

## Article 5

For this article, we spoke with Lauren Barri Holstein whose work as The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein ([www.thefamousomg.com](http://www.thefamousomg.com)) plays with, among other things, theatre-as-site in social, architectural and political contexts. It's pretty common nowadays for a theatre to have a main house and a secondary space – usually 'the studio'. This will be smaller – smaller stage and smaller audience capacity – frequently less well equipped than the main space, and will sometimes be a room which has been converted into a performance space. A room which used to be for seminars, or even which used to be a storage space. At one theatre we've shown work at, the studio is *simultaneously* a fully functioning café. Curtains are drawn around a spot in the centre of the room to create an 'instant black box'. As you rehearse people walk through with croissants saying excuse me. It is not a space in which performance is the priority or which was built for performance. It is not a theatre. Very often (*not* always) it is these secondary spaces into which work from the more marginal practices is programmed - the 'daring' strand of the programme, which runs alongside the main programme. While it is undoubtedly a good thing that venues are aware of the need to think widely about performance, it could also be viewed as detrimental to audiences and makers alike to tuck 'experimental' work away in this secondary space. When we spoke to Lauren about this, she aptly named it the 'excuse space'. You make an excuse for the work, you apologise for the work, by programming it into mis-fitting rooms that were never meant to be theatres. You tacitly say "This isn't real theatre, so it isn't in the real theatre" (which incidentally is often a few metres down the corridor in the same building. Where tickets are more expensive.)

Work-in-progress events, which as we've discussed are seen as a strand of most theatres' programmes these days, are often programmed into these 'excuse spaces'. So they become part of the 'excitement' or 'adventurousness' that's going on in the building, but they are (often) confined to that room. And so a conflation starts to happen that isn't useful in either direction – the finished work programmed in the space steps into a connotation of 'progress', 'scrappiness', 'experiment' – and the work-in-progress events step into a connotation of 'weird', 'experimental', 'out there'. Neither is being presented in a wholly legitimate frame.

Lauren's work is self-confessedly difficult. Nudity, piss and extreme boredom are staples in her performances as The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein. It's what some people would call 'dirty work'. It is, for sure, work which is about subverting. However this does not mean it is made for dirty spaces - forgotten corners, grungy cellars – the excuse spaces, spaces which are *already subverted*. Quite the opposite. A show by The Famous will have as its core the idea of ambushing a legitimate, traditional, culturally clean theatre space, into which the audience bring a set of 'polite' expectations and understandings. She is intentionally mis-using space, time and privilege – and it is essential to her that the work has this legitimate sort of frame to play itself out against. But finding a 'legitimate' high-end venue in the UK that will programme relatively unknown difficult work into its main space, as well as its more expected mainstream fayre, isn't easy.

HC In the Live Art Development Agency's pamphlet *Programme Notes*<sup>1</sup>, Neil Bartlett has an essay about when he was artistic director of the Lyric, and he talks about mixing his programming - so trying to have new strange subversive stuff alongside more traditional, more expected productions. I guess maybe that's part of it - it's about going "can't people just come and see shows?" and not be like "am I going to see a normal show or a weird show?". Just come and see a show and see what goes on. But I do wonder a tiny bit, if the thing to kick against were taken away from us, and we were just *allowed* to have our work in there, would we be at all like...huh?

LBH But would it be taken away from you? Because when I think about it, it's not that I'm not allowed in that space that makes me want to perform there (I mean, maybe it is in some way) - it's all the other expectations that fill that space.

LM It's not that you're not allowed in the space, but it's the reason why you're not allowed, which is hugely complex, and is a whole world, whole set of social conditions. It's playing with these huge systems of behaviour and control and politics which those places are so full of.

For Lauren, due to the content of her work, the opportunities often open to her to stage it are 'underground', cabaret-esque contexts – contexts which are 'pre-subverted'.

