

Action Hero Interview... Action Hero



Photo Sandy Danbury

Action Hero is the collaboration between Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse. They have been making work together since 2005 and theatrebristol.net last interviewed them 18 months ago. They are currently working on a new piece that will premiere at Arnolfini in February 2009, so we thought we'd catch up with them again... and they suggested that they interview each other.

Gemma: Ok, so let's start with the basics. Why do you make theatre over another art-form?

James: Because theatre is unique in its ability to bring groups of people together. It's the 'gathering' aspect of it and the potential of those communities that are created that inspires me. I also love the way theatre resists commodification. It is temporary, it is difficult to document and it has a lack of convenience which I love. Although I get frustrated by how the media reports (or doesn't report) on theatre and contemporary performance in particular, I do quite enjoy their attempts to describe, capture and commodify it into a convenient package. You can't adequately sum it up in one sentence and for me that emphasises the uniqueness and importance of theatre.



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G: So would you describe our work as theatre? Because it usually falls into a live art kind of category but somehow this doesn't seem right either. What do you call what we make? I feel like I don't want to reject either.

J: Errrm, I don't know. To be honest I think those categories are only really helpful to funders, institutions and the media. I wouldn't reject either definition, and I think it just depends on who I'm talking to. I know some people have criticised our work by saying 'in what way is this theatre?' but I think that's just funny. I think your question gets to the root of why I like theatre again. I like the way it is difficult to define and I like the way it's fluid and all these mini-genres overlap and feed into each other.

G: But I think you and I have a very expanded idea of what theatre can be, and so that's why you love it. Because the scope of what you'd consider theatre to be is so wide that it is very liberating to work with that definition. It allows for pretty much anything, don't you think? But this is problematic for some people because the word "theatre" has very particular historical connotations around classic texts and playwrights and proscenium arches, and I know you aren't interested in those things.

J: Yes that's true, which is why the term live art is used more now. It's a convenient way to let people who are caught up in those traditional connotations know that what you're doing is not that. But this causes problems for me because amongst the community of artists making work it creates strange divisions that in reality don't exist. There is also a kind of hardline theatre camp who wouldn't consider what we do theatrical enough and a hardline live art camp who would consider what we do too theatrical.



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G: So you think we should all just love each other and get along! I agree I think, but I see why these terms exist, where they have come from. I think it helps people to say what they are, rather than what they are not. It can't be helpful for anyone to have to define their work as to what it is not, like "my work is not theatre because it is not appropriately theatrical for the traditional definitions of this art-form". Then your work is always defined in relation to a negative.

J: Yes, I would like live art and theatre to get into bed together. I would like to see the love child of Pete Postlethwaite and Franko B. Maybe not, but I'd like to acknowledge that between Pete Postlethwaite and Franko B there is a whole host of work going on that is hard to categorise.

I'm aware that I said I don't care about definitions and we've now spent this whole interview talking about definitions so I'm going to change the subject. We don't make work with a director, playwright, producer kind of set up, it's just you and me. Does it ever piss you off that it's just me everyday?

G: Well there are practical benefits to there being just two people- it's easier to arrange rehearsals, there are less people's ideas to muddy the water, money goes further between two. But sometimes ideas get stuck between us, just bouncing back and forth. I think sometimes we need a triangulation point! The dynamic of two performers is really interesting to me, especially a man and a woman. That's already fascinating to watch, I think. Watching a group of people is completely different and our work must be informed by the fact that there is no one else to fall back on in performance- it's either you or me or the audience. Actually maybe that is why we are so obsessed with the audience; they act as the triangulation point for us. But we only get to work with that in the moment of performance really, don't we? So in rehearsal if it feels like someone is missing maybe it's them!

J: Well, we started making the work we do as a response to the frustration we had with a lack of resources and then kind of stumbled on an economy in our performance that we really enjoy. The need to use imagination, environment and our audience as the missing link is now a key component of our work. Do you ever see a time when that will fade and you will want to make work on a different scale, or are you now committed to the aesthetic we have found?



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G: I don't know – part of me would love to make a really large scale extravaganza that redefines the nature of spectacle and the live event! At the moment I think we aim for that on a much smaller scale. It's about how to create something epic but that is somehow home-made, with an aesthetic of roughness. That has come out of necessity though; maybe what I really want to do is make some enormous multi performer spectacular but I can't so the beauty comes from a genuine attempt to do what I can with the resources I have. It's not ironic either- I don't want to ironically create something that is winking and nudging the audience the whole time because you can never fully invest in that, and I want to engineer total commitment from everyone in the room to make something incredible. I think that is possible.

J: I think it might be possible but my mind is cast to a recent work-in-progress performance of our new show where there was definitely not total commitment from everyone in the room. The collaboration between us and the audience was very much on their terms and yet there was something extraordinary about the event. Something you could call beautiful? The images we got from that event look like something from another world, like The Clash on the front of "London Calling", you said. So is that total commitment really the ideal you're after?

G: Yes, I think that would be my ideal performative event. Those pictures are amazing because they capture something very raw, but they lie as well because I know it wasn't that poetic. I suppose that's the thing about live performance- it only exists in that moment and that is its strength. You can document it, but that document can never recreate the complexity of that moment as it was when you experienced it.

J: Let's have a cup of tea

G: Ok. But you have to make it.

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Comments

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Seth Honnor said [3 days later:](#)

Hi Gemma and James. I really like your idea that the audience provides the triangulation for you as performers. I see so many shows where I wish the companies had more of an obsession with the audience. Have you ever made or do you have any interest in making shows for kids?

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James Stenhouse said [4 days later:](#)

We have never made a show for children. We have both thought about it before. We sometimes get frustrated with the fear that audiences have in theatre spaces. It can hold them back from really engaging with something, and children are less likely to have that fear. For me though, I think I just don't like children enough. Not that I don't like them, but I think to make really good children's work you have to be REALLY passionate about it and I'm not. I have massive respect for people who do it though and think its a brilliant genre that often goes unnoticed.

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James Stenhouse said [4 days later:](#)

But as for obsession with the audience, it was very much a starting point for us as a company. I don't like seeing performance where I feel like it was irrelevant whether I was there or not.

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Seth Honnor said [7 days later:](#)

We had a discussion in the TB office the other day about why its called children's theatre and whether it needs to be. Some of the most engaging theatre shows I've seen in recent years have been marketed to children. I wonder whether this has to do with a consciousness in the mind of the children's theatre maker that a 3 year old audience member is more immediate and often vociferous in their disengagement than an adult audience member should you lose their interest.

A discussion that has come up at more than one Open Space event I've attended is the fact that, unlike cinemas, theatres have seats that are very hard to get out of and leave without a huge disturbance. Maybe adult audiences should take more responsibility to respond when we're no longer being engaged.

I imagine the shunt audience is very different to an auditorium audience? Maybe the illusive images of your performance there will answer this?

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James Stenhouse said [8 days later:](#)

yes, the shunt audience is a completely different kind of audience, which is why we wanted to show the work-in-progress there. We showed 'A Western' there this weekend as well and had a really great time with it. In fact an audience member came up to me afterwards and said that he really liked the fact that we explain that the audience is free to move around the room and

move if they can't see something. He thought that it was probably an element to the show we don't really think of as important, but to him, it was key to his enjoyment. The idea that he wasn't confined to his seat and had 'permission' to do what he wanted. Sometimes this means audience members feel comfortable walking out (or swearing at us as one young lady did this weekend!) but we don't mind because it means those who do enjoy it are much more engaged and get a lot more out of it. Someone once described the process of watching one of our shows as 'liberating' and to me, that's the ultimate compliment.