

Exeunt feature by Diana Damian

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<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/action-hero/>

Action Hero are performance daredevils: their work is risky, playful, uneven – constantly shape-shifting and preoccupied with the idea of failure. They capitalize on performance as ‘event,’ tinkering with the social and cultural context whilst at the same time exploring the very nature of the live encounter. In *Live Art Tattoo Parlour* they set up a one-on-one interaction involving a marker pen and a shot of vodka. In *Watch Me Fall*, they played with hero figures, Evel Knievel and Chuck Yeager; and *A Western* was just what it claimed to be, a western performed in a bar.

Action Hero are protagonists in their own adventures but their work always includes a measure of audience collaboration; their theatrical language is physical and risk-taking, whilst the form of their performances always takes on the shape of other recognisable live events: the comeback gig, the Mexican wrestling match, the daredevil feat.

“We’re interested in making work about things that we experience and see around us every day; how can you not talk about pop culture? It’s the way you experience everything”, they tell me. Gemma Paintin (one half of Action hero, along with James Stenhouse) explains, “I always want to make work about things I don’t understand. I’m interested in something because I am intrigued by it. “ There is something counterproductive and didactic about engaging with subjects that are too familiar; for Action Hero, being inquisitive is necessary and ensures their work remains open. “What’s the point, unless you’re questioning the world you live in?”



The downfall of an icon. Photo: Briony Campbell

Both *A Western* and their most recent production, *Frontman*, attempt to debunk some of the mythologies surrounding pop culture whilst picking apart the very nature of the ‘event.’ “Form is really important; often we’re interested in the form of another event that isn’t necessarily a performance. In *Frontman* we were interested in the structure of a music gig, and how that would be

interesting. We're always thinking about how the audience will engage with that, and often this is how the work begins."

This willingness to play with and appropriate form is something that has developed over their six and a half-years working together. Failure, or the idea of potential failure, is a key element of their practice. In *A Western*, it's evident in the piece's inability to capture the reality of the Wild West, in the humorous collision of the epic and the intimate, whilst *Watch Me Fall* looks at the inevitable downfall of those who seek to attempt the impossible. "In *Frontman* we were interested in the comeback gig, and gigs that have gone completely wrong, in the balance between risk and failure and the moments of breaking both."

"There is a trajectory; the beginning of a comeback or return, the attempt to really make it work and the gradual collapse, the deconstruction of those moments. We are not trying to tell a story as such, but we were interested in how a piece might echo the trajectory of a gig." *Frontman* doesn't have a dramatic climax in any traditional sense, but rather it rolls downhill towards collapse. The piece clearly echoes its live counterpart: there are bursts of music punctuated by intervals of talk, a sense of whipping up expectation in the gathered crowd, all underlined by a desire to explore the nature of that encounter. "We want to open it up from the inside, put everything on display. There is no glorification; I sing the way I really sing. My body can only act according to its own limitations."

In *Frontman*, Gemma is the protagonist, something that doesn't come naturally. This better allowed the duo to interrogate the iconography, to unpick the concept of the frontman, the person out there under the lights, bathed in applause; they didn't want simply to replicate an event, but to reflect on it. The piece is as much about her attempt to embody that persona. "However hard I try to do it, I can't do it very well, so the piece becomes about vulnerability, collapse of the performer and the structure. This exposure is funny at the beginning- my body onstage doing those things is what's intriguing, whilst James is a counterpart- a scornful, bored or jealous technician."

Frontman also attempts to negotiate a particular relationship with the audience in light of the rules of engagement of a gig or concert. "The way you negotiate your unconscious signals is crucial. For most people who have been at gigs, you put a certain amount of cues in place. In that sense, the audience know how to be *that* audience, and that's something we build on. A visual cue is usually the formal construct of a gig". This is inherently connected to the nature of the space in which they perform. "When we do a piece in a black box it's a bit of a hurdle to get over some conventions, and that's partly to do with our collective expectations and what sort of things we believe can happen in that space. If you come to a gig, there's a different set of expectations, a looseness of freedom in the way people behave which can sometimes backfire too." Yet James and Gemma enjoy constructing something together with an audience, collectively taking ownership of a space. "When there are no expectations, anything can happen."



Comeback gig... Photo Robert Daniels

Sound plays a key part in their work too. “We wanted to make our own sound. It means it’s different every time, but there was also something about analogue which felt more exciting- unpredictable and problematic.” This passion for analogue, for the retro and DIY is something often associated with Action Hero’s work, yet they underline that at least in the beginning, it was less of an aesthetic choice than it was the reality of the circumstances in which they were working. “When we began making work, it was a practical approach; we had little money and not so much time. But it is absolutely our wish to control the means of production, to try and do as much as we can ourselves. We’re not regularly funded, but we have support and wish to remain non-institutionalized.” Did success mean they had to relinquish some of that ownership? “For us letting go is a big decision, but the reality of the situation means we have to trust other people to handle aspects of our work.”

Frontman is the final piece in a trilogy exploring the iconography of masculinity, together with *A Western* and *Watch Me Fall*, yet that formal trajectory was more spontaneous than it would seem. It was not intentionally intended as a conclusion, yet it was a conclusion that emerged; it seems particularly apt that Gemma takes on the more traditionally masculine role in this last piece. “That sort of icon, we tried to kill it. The piece doesn’t round it all off really neatly, maybe it raises more questions, but we wanted to know how we might try to take the idea of an icon and push it to its logical conclusion or extreme. *Frontman* is quite aggressive, but there’s something about the inherent vulnerability of the protagonist which is pulling that icon apart.”

Their next piece will be about confrontation but also about sports, rules and game-playing. “We’re keen to take inspiration from American sports films, particularly sports we don’t understand.” With

intent on introducing the idea of duration into their work, Action Hero want to “go crazy on extended metaphors and never allow ourselves to reach the fight.” That tension of never quite arriving, of deconstructing things along the way, is woven throughout their work, and whilst it’s often formally daring, it’s always infectiously entertaining and humorous too.

Action Hero’s Frontman is on at [Jacksons Lane until 24th March](#). You can also read more about Action Hero on their [blog](#).