

Lament – notes from the development process

The following document consists of very brief notes from the first Lament workshop in October 2001, extracts from emails between the artistic team in the weeks after that workshop until the beginning of the rehearsal period in February 2002, and notes made for the programme before the show opened for the first time at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow on 3 April 2002.

15 – 19/10/01: workshop

Lament: a poem or song to express or mourn loss

Singing – finding ... a common song
 different qualities of voice
 how to sing to yourself on stage, with a microphone, casually, formally
 a song within the scene, singing from without
 how do you have people sing

impulse/reaction – cause in one scene effect in another simultaneous but different
 ripple of cause and effect
 impulse/causes are naturalistic the effects heightened

things I would like to see happen in the theatre but never have:

the scene in which travel is dramatised effectively
 every character on stage is in six different parts of the world
 the suburban couple phone a friend who's having a big night out in
 Amsterdam
 Tony Blair is a character but is in no way satirical
 global economics is discussed in a genuinely interesting and funny way
 the actors tap dance across the stage blindfold and drunk

how do you have five different stories happening at the same time with five actors moving in and out of these stories?

the look-alike agency ... what if a look-alike was in love with another look-alike who died and then the bereaved look-alike encountered the 'original' of their lost love?

29/10/01 11.06

Greetings ...

I've been trying to apply myself to Lament in the light of our workshop week...

I was quite excited by the notion of staging scenes or acts from all over the world (two or more at the same time) and having actors move between them as discussed. I think the interest comes from the freedom to kind of imagine any image or moment that takes your fancy and how you might stage it. The questions inevitable relate to structure and what criteria we need (if any) to select these images. Eg, Is it about the juxtaposition of images from different cultures - do they need to be culturally specific therefore? The answer to this one instinctively feels like a no to me as I think we are more interested in less intentional connections between the different images.

What do you think?

Graham

14/11/01 14.05

I had a very interesting conversation with Dave... We had the foggy notion of sectioning the piece along the lines of the sections of a traditional Scottish lament such as the ones we looked at in the workshop. Do you remember they seemed to follow a pattern (and we can invent one if they don't) of: praising the deceased and remembering their good works (oh what japes we had, do you remember that time he tossed his caber in the kirk); talking about those they'd left behind; a description of the death; the world

won't be the same without them and why. (or something like that anyway). We could very loosely interpret those themes for the different sections of our show.

...although every scene shouldn't specifically be about loss, the whole show if structured in this way adds up to a sort of general meditation (indeed a lament) on what we in the west feel we might have lost as individuals and as a society.

Graham

27/11/01 12.04

Visual ideas for Lament

Nick has talked about the use of the old-style flatbed tape recorders as something the characters could use to record their voices/songs. This use of retro technology is, I believe, a really strong reference for a possible look to the show. If, for example, we saw the piece as the assembling of a soundscape we could use colour, lighting, video and structures to reference early hi-fi displays and give us various options for setting a scene. So, the twin yellow (and red) bars of a peak meter could give us a sunset/sunrise. The green lines of an oscilloscope could show undulating hills or, when Nick is rocking, the majesty of an Alpine landscape ...

Ian

28/11/01 10:03

When John Burnside writes his sequence of poems about home coming we don't expect him to have an 'argument' or 'make a point'. We just expect that he pursue images that haunt him and that they will, through him, reveal something to us. ...I think this may be a key to Lament. The finding of personal images that we can't even necessarily explain and placing them within the piece, even returning to them. That way it will carry poetic meaning rather than political argument or a 'story'.

However a poet is an individual and we are a group. A poem has a 'voice' we have voices. I think there is room in the piece for a fictional 'voice' whose lament this is. I really mean a voice which is 'us' speaking. This is where the flatbed tape-recorder comes in.

I imagine this carrying the 'voice' of the poem. Sometimes able to make statements, observing, thinking, musing being confused - if you like the heart of the lament. The lament's composer. The words on the tape should be from many different voices and the tape itself would signal their unity.

... Fado. The other Portugal thing was Fado. You may have heard of it but it is an entire musical form based on lament. The spirit of 'saudade' (roughly sadness but much grander and all encompassing than that).