LBH: We're making interesting stuff and it's valuable and it's not an excuse and it shouldn't be buried in a corner and it shouldn't be buried in a dirty club in Dalston. It just shouldn't. Not that it shouldn't *also* be there. Maybe it can also be there. That's fine, but it shouldn't be hidden there.

JP: I know what we should do, we should wait until we've got a huge show and then insist on doing it in a small crappy space.

HC: With a massive set.

LBH: Actually that's not a bad idea to even do now. If you're not going to let me in your big space, I'm just going to fill your small space as if it were a big space and you have to deal with it because I'm too big for this space.

Ego, of course, is intrinsic to the work Lauren does as *The Famous* and for that to be played out properly of course she must be on a big stage. The game of the show itself – performance as epic pop concert, massive spectacle juxtaposed with the dirty and problematic – hinges on having a big, legitimate space. If we deny Lauren (and many other artists) access to the real stages, the big stages – very simply, the theatres – we are not trusting the artists' understanding of their own work and we are not supporting them as artists. This goes back to a key point Mischa made when we spoke to him, about the

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1 Eds. Lois Keidan and Daniel Brine, *Programme Notes: Case studies for locating experimental theatre*, (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2007)

necessity to say to an artist “what do *you* need?” not “here’s what you can have – make it work” if we really want to find models of genuine artist support. Of course an artist may say she or he needs things you cannot give them – but then let them decide whether or not this opportunity is right for them. And the more research we do into artist development the more convinced we are that trying to get/find/create what the artist needs should be the first effort. And (needless to say) the artist should offer to help with this. Because otherwise we don’t create the conditions in which things can change, in which the unexpected request is honoured and new things happen. Instead we maintain well-trodden paths of what artists should expect given the content of their work.

HC      Maybe there isn’t a wide enough sense by people running venues, that the space is a vital player in what you make and it’s not incidental. It’s not “oh put it wherever”. We’re in this mad situation with the show we’re trying to make at the moment - we’re going to open it in this festival in Switzerland where they’re giving us loads of support and a massive stage. And then we’re going straight to a small studio in the UK. And we’re like, well that’s not going to be the same show. We might as well just make two shows.

LBH      Yeah, literally I make a new show for every venue. I may have toured *How 2 Become 1* for 8 months but it was a different show in each venue. It had to be, there was no choice. It just had to be.

Of course it’s important to remain flexible as an artist and be willing to adjust elements of the work, but it’s a more difficult conversation altogether when artists with very early stages work are compromising the work before it has even had a chance to be made properly, in order to fit slightly mis-shapen ‘scratch’ opportunity offerings. As the idea of ‘scratch’ is so prolific now there’s a sort of one-size-fits-all approach used a lot. Here’s a scratch opportunity. You’re an artist. You use it to show some work. We have been thinking more and more about what the best sort of development opportunities might be for artists who don’t work in a traditional rehearsal format; work that might be described as ‘live art’. Definitions of types of work are always tricky and not always helpful. Lauren’s work definitely has liveness and provocation-through-liveness at the core of it, but her history is in dance and her site, as she has said, is the capital-T-Theatre.

LBH:      I sometimes say I’m a live artist because I think that my community, my base here is the live art community. Only because they’re the most supportive and they work with the same sort of rigour that I do and that I prefer.

We asked Lauren whether or not she felt that it was necessary to provide something like ‘scratch’ opportunities for work which doesn’t necessarily adhere to a rehearsal model:

LBH:      Well yeah, something’s necessary. I mean for me, the idea of scratch/work-in-progress showings feels really unhelpful, but there are other things that are really helpful. I think if we’re talking about development - space, time, and the money to have that space and time. Having a residency where the perk is supposed to be that you’re not paying for the space - I don’t get that, what is that? A residency should mean you’re actually *paid* for your time, because you’re working! I don’t get that,

why are residencies never paid? I don't really understand that, that's not helpful to me. But having one where you are paid... Also having residencies that last longer than a week.

