you don't have to reveal anything you don't want to. If you feel like something of your experience might be useful in rehearsals but you don't want it in the show, that's fine. If you agree to something being in the show, but decide later (perhaps after it's been made public) that you want to withdraw it, that's fine too. We'll talk about why, but the final decision is yours. Starting with this statement – and reiterating it during the process– is a liberating thing.

WHITE TRASH would be full of dance – I collaborated with Scottish choreographer Christine Devaney and we talked about the show as a "dirty ballet of reality". We'd start with how they moved and develop a movement vocabulary from there.

Rehearsals were a nightmare. Harley thought this experimental theatre stuff was pretentious crap. Will barely showed up despite a combination of concerned, supportive conversations and threats to dock his pay or even sack him. Regular unscheduled breaks to the toilet saw each of them (Danny and Wez excepted) coming back glassy eyed and stinking of skunk. For the first 3 weeks they'd barely touch each other and developed a neat system for rotating who was the group's victim – though more often than not it was Wez, the gay-acting straight man. All very familiar stuff for anybody who's involved themselves in work like this before.

Somehow WHITE TRASH emerged as a beautiful fragile thing. It became a sell-out cult hit at Contact, with a 4 star review in the Guardian and a visit from that newspaper's ex-editor Peter Preston writing about "theatre as journalism". He compared our show very favourably with David Hare's THE PERMANENT WAY and Alecky Blythe's COME OUT ELI – both examples of the growing trend for 'verbatim theatre'. WHITE TRASH most definitely wasn't 'verbatim theatre' but Preston's final paragraph sums up some of its power:

"What you see is artfully directed and utterly authentic, a show within a show - because the seven are finding themselves as they perform, because their performance is their triumph, their nightly act of self-definition. In short, you're not told what happened; you're there as it happens. And that's the best journalism of all."

There's a couple of things I'd take issue with there – the notions that the performance was "utterly authentic" or a form of "journalism", but I feel satisfied with his ideas about the lads finding themselves as they performed. It was a significant time for all of them and the rest of us involved in making the show with them.

We had a hit on our hands. Calls came in from theatres across the country wanting to know when we were touring. We weren't. All of the performers were returning to the lives they had before we started working together. WHITE TRASH was absolutely of its time and of its place, created specifically for that context and all the better for it.

A couple of months after the show I was invited down to London by Arts Council England's national office for the first meeting of a group debating "participatory theatre". They asked me to speak first – obviously, in their eyes, I was an expert on the subject. I asked those present for a definition. Words like "untrained" and "non-professional" cropped up. I told them that Quarantine had never made a piece of participatory theatre, and probably never would. What kind of training counts? So the actor from RADA is trained but the BTEC from Salford University not? If Wez's course had been at degree level would that make him a performer rather than a participant? We paid the lads in WHITE TRASH. Does that not make them professional?

Quarantine work with both trained and untrained performers, sometimes separately, sometimes together. Sometimes we work with people because they have a high level of skill in a particular area, more often because they have something to say. Always our process starts with the people in the room – they are the source of material for performance – on stage these are individuals, each with their own story, rather than interpreters of somebody else's ideas. I like the Berlin-based company Rimini Protokoll's term for the people they work with in their wonderful genre-breaking projects. Whether the truck drivers who drive us round the city in CARGO SOFIA, or the call-centre workers in CALLCUTTA, Rimini Protokoll choose not to use the word "participants" – they call the people they work with "experts in everyday life".

For Quarantine, working with these kind of 'experts' is a deliberate conscious choice towards a certain quality of performance. If we want to explore questions about family, as we did here at Tramway in our piece BUTTERFLY, why should we gather actors together to pretend to be related? Or convincingly portray the lot of the refugee when there are real ones on my doorstep. I squirm at fake portrayals.

We don't try to turn our performers into skilful actors during the process. We work neither with character or fictional narrative. What we're trying to discover is a kind of dramaturgy of reality. I positively desire to hold on to the uncluttered directness, the fragility of performance that remains unprocessed by the kind of actor training that just isn't useful toward making the kind of performance that interests me. Virtuosity can be thrilling and humbling, and often distancing – I want to explore a kind of performance that both closes the gap between the performer and the material they're presenting and closes the gap between the performer and the audience. This has led us toward an ongoing exploration of relational strategies that I'll touch upon later.