David

11/12/01 01:51

Hello everyone,

When I first got a flatbed tape recorder it was about 1976 and I thought it was the business. ...

I wonder if there is anything in thinking about the modern question of the analogue and the digital. It seems to me there might be a difference between the retro, analogue world of the tape recorders and vu meters and the digital high tech world of flight paths, share values. I'm interested in how the digital, high tech world both expands the scope of our world-view geographically but somehow reduces our sense of difference.

... Maybe there are two musics for the show?

... The broad difference between the styles could also be seen in terms of the personal (lament/analogue/simple) and the environmental (electronic/digital/layered/processed). This leads me on to the questions of what my persona is on stage. Um ... not sure but would delineating these

two roles make the question simpler or more difficult? Any ideas anyone? I like the idea of being 'The Poet'. So long as I can spend the show looking wistfully in to the middle distance.

Nick

7/1/02 14:25

Hello everybody and a happy new year to you all.

... Most important for me is the question of location. ... How do we let the audience know which country a particular scene is set in? I think it is right that we ignore language differences and just have the actors speaking in their own voices but this makes shift in location less discernible. I think Pamela's idea of distinctive gesture or posture is helpful here but could we really do this for every scene?

Should we return to some of the different locations and characters throughout the show? I suppose this would be the more standard way of building up stories and allowing for character development - probably easier on the audience as well. However, there's something about every scene containing different characters in different locations that you haven't seen before that I find really attractive. I think the idea of a theatre show in some way trying to represent the vastness of the world in all its diversity with five British actors in a black box that is very exciting. It might also connect to a more poetic/impressionistic feel that we've discussed.

Graham

23/1/02 14:36

This is the way that the show is crystallising for me.

Lament is a collective representation of the thoughts of a western liberal confused Lamentor. These disjointed thoughts and images follow an emotional through line which charts the generalised and inexplicable sense of loss which The Lamentor feels when considering the world.

... There is no fundamental attempt in this show to describe reality. It is an attempt to describe the way people like us perceive reality. However, this perception is honest to itself. It isn't 'ironic' or 'self-aware'. The images have to be 'true'. By which I simply mean that the acting style is not heightened but is cinematic, low key. If an actor is playing an Egyptian buying a phonecard in the souk he plays that character with all the sense memory of Brad Pitt playing a gypsy boxer. The actor is not playing a 'figment of the imagination'. He happens to be a figment of the imagination but that is no concern of his.

A thought about The Lamentor.

For me, it helps to create a fictional individual, The Lamentor, in whose brain this show takes place. Perhaps even to locate him at a precise moment in time. For me he is:

GORDON, a white middle class man of thirty odd, he's provincial British but lives in a city. He works in a creative industry but is neither a high flying success nor is he a self-deluding failure. He is a good person but neurotic. Possibly sexually dysfunctional but no more so than most.

Gordon is sitting in the Tron Bar and he is reading The Guardian. In front of him is a Trek Angola brochure which he picked up at the travel agents. He's thinking of the holidays. At 11.17am precisely, he sips his decaff espresso, his sandwich arrives, outside Terry's tattoo Parlour two youths yell at each other and seem as if they're about to fight, a black Glaswegian enters the bar and asks for a menu, and a sad song starts to play on Neil's inimitable sound system - Lament is the interior of Gordon's mind for the three and a half minutes of the song.

I attach an image of the structure we came up with at the meeting. I have done it on the back of an envelope so that people of the future can say 'do you know, they sketched out the structure on the back of an envelope?'

David

1/2/02 18.37

Stratford – gateway to the east ... a lament.

Hello all

Hope you can open the attached photo; it shows the current view from my workshop. The site was cleared about 2 years ago to make way for a new development of offices, retail outlets and live/work spaces. Building work to lay the foundations has recently started after an 18-month delay caused by a series of planning objections and the sheer persistence of traveller families.