HC: This thing of residencies being longer than a week chimes a lot with us, because we've had various experiences where not only is it just a week, but then you're supposed to show what you've made or something, and you're like "well... are you serious?".

LBH: A week is not long enough to do anything. You're not going to be able to create an output after a week. [If I was on a development scheme] another thing I'd want is to have access to - if you guys are running it - to you - to have conversations. My rehearsals are mostly us just chatting, and trying to figure out problems and then we kind of stand up for twenty minutes and try something, then we sit back down and talk. It's much more about ideas being thrown together and having feedback from people that you trust. So it could be the people that are running the event or the residency or the development thing, or people that you ask them to invite for you or that you invite yourself. That kind of support would be really beneficial I think.

This idea of the organiser/venue supporting by being truly available for meaningful exchange and conversation is key. If an organisation chooses to support an artist it can't be on the proviso that what they produce will be 'good'. Presumably the initial decision to support them has come from some understanding and appreciation of their work and approach, and it is therefore *this* – and not some invisible product in the making – that the organisation should commit to.

LBH: I would want an organisation that is supporting me to provide access to a wide range of audiences who will love and hate and be confused by what I'm doing - a venue that's willing to push their audience. Which I think, interestingly, Duckie really does. You would think that their audience is really okay with everything, but people will write emails complaining about my work and be completely offended. People rioted at one show and were throwing things at me - but the organisation stand behind it. So to also have large-scale 'legitimate' venues that did that, that could stand up behind work because it's valuable not because it's pleasing - that would be amazing. ...The idea of having a foundation support system is amazing, which is why after completing my PhD hopefully I'll be lecturing somewhere, because it's that same thing - you're in some kind of institution where you're being supported to do your research and make work in some way. Maybe not as fully as you would dream, but in some substantial way.

This raises a really interesting new point in our research – the 'use' of academia to maintain an artistic practice. Is post-graduate study, especially practice-as-research, now one of the most viable ways that artists consider they might be able to obtain access to space, resources and continuity of support? And how does research, in an academic context, relate to scratch, work-in-progress and artist support? Can theatre/performance opportunities out in the world take a lesson from the practice-as-research approach and stop dividing

'process' out into discrete chunks that need an output at the end? We're particularly interested in this area of thinking because while none of us are post-graduate students, we have recently been made an Associate Company at the Department of Drama, Theatre and Performance at Roehampton University (where none of us studied, incidentally). Our work there is non-academic, but it is supported by the resources an institution can offer (from rehearsal space to conversation). Being supported to make your work by an academic institution potentially also means the artist can maintain flexibility in the venue-world – that is, you may be tied to one place (your university), but it's not a public venue, so you still have maneuverability when it comes to putting the work into the public forum. You are not embedded in one theatre. And you are not dependent on dingy cellars to try out 'difficult' work.

LBH: I don't really like the idea of being embedded in one space - then your audience is limited and access to audiences is limited. But I think the other question about being embedded in one space is like you said earlier, would the work still be subversive if you know it's allowed to be there? I don't know. Or is it subversive up to a point, and then kind of loses its power, or what? I don't know, but I'd like to have the opportunity to try that out first and then have it fail, rather than having it fail before I even get to try.

Since talking to Lauren for this article, we're pleased to say that she has been given the opportunity to do just this on a very big legitimate stage, when she opens SPILL Festival of Performance 2013 at the Barbican Centre's Silk Street Theatre in a few days' time, with her new show *Splat!* (<http://www.spillfestival.com/performance/splat/>). In curating her this way, Pacitti Company have recognised the space (cultural and architectural) she needs for the work she does. Contemporary performance festivals like this do a really important job in allowing 'legitimate' venues to 'buy in' a context for audiences and artists. An interesting negotiation here is, whether these sub-frames bought in bridge or further the assumed divide between the 'legitimate' venues and the 'illegitimate' work.

HC, LM, JP 31/3/2013

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