



THE SPACE INSIDE

¶¶ Quarantine – the word speaks of disconnection: hospitals, immigration controls, officialdom at its official worst or best. I suspect I probably asked Richard Gregory the reason for the name some years ago, when the company was just getting established. I suspect he gave an answer that was more to do with shapes and sounds than meaning. ¶ And while Quarantine's work is neither cold nor disconnected, and is a slap in the face of the awful officialdom of much theatre, queries about meaning are often the least useful place to start. ¶ So let's start with sounds and shapes. Listening to a the music in a show skip from the Buzzcocks to Purcell to Outkast, you just know that Richard has sat up late at night with his records, searching for that elusive association that the right choice of track can ignite. He's worked with some fine composers and sound designers, but you suspect that Richard is the kind of guy who might have gone into movies just so that he could pick the music to the film he was making. Except that other things seduced him into theatre: the sound of a boy whispering so quietly into a mike turned up so high that the soft voice becomes a wave crashing; the absurd intimacy of a Glaswegian Elvis impersonator bursting into song in the seat next to you. ¶ Richard's partner in Quarantine, Renny O'Shea, takes an equally involved, equally thoughtful approach to sound; yet the late night soundtrack is absent from her work. In her first piece for the company, *something a taxi driver in Liverpool said...*, an installation in the dark, Renny created a variety of sound designs as the project developed. Eventually she replaced

everything with an almost-absent soundscape, reminiscent of a distant, empty shore. In this extraordinary piece, the audience member – one at a time – was guided in the dark by a skilled, supportive, very invisible hand, discovering in that dark room, objects, textures, smells and memories, erasing the bone of the skull, so that we travelled in a space that has always been there – inside us. ¶ Perhaps you could say that Richard deals primarily with soundtracks and Renny deals with soundscapes. Both deal with the ways in which the personal within is seduced into an empathy with the personal outside, around, in others. ¶ The way in which sound is explored is always intimately related to the way in which space is configured by the company. Perhaps the single most resonant example of Quarantine's relation to space is still the company's first full scale piece, *See-Saw*. In a single spatial metaphor, *See-Saw* laid down the manifesto of Quarantine's work. We sat in an auditorium facing a red velour theatre curtain. We waited for the show. The curtain parted and there in front of us was another audience, who had entered through a different door to see the same show. I don't know if a theatre company has ever made such a single clear statement of its interests and aesthetic. ¶ And the spaces continue to surprise and invite. In two projects by Renny, *EatEat* and *Rantsoen*, we sit at a huge table with the performers – new arrivals, refugees, economic migrants – who cook for us, tell stories, dance on the table-stage. ¶ One of the fascinating things about Quarantine's body of work is that the pieces created by the company's two directors are very

distinct, and yet all the work is identifiably Quarantine's. One of the unifying qualities is the spatial confidence and originality of the work, and for this Quarantine's third key player, designer Simon Banham must undoubtedly take much of the credit. Often the visual idea is the first thing you hear about a planned new Quarantine piece. For the triumphant *White Trash*, Richard could tell you early on that there would be a pool table, a bunch of young white working class men, and not much else in the room. What the young men would say, the beauty with which (under choreographer Chris Devaney's inspired eye) they would come to move, was all for the future, but the visual world was set. Simon takes Richard and Renny's visual ideas and treats them with a sense of space, shape and surprise that has little to do with the artifice of much theatre design. For *Butterfly*, Richard's piece created with a Glasgow family and set so that the audience were guests at a social 'do' in a church hall, lodge or club, Simon faithfully created the mundane wood and vinyl tables and chairs for us to sit at; but above our heads, the expected tacky glitter ball had multiplied into seemingly hundreds of mirrored balls of every size, floating magically into the heavens. ¶ And that is what Quarantine does. Far from disconnecting, disinfecting, distancing, the company takes the everyday, the personal, the quirkiness of each and every person, then shifts the context, our way of looking, and suddenly finds beauty. Richard says the new piece is about moments of grace. The piece has the name that the company deserves.