

A Western, Action Hero's most prominent piece to date began as a piece in development in Bristol with the Arnolfini and was first seen as a platform event in Manchester. Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse both received mentorship from the Arnolfini who took on an advisory role for the artists- a fact that has unmistakably aided these two self assured and confident artists. With the gift of time and space the reciprocal benefits of artist and venue collaboration quickly became apparent: it was only a year after they had been living in Bristol that the pair were invited to become Arnolfini Associate Artists.

In **A Western** both Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse step outside of 'becoming character' to instead 'wear' their roles very lightly. A Western has a task led, highly participatory approach to performance, a performance that explores making 'your own western in a western'. There is the enjoyable gap between the film and the performance. Quoting the inspiration of Umberto Eco's to 'the extreme of banality allow(ing) us to catch a glimpse of the Sublime', the hope seems to be that by placing the right banal things in place, Action Hero create little by the little a feeling where for an audience member as James Stenhouse says *'even though you've seen the fabrication and what we are doing... there is a genuine attempt to do it as accurately as possible. We are passionate about creating that moment. The theme of a Western is a vehicle- we don't just want to make a western we also want to ummake it.'*

James, guided by an interest in Western films, passed on from his Grandad particularly emphasise Action Hero's desire to examine the concept of 'formula'. Westerns have 'formula' in abundance; the boozy barmaid, the stock stranger, the good Sheriff, the bad Sheriff and of course the bar which acts as the local piazza, where shoot outs are rife and citizens meet and ruminate.

Action Hero's A Western inhabits a landscape that asks 'what is a western?'. Demonstrating this through a series of gestures and motions we quickly realise we are watching common characteristics or 'types' belonging to the western genre. As live performers Action Hero are guided by a task based 'doing'. 'Doing' in A Western varies from a shoot out instigated by a cowboy encouraging an audience member to a 'stand off' to the artful demonstration of death in Western films as a poker faced Gemma covers herself in ketchup and transforms to the 'barmaid caught in cross fire'. Re-enactment of such character types documents takes an ironic side step or bird's eye view to characters very much part of a universal popular culture. By re-imagining them live Gemma and James simultaneously create a new archive and point of reference that is very much an enjoyable live event.

To enact, as in 'to perform or act a role' is, in the theatre, associated with speech, gesture and personification. Re-enactment in live performance is problematical by becoming a place that upholds performance not only in the past but also the present; and what does this therefore mean for 'live performance'? Re-enactment is a fantastic vehicle for bringing in instantly recognisable reference points and references to popular culture that speaks in dialogue with a watching audience. Is this a starting point to their work?

Action Hero acknowledge foremost that *'It's really important to bring people in. Yes we do use popular culture but it's more to do with allowing the audience in to what we are doing - borrowing from things that aren't theatre or live art. We are interested in creating things that are live rather than live art. Live Art Tattoo parlour is just that. It's a tattoo parlour and we draw a tattoo on someone. We are allowing the audience in to experience something different.'*



Action Hero Live Art Tattoo Parlour (Arnolfini Bristol)

When faced with the option of not being able to perform **A Western** in the main performance space in Manchester for its initial opening Action Hero performed it in the bar because it was ‘the only way to get it on’ (a perfect example of formula and process-led work to us at Live Traces). So in place of not performing at all it was presented in the bar- thus hitting upon what Action Hero characteristically unearth in their work- an attention to place, form and process. Action Hero’s work could be said to gradually emerge and take shape. Doing **A Western** in a bar was entirely practical. Gemma comments ‘We make something and then decide what we are doing or *‘what its’ about’*. *We make this thing, follow our interest and we think we’re going off in a random direction but actually it’s an interest you’ve had for the last four years. That’s why critical writing is so important in helping define what we are doing as we don’t set out and say this is what we are going to do.*’ Action Hero’s pieces, to call them pieces (rather than performances) allows us to place emphasise on the process led approach to these works, **A Western** and **Watch me Fall** play on popular culture; in a Western it’s the genre of western film, in Watch me Fall its Evil Kneivel.

There is a wonderfully fluid narrative to the production history of **A Western**. As independent self producers the pair have recently taken the production on a tour that has included performances in Nottingham, Oxford and Texas USA. Commenting on the prescience of performing **A Western** in Texas Gemma states ‘We never set out to do the show in Texas but that’s where it will end up and finishes...starting from our little living room in West Yorkshire... from starting very small it’s grown its own story around it.

With the popularity of **A Western** we asked the pair how they are able to stay on their feet and keep doing the work they want to do as live artists. Gemma and James answered that *‘a few years ago, having made one show we get offered more, and you feel like you can’t say no. But it’s about being flexible, responsive, light on your feet. We use the touring model to expose our work as much as possible. It’s a show that doesn’t fit into traditional theatre model. It’s not a sit down show, it’s not in a theatre. It’s a learning process of how to articulate what we do. Our work inhabits a space between theatre and body based work and there is no immediate reference point for that. Marketing departments don’t know how to articulate what we do.’*

While the pair rightly point to the frequent difficulties of articulation of event based live performance it is an area continually renewed and thriving in the UK with innovative performances varying from performance lectures by Richard Dedominici to epic spectacle from the Shunt Collective’s Money.

Action Hero were interviewed by Rasheeda Nalumosu and Kane Moore, Live Traces, Arnolfini Bristol