

## **‘Truth and Belief’: Autobiography in the Work of Improbable Theatre**

- UNLIKELY
- DOUBTFUL
- IMPLAUSIBLE
- QUESTIONABLE
- DUBIOUS
- IMPOSSIBLE
- UNBELIEVABLE
- INCREDIBLE

This is the title of my paper. When I was putting together the power point for this paper I accidentally right clicked on the word IMPROBABLE and thus came up, ‘spontaneously’ with the following list of synonyms, which seemed to me – by chance – to sum up the character of their work pretty accurately. Apart from anything else a focus on spontaneity especially through improvisation has been a feature of their work since forming in 1996.

Perhaps a little background will help provide context for my remarks, especially for those unfamiliar with the work of this company :-



This paper mostly focuses around a discussion of the uses and abuses of the 'autobiographical in Improbable's latest show, *Panic*, which was seen in the States and at the Barbican in London earlier this year.

In terms of history:

Improbable is one of this country's leading theatre companies. Since forming in 1996, the company's artistic directors, Phelim McDermott, who is a writer, performer and director – you can just about see him among the trees in his pants in this image - Lee Simpson, who is also a writer, performer and director, and Julian Crouch, who is principally a designer, although he has directed and performed on occasion. have established an international reputation by making a series of innovative, playful, accessible and highly theatrical shows. These artists had worked together before in various combinations but, as Dee Heddon and Jane Milling have observed 'a desire to use the personal more fully in their work' provided the impetus, at least partly, to form their own company.[i] Indeed, Lee Simpson acknowledges on the company website that in the run up to their official formation, 'Phelim and Julian (who'd been working together in the reps) had cooked up this idea for a small company doing more personal work.'

A number of Improbable shows since then, have relied on deeply personal reminiscences for their material.

[i] Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), p.186.



Their first show as a company, *70 Hill Lane* (1996), for instance, was based on a disturbing teenage experience of McDermott's. Left alone in the family house for a few days when he was 15 he and his best friend Karl were 'haunted' by a poltergeist.

The show combined memory, fantasy and dream imagery and as well as an emphasis on the personal/autobiographical, key features of this work which were to become synonymous with the company included:

1) Improvisation – parts of each performance were improvised and it was not clear which particular stories would be told on any given night. (the improvisatory aspect of their work reached full strength in *Animo* (1996) and *Lifegame* 1998) which were almost entirely improvised.

2) Object animation/transformation – even puppetry

3) These combine in an emphasis on the 'moment' and on overt theatricality

As you can see from this image, the staging of the house in *70 Hill Lane* involved 'steel poles with sellotape stretched between them. The sellotape became variously, an architectural feature, rays of light holding objects as if in mid-air, and a sound-effect of a threatening presence, before being scrunched up and animated as the poltergeist and – in a final image – a luminous moon.' (Heddon and Milling, p.187.

In the event *70 HILL LANE* won several major awards including an OBIE for Outstanding Achievement in Off Broadway Theatre, the 1997 Time Out Award for Best Off West End Production. It established the company's reputation.



Other early shows, such as *Coma* (1999) and *Spirit* (2000) retained this focus on personal and/or 'confessional' tropes in various ways, but in the early part of this century, the company moved into larger scale production work. Most notably, *The Hanging Man* (2003), *Theatre of Blood* (2005) and *The Wolves in the Walls* (2006) which were made in co-production with West Yorkshire Playhouse, The National Theatre and The National Theatre of Scotland, respectively.



You can see from these images, I think, that the work is often design driven or at least heavily design influenced.

This takes us neatly back to *Panic*, which was developed on a set made by Crouch almost entirely of brown paper.

*Panic*, as I have said, represents a return to the more intimate and confessional style of performance that characterised Improbable's earlier work.

The subject of *Panic* as with *70 Hill Lane* is substantially Phelim MacDermott himself.



This is Phelim MacDermott as the Great God Pan in *Panic*.

The show is a rather deliberately ramshackle affair, featuring a sequence of loosely related and meandering scenes. In it, the Great God Pan and his various histories, act as a kind of metaphor for what can only be described as MacDermott's mid-life crisis.

