

"Very live, very lively"

British theatre company Quarantine combines social engagement with an innovative experimental form that puts the contemporary performance scene in the spotlight. Before the company's second visit Gothenburg, Sara Östebro [SCENKONSTGUIDEN] talked with director Richard Gregory to find out more about the company and how they work.

In January last year we had the opportunity to work with Quarantine when they visited Gothenburg and I got a glimpse of their amazing way of working. For me, Quarantine have revolutionised the theatrical form by creating work in which human issues can be addressed through the language of art. It is a new form of community theatre that takes into account life's uncertainty, doubts and beautiful poetry. I am pleased to be working with the company again when they return to Gothenburg this month and I spoke to Quarantine's co-artistic director Richard Gregory ahead of their visit.

Richard, co-artistic director Renny O'Shea, and designer Simon Banham started Quarantine in 1998. Richard explains that they chose to start their own business because they wanted to work within the performing arts in a way that was socially engaged while being innovative and experimental in form. This, says Richard, was something that was missing twenty years ago.

"The work that was socially engaged wasn't very formally adventurous, and vice versa. So it was really trying to find a way to bring those two ideas together. And Quarantine became, and has remained, a space for us to do that. And also, at that time I was working for other people and I reached a point where I didn't want to work for someone else, I wanted to be responsible for my own decisions."

Quarantine's approach has been to focus on the here-and-now, to capture the fleeting moment and put it on stage. At first it was about dramatising people's personal stories, using their experiences and life stories to create

something new. Over time, this work has been replaced by an approach that enables them to capture the moment in a more direct way, without distortion. Now they design stage works in such a way that a 'now' is created, where the actors on stage are given instructions and issues to consider live.

"Instead of representing the present we are trying to create circumstances in which it might generate."

The company often works with people who have no previous experience of acting or of being on stage. In this way, the performers are removed from ideas of what theater is, or can be, and instead create an unfiltered response.

"What we try to do in making the shape of the work is to create circumstances where actually you're not asking them [the performers] to repeat themselves in rehearsals, you're asking them to make something new each time."

This month, Quarantine come to Gothenburg to develop their project Spring., the final part of a quartet works that collectively create a marathon 7-hour performance, a large-scale work that is about the human life cycle and its relationship to time.

I ask Richard about the reason for the size of the show, is this marathon format something they like to do?

"It's probably the biggest! We wanted to work with our relationship with time, and we knew that we wanted to look at fundamental subjects about birth and death. It felt like the scale and epic-ness of those questions required a form that was also epic. And it's something that happens when an audience come and spends a long time with you, spending a whole day. Something changes, and some sort of temporary community is formed and an audience changes its relationship with the work. So by the time we got through to the performance of Spring., it's almost like everyone is involved. Everyone is some kind of performer, somehow. And that's a very interesting atmosphere."

The show takes us through all the seasons, each part dealing with the different stages in a person's life. The first part, Summer., takes 40 different people of all different ages and backgrounds and places them on the stage.

"When we rehearse Summer. we don't really rehearse. We meet people and we feed them. So we provide them with dinner every time we meet, and we talk. We ask questions and we get to know them. We spend time making them familiar with some of the techniques of the performance - but we try not to rehearse it at all. So when it comes to the performance what they are doing live is responding to instructions that are projected onto a screen, and it's the first time they are seeing the instructions. So it's very live, very alive. And very complex because there are so many people in it with so many experiences of the world."

The second part, Autumn., invites the audience on to the stage where a variety of activities take place. One can discuss the history of the world, have their future told, dance, eat and cook for the next audience. It's a two-hour "interval" looking both backwards and into the future. Part three, Winter., is a film created with a woman facing death. And the last part, Spring., sees nine pregnant women take to the stage, raising questions about the future.

"The questions follow a narrative from the as yet unborn child, and the questions that these women might be having right now about what it is to be pregnant, what it is to imagine giving birth. Then the questions move forward in time. So they start to be questions that are asked about what about when this child is a toddler, what about when they're two years old, what about when they first go to school, and what about the ways they behave. And then the questions go all the way through that child's whole life. From childhood, from being a teenager, to being an adult and eventually go right through to death."

Creating the show also created unexpected results and ripples...

"What was very strong in both Summer. and in Spring. was that the group of people involved in both of those pieces, they made a really strong bond with each other. So the women who were in Spring., none of them knew each other before, they attended each other's births, they became really close to each other. And I think that all of them said that what was unique for them was being in a situation where they could talk with other women about what was going on with their pregnancy, what their ideas about the future were in quite a philosophical way. They really enjoyed that space and made a strong connection with it. We didn't plan that. It's a great thing that it happened, but it happened because of them."

The questions and text in Spring. were created with a group of women in Manchester, and a group of women they met in Gothenburg in January 2016. Because the company are still developing the work, they have come back to Gothenburg to work with a new group of women. I ask if they have noticed any differences between the groups they met in Manchester and Gothenburg, and whether the issues the women had were different or similar to each other?

"We noticed a very big difference between the women we worked with in Gothenburg and the women in Manchester, a difference in their approach to being pregnant and their approach to motherhood. So it will be really interesting to come back to Gothenburg and ask some more people some questions. There was a directness there, in the Swedish women, and a certain sense of confidence or autonomy about the idea of becoming a mother. Part of it is perhaps that maybe it feels like in Sweden if you're to have a child then you are conscious that there are ways in which society will really help support you in that. And maybe also the place of women in society is different from here in the UK. We found the Swedish women very open and willing to engage, so it will be fascinating to sort of try out this idea of the questions with this new group."

Why Gothenburg? The group's relationship with Sweden and Gothenburg started when Sarah Melin from Gothenburg Dance and Theater Festival saw the company performing Wallflower. Sarah began conversations with the company, leading to their first visit to Gothenburg last year. Later the same year they also appeared at the festival in Gothenburg with Wallflower.

"We fell in love with Gothenburg so we did whatever we could to persuade Sarah to bring us back. We really enjoyed being in Gothenburg and we found, working with the women we met last year, it was very rewarding but it was also remarkably straight forward, people were very open and very giving. So it felt like a good place, safe and interesting place to do some developing work, so that's why we are coming back."

There are as yet no concrete plans to perform Spring. or the full quartet in Sweden, but Richard and the rest of the Quarantine hope it will be possible.

"We hope so! We are talking to the Sarah and the festival if that might be possible. It's a complicated project, it takes a lot of setting up, but we'd absolutely love to. So fingers crossed!

Scenkonstguiden is working with Quarantine on behalf of Gothenburg Dance and Theater Festival. The project is initiated and run by Gothenburg Dance and Theater Festival with the support of the European Network NXTSTP and EU culture.