

An interview conducted by the artist and academic Michael Pinchbeck

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What does the term 'outside eye' mean to you?

Gemma: It makes me think of someone who would give you feedback on what the piece looked like and what the piece is communicating to an audience so whether the piece is saying or talking about the things that you want it to talk about. I wouldn't really say an outside eye was providing any direction necessarily. Perhaps they are more in a dramaturgical role than a directorial one. But I guess they provide a perspective from an audience's perspective.

a smith describes the role as representing 'the audience in the room'

Gemma: When we do use an outside eye it's for that purpose when we need someone to take a look at it. To be a pre-audience audience. I think we've only had one experience really ever of working with somebody in the room whilst we were doing just general rehearsal and that was quite a different experience because they weren't there as an outside eye and there was someone there being present in the room. Sometimes in a good way. The awareness of somebody being there makes our work harder. Makes you more aware of being there in the room. There's something about when someone else is watching you, you feel like you have to be a bit better for them in some way. It's not something we do very often. When we do it always feels like: there's someone here now so we better be good, we better behave ourselves.

So do you ever feel like there is an absence in the room?

Gemma: Not really. I think because mine and James' collaborative process is always very alive. We've always got something to talk about. It never feels like I wish someone else was here, adding into this. It's more like in a way being in a rehearsal room feels more like a private, more personal space, like inviting someone into your bedroom, it feels personal. I feel the same about the rehearsal room, I don't know whether it's because we're a couple. I don't know how to separate our work relationship from our relationship relationship. There is a completeness about me and James working together that an outside eye might not be able to be a part of. Sometimes when someone comes into the room James and I have to put our 'well behaved' faces on.

The Beatles invited a keyboard player, Billy Preston, into Let It Be when they were arguing and it completely changed the dynamic.

Gemma: When we did this darkroom residency in January with a writer called Nick Walker, that was the first time as Action Hero that James and I had had another collaborator in the room and because we'd had a difficult time making *Frontman* having Nick in the room reminded us that this is really fun. What we've done in that two weeks was the best work we've done for a long time, maybe ever. Having someone else in the space renewed our working relationship.

What was his role?

Gemma: He came in as a third collaborator as a writer. He wasn't writing for us. That was a thing as well. It wasn't like a theatre making residency it was a writing residency. Because it was slightly to the side of our usual practice it felt really valuable. He wasn't there as an outside eye it was a completely process driven thing. The experience of having someone else there was a reflective process. It made us think about each other as collaborators again.

Did that presence change the authorship or voice of the work

Gemma: In some ways you felt freer to say things because you were one of three voices not half. So less weight on any idea you might put forward but also so things might go through more of a mix. I

might write something, someone else might edit it and someone else might do something else to it. It was a different alchemy. More brains in the room.

Are you ever your own outside eye?

Gemma: Often because we don't feel the need for an outside eye, we are doing it for ourselves all the time. I'll be James for a bit. He'll be me. I'll be both of us and he'll sit out. We kind of demonstrate things to each other. We're continually in and out, in and out of all the rehearsal room roles. Division of labour is condensed and replicated by both of us. We definitely have different strengths when we're making a show. You know when you say things like can you look at the way you pick this up, the fine detail, often I'll do that thing. Directorial nit picky things. James is always on the meta-level for everything. I'm always on the micro-level. I think we're outside eyeing when we do that.

Rachael Walton from Third Angel talked about having different paintbrushes: a big paintbrush for the concept, a little paintbrush for the detail.

Gemma: Often if you are maker of a thing rather than a director of a text, there is a sense that you have a feeling of what the thing is like before you make it. I can't necessarily tell you what it looks like or what happens in it. For example, we're working on some new ideas at the moment. Although I don't necessarily know what will happen or the detail of it we both have a strong sense of what it will be like. I think it's quite hard to describe to someone outside of our collaboration, we both have a sense of what the feel of this thing is, sometimes we articulate this with an aesthetic or a text or whatever so in that sense it is hard to have an outside eye in the early stages because we're often in the thing we are making and it comes from us and we are it. It's hard to think about how someone externally will be able to feed into it. It is easier later on in the process because you've got something to show, because you can articulate it into something more tangible. You can say is it talking about this this and this and they'll say no it's talking about this this and this. It's quite an instinctive process and you have to trust what feels right.

Do you ever use video as an 'outside eye' or would you could consider a blog as a dramaturgical space?

Gemma: We never use video, even when we've had a video recorded of a performance I won't watch it. We've got documentation that I will never watch. It always makes me feel a bit depressed. It's not the real thing. It's something else. It doesn't really serve some kind of function as a dramaturgical tool. It just makes me feel a bit shit about it. In terms of writing blogs, we use those things quite a lot and I've never thought about it in that way but I guess it is. You know when you're really in the thing it's an obsessive process you are in it and you can't switch off and you're talking about it and everything in your life is connected to that thing. Because we're a couple as well your daily life always seems to be reflecting back on that performance so your entire life becomes some sort of weird dramaturgical reflection space. We'll often write things or have conversations that serve some kind of dramaturgical function for the piece we are making. Not as a conscious dramaturgical process just because that's what we do.

You take a long time to make a show. Does a long-term process allow a different kind of dramaturgy to happen?

Gemma: *Frontman* took a long time to make and maybe that was a mistake. It took 16 weeks to make but when we look back maybe the work was all done in the last three weeks. We'll always take longer just because that's the way we work. The new piece will be quite fast. I feel like we will have made two new shows before Christmas and that is fast for us. Also there's something about taking a long period of time and it being spread out sometimes practically it has to be like that so we can't take two weeks out or whatever.

Sometimes the work happens when you're not working.

Gemma: Always

How does the work change when you're on tour?

Gemma: Often I want to show the new thing and you have to show the old thing. The old thing is always fun to show but it's a different kind of process. You're doing the get in for one show and you have an idea for something else.

How does the work change in response to audience feedback?

Gemma: We try to show stuff as much as possible when we're developing it. I suppose it's like when you get a whole room full of outside eyes. Sometimes it's way too much feedback. You show something and you can feel whether it works like that. You do that thing and you think oh no that is completely wrong. That moment is some kind of feedback loop that you get just from performing in front of an audience and that's incredible and I don't know what that is.

More of Michael Pinchbeck's interviews about dramaturgy can be found here:

<http://outsideeyeproject.wordpress.com>