

Little Acts of Hope

Action Hero's James Stenhouse on cynicism, hope and the role of popular culture in Hoke's Bluff.

James Stenhouse

*We're all together in the same boat
I know you, you know me
Baby, you know me
We're all together in the same boat
I know you, you know me
Baby, you know me
We're all together in the same boat
I know you, you know me
Baby, you know me*

*I Just wanna dream
I Just wanna dream
I Just wanna dream
Baby, you know me*

“Get Free” by Major Lazer

A year or two ago we were performing our show [Watch Me Fall](#) in Shanghai. There is a point in the show in which I throw a bucket of ping pong balls in Gemma's face and the noise of the balls bouncing joins in a dialogue with the awkward laughter of the audience, until it's silent, the balls roll to a standstill and the performance stops. We let the silence linger, inviting suggestions for what happens next, then Gemma silently picks up the balls one by one and puts them back in the bucket. The sound of the balls hitting the bottom of the metal bucket pierces the silence of the room. There are hundreds of balls and the possibility exists for the audience that we will have to wait until Gemma has picked up every single one. We let that possibility hang in the air for a good few minutes and we invite the audience to acknowledge the way they feel about this moment; this dysfunctional relationship, this increasingly violent event unfolding before their eyes. During this time I sit with my head in my hands and refuse to co-operate. I've just announced "I'm done", a suggestion that I no longer want to hold responsibility for what happens on stage. The audience is left to consider what happens without me. When the answer is nothing, it's frustrating and disempowering. It's a comment on the machismo of entertainment riding bareback through an empty oblivion of amused faces. It's the failure of community and of society, it's all the apathy and the passivity. It's one of my favourite moments in the show.

And for four years it was performed exactly like this in towns and cities all over the world; the silence always the same, the awkwardness always the same, until this night in Shanghai. There were 300 people there and the moment came in the show and we let the silence linger, like we do, and then Gemma began picking up the ping pong balls. But this time, as soon as she picked up the first ball, a 2 year old girl walked onto the stage. She picked up a ping pong ball and put it in the bucket. As soon as the little girl had done it, almost all the rest of the crowd rushed on, picking up ping pong balls and putting them into the two buckets Gemma was holding. There was a huge flurry of activity and conversation as the audience co-operated to finish the task. And as the audience returned to their places, the little girl was left alone on stage with Gemma and a small dance ensued in which Gemma and the girl moved through the space clearing it of all the remaining balls until the job was completely done and the girl returned to her parents.

It had never happened before, but at the next show (in Sarajevo) the same thing happened, the audience collectively collaborating to fill the bucket ... and then again in Dublin, then in Texas the same thing happened, and last week in Hong Kong it happened again and it keeps on happening. Now it happens more often than it doesn't, and we haven't changed a thing. We don't perform those moments any differently to how we did before.

But of course, we do. The portal or window of possibility opened by that little girl in Shanghai is now permanently open. Once we know it's possible to get out of the awkward container I've created when I throw the ping pong balls at Gemma and absolve myself of my responsibility, it's perhaps impossible not to hint at this possibility. Gemma's knowledge of it must be detectable somehow and the audience seize on it because it changes the meaning of that moment from something dark and terrifying to something hopeful and empowering. Our invite to consider what happens next is, thanks to that girl, now a much more open invite, and more often than not the audience now find a way to re-work it in small protest at their lack of agency in both our constructed reality, but also (I'd like to think) in the outside world.

The little girl's act of generosity, her little act of hope has altered the show, has allowed it to grow, more than any "critical dialogue" ever could have. The little girl collaboration was completely devoid of cynicism and yet she managed to interrogate the work we'd made with more rigour than we or anyone else had done before.

It's easy to be cynical.

In the words of [Chris Goode](#), "British theatre culture is ... too in love with its cynicism to actually dare to *want something*". The most exciting audiences are the ones that don't give a shit about British Theatre Culture. The audiences that treat the presence of the work as an "[honorary invite to adventure](#)". The "wayward joy" of an audience – up for the disruption, up for a challenge, ready to be present, really listening, living it up, feeling their way through the night – is the thing that makes this job the best job in the world. That audience and their generosity has built all of our work. Without their interventions, without their acts of bemused amusement, without their openness and spirit we'd never have made anything happen at all. I love them, and I dream about them.

I think cynicism is overrated as a critical approach. I think generosity is a better form of rigour for the world we currently inhabit. It's easy to write a snarky tweet, it's easy to think of cynicism as an act of defiance or subversion. It's easy to think that the only way to pull ourselves out of this shithole is to snipe and groan and pick at the rough edges of what we all do or say and declare it NOT GOOD ENOUGH. But maybe it's the generosity that really moves us?

In the research for our new show [Hoke's Bluff](#) we wanted to explore hope. We wanted to look at underdog stories and understand why they persist. We wanted to look at the cultural arenas in which sentimentality overtakes cynicism. We found ourselves watching extras from straight-to-DVD American sports movies. We watched interviews with high school coaches where they talked in inspirational soundbites, and it was very easy to be cynical. What we saw and what we discussed most of all, at first, was the failure of the American Dream and the tragic longing for a place and a time that never actually existed in the first place. A misplaced nostalgia. These quarterbacks, coaches and cheerleaders were poster boys/girls for the broken dream America had bought the world with. We heard a coach say "we make a life by what we give" and we laughed at its banality, and its empty promise.

The longer we worked on the show, however, and now the more we perform it, the more I think this easy cynicism is missing the point. Not that I don't think the idea of the American Dream and the patriarchal politics that prop it up should be held to account; more like, if we are going to hold it to account then we have to change our tactics. In the same way that I feel like cynicism isn't necessarily the most effective way to grow creative ideas, perhaps cynicism isn't the best way to grow political ideas, or alternative ideas, or radical ideas. Perhaps we're really missing a trick when irony is our default or when we shrug our shoulders and sneer at the sentimental folks peddling these sincere stories because the power of those stories is very real. Terrifyingly real in fact. Perhaps by acknowledging the role sentimentality and hope are playing in our culture instead of dismissing it we can navigate our way towards a better narrative than the cynical dismissal of anything that dares to dream.

One day, in the making process of [Hoke's Bluff](#), we were in the rehearsal room and we found ourselves saying out loud together "we DO make a life by what we give!"

Theatre is an exciting form because it holds a space where intellect and feeling can collide in really knotty, interesting ways, and the thought that a two year old can deliver a more useful intervention into the development of our work than any theatre critic ever has makes me wonder how we can better deploy emotional responses in the development of ideas both in art and beyond. Emotional responses are more often than not treated as naive responses, and pop culture is rarely taken seriously because it trades in so-called emotional naivety. But for me, the truth is that these apparently banal arenas hide both a violence and a beauty that we shouldn't ignore.

Popular culture pervades our thoughts and colonises our minds in a way that allows it to manipulate our dreams. That's got to be taken seriously in my book, and by seriously, I don't just mean academically or intellectually, I mean with sincerity, and with generosity. With the body and the head. I mean emotionally and I mean all together. In the same boat.

[Hoke's Bluff](#) is touring until 10th December.

Photo: Jemima Yong.