

## **Lament**

**The Guardian, April 9 2002**

It begins on television screens: banks of them, stacked up like a tower. The audience watches and waits, seeing scenes that are almost too intimate. We see members of Suspect Culture theatre company – actors, the musical director and artistic director – talking personally, sometimes awkwardly but always passionately, about songs that make them cry, and things they'd like to change about themselves and the world. They talk of what makes them mad: injustices, poverty, exploitation, the Guardian. They dream up alternative lifestyles, ludicrously utopian, knowing how silly they sound.

From this the tangle of memory, anger and dream, the play – structured like a traditional Gaelic lament – unfolds. Just like the ancient songs, threading communities and families together in times of hardship and loss, this means phases of bleakness, elegy and celebration on stage, culminating in a shared moment of remembrance that may also allow those lamenting to move on.

But it's also a play about growing up, about realising that you've lost things that make you feel safe, so tender childhood memories collide with rants about Third world debt, and nostalgia for a place collides with adult desires for your own space. Through it all, in the shadow of Ground Zero, our loss of faith in religion, politics, history, and the possibility of change glowers. Smart enough not to fall into the trap of thinking our time is different from any other. Lament alludes to other unnamed catastrophes, losses and cruel, unnecessary deaths. The piece is strongest in the musical scenes and that opening sequence of videoed revelations. An extended, wordless lament at the end, in front of a raggedy, sentimental temporary shrine, is heartbreaking and cathartic in quick succession. Lament is another example of Suspect Culture's ability to discard many dramatic cliches to access a raw emotional landscape we rarely see in contemporary theatre.

The company deals with some targets less sharply than others: a media brainstorming session and Friends-like sitcom are nowhere near dark enough. Even though it's all done self-consciously, there are moments where you feel you might drown in thirty-something liberal guilt, a luxury in itself. There's also one physical tic in the production, a maddening palm-to-forehead sign to signal things that are being forgotten with cultural change, through globalisation and the dissolving of community, which is almost comical and reminiscent of cheap sci-fi movies. That said, this remains extraordinary theatre – intimate and universal, local and global, and as indulgently heartwarming as the saddest song.

**Elisabeth Mahoney**

---

## **Haunted by Loss**

**The Scotsman, 10 April 2002**

They begin by telling us what they like to wear. On a bank of three small video screens, somewhere to the back of the stage, the faces of the five actors and

the musician come and go, talking everyday clothes; jeans, T-shirt, 'wee skinny top', whatever.

According to a recent study of voter turnout at the last election, these are consumer choices which are supposed to empower the Suspect Culture generation, and make them feel more effective than conventional politics or voting. But do they look empowered and effective? No. They look mildly amused by the triviality of their preferences; when their faces are in repose, they look depressed; in fact they look – perish the word – alienated.

For more than half a decade Suspect Culture have been mapping the inner landscape of a generation haunted by a sense of loss, by struggles with intimacy and by avalanches of management jargon. But in this show they begin, for the first time, to name the political beast behind their feeling of unease. 'Yes, I would club global capitalism to death with an iron bar,' says one of them, as the video images begin to wade into deeper water. 'But my feeling about it is that it's won, and there's nothing I can do.'

So the live performers begin their lament, their 80 minute revue-style elegy – no characters, all the performers using their own names, just brief scenes and episodes punctuated with music – for all they feel they have lost and cannot recover, from family life and noisy houses full of kids, through political idealism and action, to the globe itself; the place once full of natural wonder, now an ecological and ethnic wasteland reduced to a series of electronic airport codes, and dotted with refugee camps where people hang on to amnesiac shreds of ideas about civilised living and real, nourishing food.

It's important to grasp that there's nothing objective about this show. It describes the projections and fantasies of a generation brought up on hopelessness and eco-doom; and often it does it with an ironic sense of absurdity of the self. Some will see the show as self-indulgent, others will say – wrongly, I think – that it's not political enough. But what it does is trace the outline of the intellectual and psychological void where politics used to be, in the minds of a generation. And it does it with a strong sense of form, one or two bursts of beautiful writing, and the kind of openness that often looks raw, but also sometimes tingles with the deep, radical rhythm of life itself; and begins to mark out a whole new slice of post-modern space, both in Suspect Culture's work, and in Scottish theatre.

