

Interview for Ideas Tap

Matt Trueman 2011



Action Hero: Live art

Performance artists James Stenhouse and Gemma Paintin have been collaborating together since 2005 as Action Hero, and they're also part of Residence, an artist-led community in Bristol. They talk to Matt Trueman about local collaboration, shared resources and their latest piece, Frontman...

How did you start out?

We studied theatre at an arts college in Yorkshire called Bretton Hall, which doesn't exist anymore. After spent a few years doing shit jobs and moving to Taiwan to escape, we came back to both do an MA, and when we finished we just decided to make something. We watched endless westerns with friends, so put something together from that and a year later we showed a finished version at the Arnolfini in Bristol.

You're part of Residence, a Bristol-based community of theatre makers. Can you tell us more about it?

We wanted to make work without being dependent on institutions. The support and opportunities Bristol-based organisations give is great, but we felt we didn't want to rely solely on them. We wanted some self-sufficiency.

Residence is a collective of live artists and theatre makers who share space and resources in an old record shop in Bristol. It started when a group of local artists got talking at an open-space meeting organised by Theatre Bristol. Within three months we were in a building, and five years later we're in our third space and there are 22 of us!

We're self-funded. Each person pays a small monthly membership, which is spent on whatever Residence wants or needs. It's always been a horizontal structure: no one's in charge and all decisions

are made collectively. We operate a “DO IT” policy, which means if you want something done, you have to do it yourself.



What are the advantages and disadvantages of working that way?

By working together and sharing space, we’ve learnt that by sharing information, talking to each other, sharing opportunities we all become stronger. It’s hugely valuable to feel supported in that way. Each of our individual success contributes to the success of Residence as a whole.

Sometimes people contact us because they think we can give them something, whereas the truth is that to be in Residence is a commitment. But it’s no-one’s first priority. We’re all primarily focused on making our own work, so decisions take time and we aren’t always 100% efficient or strategic.

Do you think that live art and performance is growing in prominence and/or importance?

Live art is ambiguous and challenging and questioning by nature, and mainstream culture doesn’t really like any of those things. What’s happening at the moment is a growth outside of mainstream culture, but it’s still very much a minority audience.

I think that liveness is becoming fetishised as a last uncommodifiable space, so maybe that is helping live work to seem more important or prominent.

Let’s talk about your new show, Frontman. Why were you drawn to noise bands as a subject?

Frontman came out of the embers of our last show Watch Me Fall, which played with the stuntman icon. We thought the rock icon might be a continuation of that idea, and wanted to push that masculinity and the relationship to an audience to some kind of conclusion.

It’s quite different to our previous work; less compact and more challenging for an audience. We explored noise and loudness, which is aggressive, but we like to take care of our audiences. Loudness can be frightening, but it can also be immersive and exciting, so we worked to balance the euphoria and the confrontation.

We get obsessed with things: Evel Knievel, westerns, Iggy Pop, Japanese noise bands, whatever. They're always inherently theatrical. We're interested in spectacle and event, so we're not going to make a show about growing vegetables.

Images by Bex Singleton.