

Article 2

We recently had some long conversations with Mischa Twitchin (SHUNT), Gemma Paintin (Action Hero), Brian Logan (Co-Artistic Director (with Jenny Paton), Camden People's Theatre), and Lauren Barri Holstein (The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein), to try to open up for ourselves our discussion about 'scratch night' models, and the concept of work-in-progress as a public product/event. We have curated our work-in-progress events, the SHOW US YER BITS! series, since 2008 and we are now doing a research project to interrogate the models that we offer and their place in the field of similar opportunities available. Everyone we spoke to comes from a place of making – Mischa and Brian also have/have had one foot in venue/organisation-running, which is a particularly useful perspective to get, but they both talk very much as artists too.

This article looks at our interview with Brian Logan, particularly in reference to CPT's long-standing experimental festival Sprint (which opens 8/3/2012) and its linked artist development programme for emerging artists, Starting Blocks (www.cpttheatre.co.uk). Both of these serve to clearly announce CPT as a venue which nurtures the experimental context. And for a venue that is always helpfully upfront about how there is zero hard cash available for artist support, one thing it can extremely usefully offer as artist support is context-building. Clear articulation of context is overtly about the present (the conversation you will be joining if you step through the doors of our venue *now*) but it does also indubitably work as a move of investment, because clear context brings focused makers and prepared audience together, which then pushes the context itself to evolve and move forward. We began our conversation with Brian, which was led by our Artistic Director Hester Chillingworth and which took place in December, by examining how he and Jenny are attempting to shape the context of Starting Blocks 2012.

HC: We saw the applications for Sprint and Starting Blocks are open and we were wondering if, with Starting Blocks - as the newly appointed directors - you're taking the model as it exists, and going to run it and just see how that's working, or if there are any fundamental changes you're going to put into that...

BL: I know that last year Starting Blocks was exclusively for solo artists... [There was a sense that] solo artists were most in need of the sort of peer-to-peer network aspect of it. And they were the type of artist that were most likely to feel isolated, and benefit from that sense of community. I'm slightly disinclined to make it exclusively for solo artists this time, partly because I think CPT as a venue gets a lot of solo work and I certainly don't want to show that just because we're small, we have to put on small performances... I was quite interested when I read the existing Starting Blocks blurb because it barely used the phrase 'artist development' or the word 'development'. It was all about peer-to-peer network - much more about it being a community. I think I probably did tweak it to change the emphasis... I certainly didn't mean to reduce the sense in which it is a chance to make links with other artists, although I did also want to say part of it is to give you a chance to *make new work*.

[...]

HC: If you had a starting blocks application that was from a live artist who said the only time they were ever going to do anything was in the final showings. And up until then they would be talking, discussing and thinking, would you go for it?

BL: I'd think cheeky bastards (*laughs*)... Well it depends, if their application and conversation justified to me that that was a legitimate use of our space and time, then, yeah, I'd try and be open to that. If I thought, it's an unconventional process but yeah I can understand how you couldn't get to the point of doing it, unless you had all that time where you could conceptualise and research it. Although whether that would be the best use of... given that we've got rehearsal space available for 5 companies or artists... I mean, in that instance you could do 6, because one wouldn't be taking up rehearsal space. I don't think I'd chuck it away.