**Joyce Macmillan**

---

## **Lament**

**Independent, 13 April 2002**

The inherence of loss in human experience, both individual and collective, provides the raw material for this latest devised production from Scotland's internationally acclaimed Suspect Culture company. Combining hi-tech visual projections, live and recorded music, and a cast of six, it opens at what seems a highly individual level, showing video footage from talking-heads interviews with the performers. In engagingly chatty, informal style, each describes a typical outfit they might wear, recalls some childhood memories, muses on

present-day sources of angst, nominates a favourite sad song and sketches out a pipe-dream idyll.

In a clever self-referential refiguring – at once playful and provocative – of the devising process itself, this material is then transcribed into the fabric of the performance. The actors appear wearing the clothes they've described, echoing snatches of speech as uttered by their on-screen selves; they use their own names throughout, and their castle-in-the-air scenarios form the basis for many of the short, fluidly overlapping scenes in which most of the show unfolds. There's thus an immediate implied reflection on the process of turning oneself into a character, or simply a public persona, and the losses or limitations this entails. Although seemingly drawn into their confidence, we actually have no way of gauging the reliability of these people's testimony, while the picture they present is inevitably simplified and selective.

Most of Lament's other central concerns also emerge at this point – loss of innocence; loss of idealism, of identity, and of belief in an individual's power to impact on a world where global capitalism reigns supreme. The settings in which these are illustrated, explored and juxtaposed range across a bucolic peasant community, of the kind romanticised - and commodified – in the West as embodying a simpler, purer existence; a Friends-style sitcom sequence, a cowboys' campfire, a drunken funeral wake, a climbing expedition up Annapurna, nameless war-torn cities and refugee way-stations, and a tango class in Buenos Aires.

It's an ambitious approach, at times somewhat scattershot but largely effective, thanks to a set of low-key but sharply defined performances, obliquely enabling different psychological and philosophical strands to connect and play off one another. In evoking the notion of bygone golden ages, for instance, the show posits numerous interrogative angles on the rose-tinted, distorting sentimentality with which human beings commonly compensate for loss. This element in turn resonates further within an overarching, multi-layered meditation on the process of forgetting – surely the most universal form of loss, and the most indivisible from the human condition. Frequent abrupt lacunae in the dialogue underline the point, suggesting newly realised gaps in the characters' memories that the audience are implicitly invited to fill.

While the inevitability and ultimately unassuageable nature of loss are thus delineated, however, the timeless consolations of music and ritual are also acknowledged. The overall effect is a graceful counterpoint between the poignancy of unresolved longings and an elegiac serenity, gradually accumulating a potent emotional charge to match the cerebral perspicacity that has long been a Suspect Culture trademark.

**Sue Wilson**

---

**Lament**  
**The Guardian January 22 2003**  
**4 stars Byre Theatre, St Andrews**

It is a shame devised theatre gets such bad press, because, as companies like Complicite and Third Angel have shown, seeing material created and performed by the same people can be twice as arresting as watching people act out some old script in which they have nothing invested.

This is certainly the case with Suspect Culture, which comprises a director (Graham Eatough), a writer (David Greig), a musician (Nick Powell) and five performers. Their work has a level of discipline rare in devised theatre, particularly such contemplative devised work, which can slip into self-indulgent portentousness in seconds.

On a stage adorned with a ramp, three video screens and a display flashing share-price fluctuations, the performers flip between scenes of lamentation from cultures across the world. The most important thing in this show is that almost none of them are ostentatious; most are so self-effacing that the sadness reveals itself in layers. The only really lugubrious display of grief, tellingly, is at a British wake, where getting really pissed and wailing along to Nilsson's Without You is the way to show grief.

The piece is about loss, but it deftly sidesteps tedious romantic clichés. It would be easy to play for tears with 10 dead lovers and a sick hamster, but instead the company concern themselves principally with loss of "the future". By that, they mean the encroaching disenchantment that comes as the spirit of '68 is replaced by the need to earn a living, and the knowledge that we are doing so in almost all cases at the expense of someone we have never met in a country we have never heard of.

Thus, a show that started as a contemplation of responses to loss also becomes an investigation of a wider, cultural loss - and an indictment of the dominant, western culture that destroys all in its path. It is living proof that devised theatre need not be navel-gazing and obscure: a more urgent topicality is rare in the theatre, as is the ability to render world issues deeply human.

**Dan Bye**

---

## **Lament**

**The lull of recall, then the storm**

**Toronto Star 29 January 2003**

The Six Stages Festival got off to a mesmerizing start last night at Artword Theatre with the production of *Lament* brought here by the Glaswegian company, Suspect Culture.