When the vacant site was occupied by the first wave of travellers, I was fascinated to observe the precision and speed with which they created what was, in effect, a small town. A huge bonfire, constantly tended, dominated this encampment and the dwellers seemed to me to be always moving, always busy. A constant stream of 4x4's, trucks and newly arriving caravans gave the sense of a vibrant community engaging with the world. Most of the caravans had TV aerials (were they watching "Millionaire", too?), children came and went, carrying water and petrol containers and, all the time, vehicles brought new kindling for the fire. The local council seemed to have no objection to the travellers developing their own live/work space and, indeed, sent a liaison officer to help out.

One morning, returning to my workshop after a 10 day absence, I glanced out of the window and was confronted by a scene of utter devastation. The lively community I remembered had been replaced by a pile ofcrap; huge hills of twisted metal, mounds of rubber tyres, old fridges, puddles of oil and a mountain of black bin bags. Concrete blocks had been placed at the entrance to the site and a small army of security guards sat in cars outside.

Over the next few weeks the site was slowly cleared. Surveyors appeared with brightly-coloured equipment and started taking measurements. The security presence was scaled down and the concrete blocks shifted to enable a fleet of bulldozers to move in. One night the travellers returned. The recce party, in a small van, was soon joined by a convoy of trucks and caravans and a bonfire was lit.

This sequence of events was repeated 3 or 4 times over the next year; a community built and slowly enveloped by mounds of debris followed by yet another clean-up operation. I began to wonder why these people were deliberately impeding the progress of the new development. Didn't we all want to look at shiny new buildings?

I hadn't consciously decided on direct-action but late one evening when I noted the arrival of a small white van in the middle of the recently cleared site, I found myself dialling the number of the 'fly-tipping hotline'. I mumbled something about activity across the road, I refused to give my name and immediately I felt huge regret.

So this is my lament. Like Gordon at the Tron I find it hard to reconcile the idea I have of myself aswhatever, with the reactionary, racist, nimbyism that is obviously nearer the truth.

Ian

1/2/02 18.49

I've finally been able to look at David's 'back of the envelope' gif. It's crashed my computer several times because it's absolutely huge.

When people in the future talk about the origins of 'Lament' they will undoubtedly mention the vastness of the envelope that we scribbled on the back of.

Ian

14/2/02 11.07

realism vs. fantasy

...the more practical work I've done around these ideas the more I've come to think that this some kind of realistic performance style is a red herring.

The work we did in the open workshops involved us inserting another layer into the techniques we've already discussed. This layer is to do with the white middle class anxieties or fantasies that so crucially inform this

piece.

... I don't think every scene should be a fantasy ... David and I talked about a possible dynamic of the scenes moving from the more fantastical/neurotic towards the more realistic as if the show is trying harder and harder to be more accurate about the world or less subjective - trying harder to understand perhaps.

Graham

April 2002

We've used a variety of methods for making shows over the past ten years. Some, like Airport in 1996, have followed a devising process where we have made the whole show with actors over a five or six week period. Others, like last year's Casanova, have followed a more conventional script development and rehearsal process. Most have been a mixture of these two approaches. All have been collaborative. The attempt in each instance has been to develop work in a way that continues to challenge its creators and therefore (so the theory goes) excite an audience.

I think it would be wrong to say that Lament marks a return to the devising processes of earlier projects. Like every Suspect Culture show it represents the next step in an ongoing journey.

What we've tried to do with Lament is create a space in which ideas can be freely contributed without too much regard for the discreet areas of responsibility of more conventional theatre making. Hopefully this freedom has produced a work that is both personal to all of us now, but at the same time draws on the experience of all of our shows that have come before it. If nothing else I think this spirit of openness is reflected in the emails we sent to each other before the start of rehearsals.

Graham Eatough

We created and rehearsed Lament during March 2002 at the Citizen's and Tron Theatre in Glasgow. Being in the rehearsal room opened the process up. The actors were generous with their stories, experiences and insights on loss. Everything you see tonight was made during that period, but it is interesting for me now to look back at how the show's roots stretch back even to the earliest emails. All through the process we've tried to make the show an honest expression of our own personal experiences and feelings. All we can do now is hope it communicates to other people.

David Grieg