



SOME EXTRACTS FROM

UN-DESIGN: A SCENOGRAPHER'S PERPLEXITIES, CONCERNS AND ANXIETIES

¶¶ 1: ...Once upon a time I wanted to be the designer of Parsifal at the Royal Opera House or La Bastille in Paris, with huge design budgets, floozies, flunkies and flymen at my disposal, a gala opening and assistants running around fetching me coffees and sharpening my pencils. But despite a lingering hankering for immense budgets, I know I am not interested any longer in doing 'pretend' or artifice; I need to make shows that are grounded in some kind of 'reality' however theatrical or distorted those realities might become. And in a sublimation of that younger design ego, I am much more interested in making 'real' objects and environments that can function on a more immediate and tactile level, and pursuing subtle, discrete resonances and ambiguities. After a number of years working together in different contexts my interests coincided and converged with Richard Gregory and Renny O'Shea and in 1998 we co-founded Quarantine. ¶¶ 2: ...*behind every face we pass in the street there beats a life of infinite complexity.* This phrase from Joyce Macmillan's review of *See-Saw* (Quarantine's first production) at Tramway, Glasgow crystallises the concepts that underpin the work of Quarantine and which are manifest in a series of events that have at their core – through a collusion of scenographic and dramaturgical strategies – a confusion and fusion, a blurring of boundaries between performers and audience, a process of disorientation, re-orientation, and a re-iteration of liveness, always with the invitation to act, to partake and even possibly derail the perceived trajectories of an event, making possible the discovery and presentation of personal histories

that become communal through the exploration of the intimate, the mundane, the 'normal' and 'ordinary'. ¶¶ 3: ...we often work within traditional playhouse venues, and we are keen to exploit, subvert, and extend the historical lineage and received expectations by specifically looking outside these contexts for more appropriate and effective practices but always by looking out from within, rather like a sailor trying to rebuild a ship at sea and never being able to start at the bottom. ¶¶ 4: ...In our work, you are offered situations where you can reveal as much or as little as you wish, situations where you can be as honest or as imaginative as you choose – the making of that choice is interesting and it is both heartening and intriguing that 'in the company of strangers' we all do mostly choose to reveal rather than disguise. ¶¶ 5: ...through my work with Quarantine I have continued my move away from the baroque and the overt to something more discreet, even unseen, a gentler manipulation of all the senses, working with the biographical resonances of objects, developing performance contexts and sensory experience, the performance space and the performance itself, tinkering within the reality of the familiar and at its edges, looking for even the small spaces of ambiguity and tension between what we expect to happen and what might happen – a kind of 'in the meantime' of infinite potentiality. ¶¶ 6: ...so whilst scenographic and dramaturgical strategies might deploy tools of pretence and artifice, the ultimate aim is not either, and we always make visible

the seams and stitches where theatrical construction meets the 'realities' of the event. We're not pretending, we're showing or telling, we're inviting others not to pretend, but to show, to tell and in that sense the scenography serves best by making the familiar just a little bit unfamiliar (and of course vice versa) to help one to 'pay attention', and in an 'extra-daily' context see and seek the extraordinary in the 'daily'. ¶¶ 7: ...in our exploration of the relationship between theatre and 'reality', one of the strands is the construction of 'not naturalism'. This might be defined as a form of theatrical hyper-realism, in that the multi-layering and texturing of real stories and lives can transform the very ordinary into the extraordinary. And perhaps it is here with this sense of negotiated, or rather performance-mediated, encounter between people and between people and space, where people can be most themselves and also be other than themselves, and where the function and poetics of the space has significant, though not necessarily obvious, or consciously perceived affect, that I position my work as 'un-design'. ¶¶ footnote: ...with *Grace*, as a company, we are entering new territory; or rather revisiting the theatrical structure and performance context that initially prompted our exploration of various modes of performance and considerations of a more inclusive spatial relationship that might bridge that gap between audience and performer. We're still not pretending, but it's as real as you want to make it.

SIMON BANHAM