I gave the Arts Council my definition of participatory theatre: for Quarantine, participatory theatre is created primarily for the benefit of those taking part. Whilst all our work has, I hope, had a range of benefits for those involved in it (including me and other artists we employ), it's driven by a desire to interrogate certain questions that we

feel are important right now, to create the circumstances for dialogue between people who've never met before, to conjour up moments of beauty and provocation, to maybe move people to think or feel differently about the world they live in. It's social benefit is a very positive by-product, not an aim in its own right.

We start all of our work from points of personal interest, obsession or experience and work outwards. We try to look at the world immediately in front of us right now and work with people who engage our curiosity. Alongside them, we examine ideas that provoke our curiosity. We don't set out with any curative measures and are not driven by an agenda to improve the lives of those we're working with. Maybe we should be, but we aren't.

"It just reminds us, in the most potent way possible, that behind every face we pass in the street there beats a life of infinite complexity. In other words, it makes us see others afresh, with a new intensity, humanity and respect; and you can't ask much more from theatre than that. "

Joyce Macmillan, The Scotsman, on See-Saw at Tramway, June 2000

See-Saw was Quarantine's first major production. It was commissioned by Tramway and made here 7 years ago. We devised it with 75 people who live in Glasgow over an 8 week residency. Some of the performers had worked professionally, some of them had never set foot in a theatre before. The youngest was 4 weeks old when we started, the eldest in her late 70's.

See-Saw invited us to stare at the world and to reflect on our place in it. We tried to explore with our performers ideas about what shapes us, what divides us, what unites us in the beauty, the trauma, the boredom and the joy of being human.

A man at Pollockshields East station was holding a bunch of flowers, waiting for someone special to alight from a train. Two groups of teenagers, eating chips, call out to each other across the street. There's milk spilt in the theatre doorway. This is part of *See-Saw*, but you might not even notice it.

Once inside the theatre, the audience are unwittingly separated into 2 groups, each sitting in a conventional seating bank, facing a billowing silk curtain. When the curtain drops there is no stage – just the other half of the audience looking back at you. Some people think they are facing a mirror.

The entire performance takes place from within the seating banks – performers and audience are intermingled. You don't know whether or not your neighbour is part of the show until he pulls a violin from under his seat or when she tells a story from 50 years ago. When the man whose everyday job is as a florist starts to pull flowers from a carrier bag to create a bouquet, then passes it back through the audience to arrive in the hands of the man who was waiting at the station, perhaps some connections are made.

At the end of the *See-Saw*, people don't want to stop applauding each other.

Quarantine's designer and co-founder Simon Banham has some interesting thoughts on audiences and our relationship with them:

"We hope to be taken by surprise by our audiences; we want to give them the opportunity to reshape the event by their presence and their actions. This is one of the key aims of our work, and perhaps the hardest to achieve successfully: the integration of the spectators into the space and activity of the performance. Not only a physical engagement but also an invitation to act, to partake, be an active presence, and actively contribute to a confusion and fusion between performers and audience.

We have often used shared rituals, usually meals or parties, to breach the divide between the audience and performer. These familiar social gatherings have their own codes of behaviour that allow and encourage an interaction that may range from the intimate to the public and as such can be exploited within the peculiarities of the theatrical context to extend the experience beyond the moment."

Food continues to play a central role in Quarantine's work. Our co-Artistic Director, Renny O'Shea, has made 2 meal-based performances.

In *EatEat*, created in Leicester's oldest building, Audience and performers sit together around a 10m-long concrete table. The 9 performers were all Leicester-based refugees. A song might be sung or a dance danced or a conversation made public. Sometimes there's a hush and someone tells a story. Sometimes someone kicks off their shoes to dance on the table. Sometimes there's a song in a language you don't know. Sometimes a story just for you is whispered in your ear.

Everyone has food to celebrate something – a birth, a death, a marriage. We have powerful memories of exquisite food, sacred food, hunger, the taste of something we didn't want to eat, the smell of the kitchen we grew up in. We all have to eat.

