

Process

Mainstream was developed over a number of months in different locations and was first presented in Scotland in spring 1999. Below are notes on this development process.

January 1999

As I first encountered **Mainstream**, it existed as a collection of stories, thoughts and questions set down on paper. To draw direct lines between these fragments and **Mainstream** as it takes form now would erase the web of associations, half-remembered stories and repertoire of images that have been generated in the development of the show. To say there was a starting point suggests the company set out with a quite specific destination in sight. But perhaps the development of Suspect Culture's work is better described as negotiative rather than navigational. The process is digressive and liable to wander; it is informed by a number of voices, and ideas accrue over time in conversation, in workshops and discussions.

January 1998

To begin at the beginning really means joining a number of stories already well under way; Scheherazade tells stories to save her own life; "hysterical" patients of the 19th century French psychologist Charcot have their afflictions turned into theatre and become celebrities; songwriters are imprisoned in the Brill Building (in 1950s New York) and forced to manufacture formula pop songs. These are all stories concerned with performance and creativity in the most extreme of circumstances. It is foundational that the project will explore the relationships between performer and audience; we ask what can we say about the act of performance itself. There are also quite specific questions of staging mostly springing from the company's show previous to **Mainstream, Timeless**: How can we make music and a musician integral to both the form and content of the piece? How might we develop "vocabularies" of gesture? Will gestures always function as an expression of emotion, of interiority and always be "read" as such?

July 1998

*The company goes to the Isle of Mull in Scotland for **Mainstream's** first development workshop.*

The week begins with the four performers remembering and telling tales from the rostrum at the end of our rehearsal room. We ask questions of each other; David Greig asks "was there a moment when you first came in to contact with the stage?" and Phil tells of his first performance in a school nativity play; Louise remembers standing on the stage of the Festival Theatre. Graham Eatough takes these memories and identifies a quintessential physicality from each telling; now isolated movements, the performers learn each one, and the seven gestures make up a vocabulary, which we will use and build upon for the rest of the week. Conversations, exercises, discussions revolve around states of acting and not-acting, looking and being looked at, on stage and off stage, being the subject and object of desire,

attempting to communicate and failing to do so. And all of these develop from our personal stories.

August 1998

The company goes to London for 10 days to work at the Bush Theatre.

It was originally intended that the show should be on a much smaller scale than **Timeless**: easier to tour and more intimate. There are two performers, Callum and Gabriel, Ian Scott our designer sits in on the workshop and Nick Powell now joins bringing with a keyboard with him. David introduces some fragments of dialogue into the process.

Continued from Mull are the concerns with communication. There is also a rostrum again to demarcate a performance area on which to explore the “act” of acting. We draw up a wish list of things we would like to look at over the course of the workshop and it is mostly concerned with the role of music and of Nick himself as a performer: How to achieve the integration of music and text? Is there a musical equivalent of the physical gesture? We also talk about the use of objects and props, and about creating a sense of place in the theatre space.

Each dialogue fragment is given an underlying emotion: guilt, lust, desire and so on; and each emotion is then given a gesture. Nick creates a musical theme for the emotions which have now developed into wistful, happy, angry etc. Many of the exercises involve establishing rules for imaginary games that bring dialogue, music, gesture together in speculative, often random combinations to “see what happens if...”

Each day we discuss the exercises, and repeatedly ask of each other “what does it remind you of?” The repetitious combinations of gesture, music, text are sometimes meaningful, sometimes obscure, funny or moving, resonant or alienating. They provoke personal memories and associations, and from these stories develops the notion of the exploded moment. Everything we see is about a couple, each other’s performer and audience, who, in attempting to communicate, never fail in not doing so. Setting aside the notion of one defining story, we imagine the couple exists in any number of different stories happening simultaneously. There might be coincidences and crossovers between them yet one story might exclude the possibility of any other.

In direct response to the theatre architecture of the Bush, we start to look at stage as a divided area for two simultaneous performances; one “in front” which is wholly available to sight and hearing, and a “behind” area in which mute scenarios can only be partially glimpsed. The question of Nick’s presence as a character or role on stage in the performance event remains unresolved.

September 1998

Suspect Culture hold a two-day open workshop in Glasgow.

There are 15 performers none of whom the company has worked with before. Graham and David lead the workshop playing with the dialogue fragments and exploring the potentials of a double performance in a divided space. There is a kitchen attached to the room in which we are working and opening two hatches in the wall means we can view a silent scenario in the kitchen through a dialogue enacted in the rehearsal room itself. The potential of simultaneous scenes rather than consecutive ones seems so much more exciting that the decision is taken to make **Mainstream** a piece for four performers. And in subsequent conversations, it is decided that there will be no live music on stage. Nick will compose music and soundscapes for pre-recording.

October 1998

The last collaborative stage before the production of text and the rehearsal period is a two-day discussion session held at the Brunswick Hotel, Glasgow. We examine where **Mainstream** has got to so far, what we have liked and what we would like to see happen next. Some decisions are taken, and plans made to follow individual paths towards the rehearsal period in January. Graham talks about the “look” of **Mainstream**, the quality of gesture and bodywork between the front and back spaces of the stage. Nick aims to go into January with a sonic environment to develop in the rehearsal period. I think Ian already has a design in mind. David notes ideas, conditions and wishes to write into a first draft.

January 1999

Looking back over the development process it seems to me that there was any number of possible Mainstreams that slipped away, or were abandoned or lost in conversation. In hindsight, it has been possible to trace some threads and through lines between the original project proposal and the idea of a performance and the text that went into rehearsal this month. But this does not account for the imaginative leaps, tangential comments and random inventions that were accommodated into the growing notion of **Mainstream**. And it certainly does not account for the work that has gone on in the rehearsal room since the beginning of January.

Pamela Carter, January 1999