Over the next two weeks, seven shows from Canada and around the world will be presented and — if they're all as good as this — it's definitely something to warm up our winter.

*Lament* isn't quite like anything you've ever seen, which is the purpose of a festival like this. Unlike many pieces of cutting-edge theatre, it doesn't launch

a full-frontal assault on your senses, but invades your consciousness in a stealthy manner that's all the more effective for that reason. The company of five actors and one musician begin on video screens, telling you about their most-loved outfits as the real-life wearers of same appear in front of you. It sets the rules up instantly: An accumulation of concrete details is being assembled for a greater purpose. Against an eclectic contemporary landscape, where pixel boards relate the latest price of Enron and airport destinations around the world click by with disorienting speed, these young people tell us about what has touched them — or failed to touch them — in their lives. A litany of favourite sad songs gives way to a kaleidoscope of seemingly unrelated episodes: tango lessons and funeral services, meals comprised of chuckwagon burritos or preciously hoarded apricots. The tone is elegiac; the mood is elusive but achingly melancholic. Harvest gold and oceanic blue are the colours of the lights that bathe the action as you let yourself get drawn into what seems like a haunting dream. Then, bit by bit, the dissonances are heard, in the form of challenging inquiries. Was anything really as good as it seemed? Is anyone truly worth mourning for? A vein of corrosive political rage is tapped into, and the impotence of living in a world where conscience-less leaders can play with the lives of multitudes leads to eruptions of anger as horrifying as they are sudden. In the end, we return to murmured fragments of treasured lost memories that we must strain to hear. Soothing music tries to heal the wounds the company have opened, but never lets us forget that the piece is called *Lament*. Although creation of this project began a few months before the event, it is clearly a work of art conceived in the shadow of 9/11. And the considerable enmity the company feels towards George Bush seemed newly minted and truly earned once we discovered that even while we were watching this play last night, he was readying the world to welcome the guns of war. The company of Graham Eatough, Catherine Keating, Callum Cuthbertson, Kate Dickie, Nick Powell and David Ireland merit our respect for the commitment they have brought to the work at hand, as well as our thanks for reminding us that feeling deeply may never be enough, but it's far better than not feeling at all. *Lament* will be performed through Saturday. It deserves your attention.

**Richard Ouzounian**

---

**Toronto Sun January 30 2003**

**Dream weavers**

**Scottish production elaborate & simply superb \*\*\*\***

TORONTO -- It is a perfect vehicle with which to launch a festival.

The festival in question is the Six Stages Festival, which has brought together an international buffet of the best in the theatre of the avant-garde.

The show in question, which launched the Festival Tuesday night at the Artword Theatre's mainspace, is Lament and it comes to us from from Scotland's internationally respected Suspect Culture touring company.

On the surface, this is pretty showy stuff -- an elaborate marriage of video, computer graphics, and the latest in lighting effects that demonstrates conclusively that Suspect Culture is very much a company of today -- something that is underlined by subject matter that is all too fresh as well.

Delve a little deeper, however, and it's easy to see that the artists of SC have built this show on time-tested theatrical principles like fine acting, theatrical simplicity and, perhaps most important, a deep respect for the collective intelligence and heart of its audience.

The show they have built is just about as contemporary as it is possible to get -- a lament in every sense of the word for a world where there are no longer easy answers to anything and even dreaming can be a dangerous thing.

Lament is launched with quiet wit as five characters take to the stage, descriptively introduced by the quintet of actors who are playing them, thanks to creative use of video technology.

Slowly the characters take over from the actors, describing the little things that shape their lives and make up their dreams.

Slowly those dreams take form, too often colliding with larger realities, as war, violence, consumerism and a host of other modern plagues intervene. Rage is followed by despair, and slowly we are all filled with an aching need to dream simple dreams once again.

Even though Lament was born long before it, it seemed to have been created in direct response to a State Of The Nation Address that was being delivered to a world seemingly locked for too long in a state of suspended animation.

With a musical soundbed created by Nick Powell, artistic director Graham Eatough, Callum Cuthbertson, Kate Dickie, Catherine Keating and David Ireland weave an almost poetic vision of despair, a vision created by Eatough in collaboration with Powell, David Greig and Ian Scott.

As a Festival opener, Lament is certainly going to be a tough act to follow -- but for all the right reasons. This is a show that will not be overshadowed by theatrical fireworks, and it will only be equalled with complete theatrical honesty.

**John Coulbourn**