Sometimes MacDermott is the Great God Pan himself, relentlessly pursuing his nymphs through a brown paper forest - decorated with projections of pornographic graffiti, reminiscent of that associated with classical antiquity - at other times he is 'his middle-aged self' in more directly confessional mode. He is joined on stage by three female performers, Angela Clerkin, Matilda Leyser and Lucy Foster, who sometimes tell stories about 'themselves' and sometimes play Pan's rather reluctant nymphs.

As a show then, *Panic*, makes substantial use of the autobiographies/memories of the performers involved. We are therefore talking here about constructions of the self not only through the staging of narratives 'about' the self but also through the staging of that self – i.e. the actual physical presence of the subject/s on stage. You can see from MacDermott's attire in this image that, at this point at least, this is an image of MacDermott 'playing' Pan. He puts on, the goatie horn, beard and nose, in full view of the audience. He retains his daytime clothes.

In effect MacDermott's identity is never fully effaced by any kind of naturalist conceptions of actor/character identification.

The show begins, significantly I think, with MacDermott introducing himself directly to the audience and inviting his three fellow performers to do so. The audience are therefore provided with personal information, however scant, about the three women, about their histories as performers, and their relationship to MacDermott in particular.

In this regard, this work remains relatively unusual.

It is distinct, from the verbatim performances we have heard about in this conference, or indeed the biographical performance texts, because the author/creators of the work – in this case MacDermott, Clerkin, Foster and Leyser - are also its subjects.





It is significant that a good deal of importance has been assigned in the past, particularly by historians of feminist performance, to the agency afforded the 'autobiographical' performer who is assumed to have an exceptionally high level of control and autonomy over his/her representation and the shape of the work (Heddon, p.169). Indeed, it is precisely the absence of such agency that has prompted the expression of ethical misgivings about the whole verbatim project – especially when it involves representing the suffering of the 'other' or 'others'.

In the context of *Panic*, MacDermott is both subject and object.

The image above, is from a scene in which MacDermott enacts his experience of a severe bout of labyrinthitis on the body of fellow performer Matilda Leyser. ... He pushes her around rather violently .. In fact ...

Having established that there is heightened sense of agency, authentic authorship, and creative control, in this work, the confessional mode adopted by MacDermott and his fellow performers at key moments in this show, are of particular interest because they appear at least to be doing the work of establishing quite intimate connections between the performers and the spectators, and because, the most memorable of these sections are quite clearly gendered, and might therefore offer insights into how the 'public' staging of 'personal' experiences reflect and inflect current attitudes to gender, and indeed to the confessional mode, both within particular audiences and beyond.

There are 4 specific instances of this use of the confessional mode in the piece that I would like to discuss briefly here:



- The prostatitis
- The self-help books

Early in the show MacDermott, reveals the root of his personal connection to the Great Pan, via some embarrassing details about his own medical history. Dominic Cavendish's Telegraph review captures something of the atmosphere of this sequence:

Stripped to his underpants, boldly baring, a mid-life paunch, he gives us the low-down on Prostatitis, an inflammation of the prostate that causes pain at the moment of ejaculation.' (Telegraph 22 April, 2009).

It is via his search for a treatment for the symptoms of this condition – MacDermott explains – that he arrived at an image of himself as the Great God Pan. This realisation is framed in the show as both revelation and an affliction ...

The enormous wicker penis ... So that he is staged very comically as a victim of his own sexual appetite ...

In another sequence MacDermott reveals that his inability to keep his Brixton flat in any reasonable order – so much so that he can no longer have visitors – is related to the fact that he possesses more than 500 self-help books ... Reading the titles ...

It is important to emphasize that ALL of the monologues in Panic are presented not only as 'personal' but as 'truthful' and I think it is here that the work





In the performance paradigm that Panic 'seems' to be operating within 'personal TRUTH' brings with it, its own authority, the 'I' BECOMES the evidence – 'I saw this', 'I felt that', 'this happened to me'.

There are a number of instances in this show however, where these assumptions are challenged, in typically playful style:

The multiple sexual partners – really ...

The boy with the guitar – came out of an improvisational exercise about telling lies convincingly

In this way the show challenges the audience to 'judge' the veracity of these 'confession'. In this way it throws the audience into a heightened awareness of its own consciousness as 'audience', asking them to decide what is true and what is not true.

I think is something different from the kind of 'witnessing' that has often been associated with audience experiences of autobiographical performance. In some ways, the show's lies - which according to MacDermott often 'get closer to the truth' - are more important than its truths.