Mick Mangan and Sally Doughty wrote about *EatEat* in *Performance Research*. I'd like to quote them here for some interesting reflections on the notion of community:

"EatEat began with the absence of community: And so, because there was no community to create the performance, the performance needed to create – what? A community? Perhaps that is too glib. Communities, after all, need time to forge for themselves that commonality which defines them: it takes time for such experiences to be shared, for such languages and sub-texts to take see and grow. And besides, is 'community' itself an unequivocally good thing? The theatrical activists of the eighties believed it was. But communities can be reactionary as well as progressive, destructive as well as enabling, exclusive as well as supportive. It is 'communities', after all, that tend to exclude and victimize refugees and asylum seekers in order to protect themselves from the threats, real or imagined, that these outsiders pose. We need a better term for the theatre of *EatEat*. Not 'community theatre'; but, perhaps, a theatre of civility? "

Out of *EatEat*, we were invited to collaborate with Victoria in Gent in Belgium, reinventing the project as *Rantsoen* (Flemish for 'ration') with newcomers to the city. In

many ways the production wasn't as successful as *EatEat* – in part it suffered from problems created by staging the piece around a large circular table, which limited intimate contact to those on either side of you and creating an epic, exposing stage for the performers. Also of interest in the context of this conference was the structure of the collaboration – Quarantine worked with both Victoria – with their global reputation for experiment and invention – and Victoria Deluxe, an offshoot of the company with a clear social agenda. We found tension between the 2 companies, each often pulling in different directions as their respective priorities rose to the surface, with Quarantine stuck in the middle. Victoria wanted a piece of high quality performance that pushed the boundaries of theatre form. Victoria Deluxe wanted a process-based experience that was of value for those taking part. Quarantine wanted both.

The visual, spatial, aesthetic choices that Quarantine make are an exact corollary with the way in which we develop live performance material. These elements are inseparable and inextricable – the one the function of the other. In rehearsal, I try to develop material with performers that is at the same time a genuine reflection of their lived experience and somehow a heightened, theatrical comment upon it – through textual framing and juxtapositions, the choice of performance languages, a host of strategies.... Our designer Simon Banham's work does something very similar: offering images which are at one and the same moment familiar, mundane even – perhaps 'real' – yet somehow suggesting something beyond the everyday.

In our most recent production at Tramway, *Butterfly*, we worked with 3 generations of a family who live just down the road from here. It was staged in this space with a cash bar, a real buffet, dancing and 250 mirror balls.

Butterfly was an investigation of our public and private worlds, of what we show and what we hide. It looks at ideas around family and belonging, at the contradictions and the complications of those relationships that none of us ask for - at the accident of being born into a set of people that we're stuck with, one way or another, for life. During the process I was talking to an academic - a psychologist - about the piece and I was saying it was bizarre that all I can find that identifies what a family is, is genetics and

familiarity with each other. He just looked at me and said, 'What more do you want?'

We tried to create a context where chaos was possible during the performance. Like all our work, some text was fixed and rigorously rehearsed. Other sections simply followed rules or instructions. For example, during one section, the adults sent the children to the bar and followed a set of rules where each of them could ask another any question they chose. The other had to respond – either with an honest answer, or another question. They brought both the tensions and the joys of each day into the space with them – sometimes the atmosphere was incredibly charged; sometimes it fell flat as a pancake. That's life, I guess.

My favourite *Butterfly* moment was when a cousin of one the family found himself dancing with a complete stranger. "It's great the play isn't it?", he was reported to say. "It's not a play, it's a piece of performance" came the reply. Two kinds of audience meet...

Is Quarantine's work socially engaged? If that's just a new term for what we use to call community theatre, then probably not. But if we're talking here about art that tries to find ways to engage with the world around us, right now, to engage with society, to try to express something about how we feel about living right now, then – yes -that's what we're striving to do. And I think we get closest to it when we create a context for genuine – and often actual – dialogue between our audience and our performers.

Just a quick footnote to end. Those *White Trash* lads all went back to their respective 'real' lives. Danny's in his final year at college now, the last I heard Wez was working as a yellowcoat at Pontin's, Will and Matty had taken up apprenticeships, Terry's bricklaying again, I don't know where Dean is and Harley has seemingly got over his hatred of experimental theatre – he's currently rehearsing with Victoria for a new production for Manchester International Festival. Strange how things join up.