Brian raises an issue here that frequently comes up when considering the process of making performance. Most venues whose main offer for artist support comes in the form of space will, understandably, want and expect that space to be physically and visibly used for the making of work. But if an artist needs to spend time specifically thinking and discussing (i.e. that *is* the creative process for a specific piece), does it necessarily follow said artist does not need rehearsal space to do that? This assumption would adhere to the concept that talking/thinking/discussing a piece/idea can be done anywhere – at home, on the bus, in the park. For sure it can to some extent, but if it is never afforded designated space (and time) it is rendered a side-line activity, a liminal pursuit to fit around one's 'real' work or premises. There are numerous residencies or space opportunities for makers, but the vast majority of these come with a clause of, at the end of your time in the space, showing what you've done/made while in the space - a sort of justification of the use of resources. However, in some processes the artist cannot guarantee that two weeks down the line they will actually have anything that it is genuinely useful for them to show or for an audience to see (and in the worst case scenario such showing could in fact be detrimental to the development of the work). But, more often than not, a refusal to show would mean the artist has 'failed' the terms of their agreement with the venue. Perhaps this means such residencies are a *non-relevant model* for makers working on a conceptual piece – but where is the relevant development model for such work being offered? As an artist applying for Starting Blocks (for example) looking for time and space to talk-and-think something into existence, you could state in your application that you will be *doing* (i.e. up-on-your-feet-making and visibly producing) in the space and then, when you get into the space, primarily talk and think. But perhaps this act would equate to buying into a wider value system of material output over ideas – a value system which ultimately marginalises conceptual work. And, regardless, you would have to divert some of your energies into coming up with an output to show at the end to cover the 'deception' you posed in the application.

We asked Brian about his perspective as an artist on this drive for 'outputs', and how helpful or not helpful it is to makers and audiences.

BL: In my company when we've done scratches or work-in-progress performances, we've always had this impulse to just try to finish the show. So we go, "well we know it's a scratch, but come on, we've got some space, let's give them a full show with a beginning a middle and an end". Which is an understandable impulse but sometimes I've had a quarrel with Alex who I run the company with and said "maybe we shouldn't do that...". And sometimes

there's a temptation to artificially be a bit scratchy just so that people will lower their expectations. Because if you try and show a finished show, well it's not finished, because you haven't had enough time or money, but you'll be judged against the standards of a finished show because you've presented something a bit like a finished show. Whereas if, because none of us are quite satisfied with it, I break out at this point and go "hey, we've only just started this bit...", then subconsciously everyone in the audience will go, "oh fair enough, it's one of those, we won't criticise it as much as we might otherwise". In a weird way it can force you to broadcast to an artificial extent its unpreparedness just so people are kinder on you.

[...]

HC: I've started to think - applying it to our work - that we should only show stuff when we think it's finished. When we cannot work out any more what to do about anything. We might be aware that there's stuff that's not working, but we're just like "right, we're going to have to show it now". And then of course you'll go, "Oh that was terrible, it's awful. Oh now I can see what needs to happen, or now I've got some idea", go back and try and keep working. But I think often the impetus is to show super early... Even if you show stuff in progress and it's totally framed as a scratch, it is always judged as a mini show, or a showing, it's always judged as -

JP: An example of your work.

BL: Yeah it is yeah. I mean, I've seen shows at a scratch thing and then 6 months down the line you sort of forget that it was a scratch, and the show comes round and you think "well I've seen that show and it wasn't that good to be honest".

HC: Yeah, it was a bit unfinished!

BL: Yeah and we're all so – there's so many demands on our time, that we seldom have the luxury to go "and now I'll go back and see the finished version".

Without clear context given for a work-in-progress event, not only can it become a vague and often quite lonely experience for the artists involved, but the audience have no real way of understanding how they are being asked to *be with* the work they are seeing. How they should position their watching – how they should talk to/contribute to the artists and what they are trying to do. It's actually a very strange thing, watching work that publicly announces itself as unfinished (and therefore we can assume the makers know that it's not 'good enough' yet – not solved enough yet). The context CPT articulates around Sprint and Starting Blocks is strong and has a clear and recognisable history. The theatre has its own voice and language for it, which is perhaps a key part of its survival for all these years – it is not a template lifted wholesale from elsewhere to serve a purpose. Nonetheless, Brian readily notes the complex questions around offering work-in-progress showings (Starting Blocks) to the public.

HC: Do you think that having things like Starting Blocks or any sort of scratch or work-in-progress thing on the programme is...how does that relate to audience? I mean those things are often either free or pay-what-you-can, so maybe more people come in the doors that way, but I'm just quite intrigued about if there is actually an audience who desire those

things, or if generally it's made up of friends of the artists, other artists who are scoping out what other people are doing – fair enough. You know, I sometimes worry that it can be very inward looking and I would like to think it could be about audience development actually...

BL: Yeah I think it's an insular, quite hermetic theatre crowd. You know, there's no reason why if you got a bunch of Joes off the street to come and see a night of art works that weren't complete that that couldn't be an equally entertaining experience for them, but I think given that you're already trying to attract non-theatre goers to the theatre, you've already got a whole bunch of psychological obstacles to overcome. To then say, "by the way it's not finished"... You know, my mum and dad would be like, "can I come back when it's finished?"

So why put unfinished work out there? Really to get advice from your audience? Or to have someone see your work and be sufficiently interested to help you keep making it? Or, as a venue, to be part of what's 'hot'? Of course it's natural that artists are continually looking for support for their work, and venues are continually looking for exciting new makers to become involved with. However, we're wondering if the 'scratch' format can too easily allow venues/organisations to seem to offer support which is ultimately very short-lived.

JP: The sort of level of commitment to a lot of these things - there's often no sort of follow through. That's what I'm interested in - the follow through of support.

BL: I mean it's obviously a way, you know, in its most basic level, it's a way of venues hedging their bets. So the venue can say, "we've developed 20 artists this year". And none of them may ever get a run, you know... It's riskier for them to actually just choose their three favourite ones, and commit to those three and make sure that they all three of them have a show...

LM: I don't think scratch and showing small pieces of work in development has to be a bad thing. As Jen said, I think it's almost what is the stage after that then? Between an early progress-showing and a finished piece of work?

HC: Yeah. And I suppose there's the possibility for confusion of terminology as well, because for sure when you're starting out, the opportunity to show ten minutes of something somewhere is really valuable, and -

BL: But valuable isn't the same as necessary. It's become conflated with necessary.

HC: Exactly and it's a different thing I think from having to show work in progress because you really need to iron out some kinks and questions, from needing a platform for exposure. And I don't think there's anything wrong with needing a platform for exposure because ultimately you do only get judged on your work, and known by your work and fuelled by your work being out there, but... yeah, it's a very different thing.

BL: And every project you do has got a different development requirement as well. Sometimes, you know, if you're making a show according to a structure or a process that you haven't [quite used before] it might be useful to break that up and see if you're barking up the right tree. At other times...your ideal way of making would be for someone to give

you space for 5 weeks and at the end of it, show us your finished show, great. ...Even in the old days before all the 'ladder of development' scratch and stuff, everyone knew that a show that had just come out of the rehearsal room was in a certain sense a work in progress, and it was likely to be better after 6 weeks than it was in its first week. Now that's been formalised in ways that are as often problematic as they are helpful, I suppose... I mean having talked to loads of artists about Sprint, one of the interesting things is I'm inviting artists here who I have in mind to just programme in Sprint, and quite a few of them are going, "can we do Starting Blocks, can we do Starting Blocks?". And I'm going, "you're a bit too established to do Starting Blocks", but they all want a piece of the rehearsal space... Maybe it's not just that, maybe they also respond to the idea of being a part of this community over a period of time. It really is what you might think as being the lesser offer, of the "be part of Sprint" or "be part of Starting Blocks", that some people see as the more attractive offer. And fair enough... In Sprint you get to be part of a really cool festival and we'll try and support it and in some instances we'll try and give you rehearsal space too. But it's less clear what you're getting out of it to the artist.

Perhaps this highlights a knot that the 'trend' of work-in-progress could be seen to be contributing to - artists 'under pitching' themselves in order to gain access to the resources that are most commonly offered in development opportunities to emerging/early-career artists. Could the proliferation of said opportunities render it difficult for makers to want to position themselves beyond the 'early' stage, as similar opportunities/resources for more established artists become scarce? We discuss the linked questions of residencies, outputs and the real terms of commitment towards development in more detail in our next article, which focuses on our interview with Gemma Paintin of Action Hero.

HC, LM, JP 8/3/12