

Daisy's answers

While your work seems to mix different art forms together - how would you describe what you do?

I think that's absolutely right – when we make a piece of work, we allow ourselves to be influenced by and borrow from a range of different art forms. We don't put on straight plays, so we don't have to abide by those set rules! In terms of how I would describe it, I'd just call it performance – it's not a completely different thing to 'normal' theatre.

A lot of your work looks past what the two of you do and towards bringing together an artistic community of contemporary performance makers in Kent – can you tell us about that?

When we first set up as a company in 2006, there were not that many local artists making new work. We very quickly realised that you can't make work in a vacuum – we needed there to be a performance scene and there wouldn't be much of a scene if there were just us! It was then that we began to really work to encourage other graduates and theatre-makers to stay in the region and make work. There is this idea that to be successful you need to leave Kent, but that isn't the case. Over the years, the work of Cathy Westbrook PANeK (Performing Arts Kent) has been unequalled in establishing a community of performance-makers in the region. This is how our very own platform for showcasing performance was launched, Pot Luck and now the very exciting Marlowe Scratch nights.

What is our experience of working outdoors and in unusual locations? How have we been influenced by Canterbury and its cultural landscape?

We have certainly performed in a lot of unusual locations – Herne Bay beach, in Canterbury shop windows, in tents... We found it a really good way of growing an audience who might not necessarily go and buy a ticket in the theatre. It is very exciting for the region that the Marlowe Studio is supporting and programming home-grown performance and we are looking forward to making something special in the wonderful new studio space.

The term contemporary performance may intimidate some audience members who aren't sure what it means but may presume it is along the lines of contemporary dance or embarrassment inducing audience interaction. Actually one of your performances focused on sharing a cup of tea – perhaps one of the least alienating British experiences you could think of. So why should mainstream audiences come along to performances such as those of Accidental Collective? Should they be afraid?

Contemporary performance is a just a term to indicate that what we do isn't a straight play – i.e. characters, chronological stories, naturalistic dialogue. Our work is actually always about connecting with people, about celebrating the little things, and about kindness. It's not scary, at all – it's just that its form may be new to some people. An Accidental Collective

show will always be surprising; it will make you think, but there are often moments of humour. Our work is about people and places – it's about you and me and our experience.

One of the advantages of this kind of performance work is the level of autonomy involved – that you will make things happen for yourselves – what are your backgrounds and how did you find yourself creating the work that you do?

The autonomy is certainly a positive when it comes to creating work; it also means that you need to be very driven and strict with yourselves – no one else will do it for you! That is one of the reasons we are so excited about working with The Marlowe Studio. We both met on the four-year MDrama degree at the University of Kent. We are a strange combination: Pablo is half German and half Spanish and I am originally from Yorkshire. I grew up with Marlowe favourites, NBT, and with another fabulous regional theatre, The West Yorkshire Playhouse. I think we were drawn together because we are both excited about all the possibilities there are in theatre.

Pablo's answers

While your work seems to mix different art forms together - how would you describe what you do?

People tend to think that theatre is something that takes place in a specific kind of space. There is a group of people (the audience) who sit in silence and in the dark, and watch. They watch other people (the actors), speaking and moving around a lit area (the stage) whilst pretending they are other people (the characters in the story). That is traditional theatre, and it's not what we make.

People tend to think that theatre starts when somebody (the author) writes a series of dialogues which follow a linear narrative (the play). Then somebody else, at a different point in time (the director) gets together a group of people (the actors). He (because people invariably think of theatre directors as being men) tells the actors what they should do, how they should move or speak their lines, and what they should feel or think (let's call that acting). That is traditional theatre, and it's not what we do.

What we make and do is something different. It's more like poetry than like a novel; more like a collage than a painting; more like a debate than a lecture; more like a party than a parade.

If it's difficult to pin us down, it's because we don't have a ready-made way of creating performances. We like to treat each piece in its own right, carefully considering what audience will see it and where it will be presented. Of course, we don't just do what we do in one kind of space; we have developed a taste for exploring different locations and particular places. In each - whether a shop window, a bar, a historic building, or even a stage - we like to take into account its special qualities and the kinds of relationships that are possible there. For us, every space and every place is unique; and we like to create something special that can happen within.

When we begin to work on a new performance, we don't start with a pre-existing playtext. Instead, our starting point could be an image, an idea, an old photograph, whatever we find lying around or whatever tickles us creatively. There is a word from French for what we do: bricolage. Cobbling bits and pieces together, juxtaposing or merging them, we playfully construct an experience for the audience that aims to be stimulating, visually arresting, poetic and meaningful.

Things beyond artistic work "towards bringing together an artistic community of contemporary performance makers in Kent"

We formed Accidental Collective in 2005 whilst we were in our final years studying at the University of Kent. There was a lot of excitement in the region about how the arts could play a role in regeneration, and there were some large-scale projects like the *Margate Exodus* in the pipeline. As we approached graduation, rather than going off to London like most people did, we were more interested in the idea of 'being there at the beginning' by helping to kick-start a new generation of Kent-based theatre-makers. Since then, we have maintained and strengthened our commitment to the region and its artistic development. When we met people around the UK and we told them that we are based in Canterbury, they are generally surprised. That is slowly changing.

In 2006 we became the first Graduate Theatre Company supported by the University of Kent's Drama and Theatre Studies department (this meant a free office and rehearsal space). As an emerging company, we were quite green and somewhat naive, but through sheer determination and pigheadedness we stayed and made things work. However, we were very aware that we could not create an exciting and lively 'scene' by ourselves. So, from the start, we got into the habit of reaching out and making connexions with fellow artists – especially as new theatre companies came out of the university and others moved to the area. For instance, we introduced people to each other and, though we did not have all the answers, we set up informal mentoring sessions for university students.

By the end of 2009 we seemed to have reached a critical mass, there were about a dozen new companies in East Kent. We had of course been around a little longer, seeing things grow and develop... Our natural inclination was, of course, to want to help establish a collegial atmosphere, based on peer-to-peer support and advice. We set up some informal meetings where some needs became apparent: artists wanted to meet other artists on a regular basis and a chance to meet others from beyond Kent, they wanted an opportunity to try out new ideas and gain feedback, they wanted to attract and build bridges with new audiences, and establish relationships with venues in the area. Out of this grew Pot Luck (www.aqccidentalcollective.co.uk/pot-luck). It was a case of 'artists doing it for themselves'. The first round of five Pot Luck events was funded by National Lottery through Arts Council England, taking place in Canterbury, Cliftonville, and Faversham. The platform was a real success with artists, audiences and venues alike; and in June 2011 we received the Canterbury Culture Award in the category of 'Cultural Pioneers'. We are currently planning the next round of Pot Luck events between now and March 2014, having secured funding from KCC and National Lottery through Arts Council England. (The first Pot Luck of this series will take place on 27th January at the Gulbenkian Theatre).

One of the proofs of Pot Luck's success was that, last summer, we were approached by Daniel Lipman to curate the Marlowe Scratch Nights. It is great to see that an

established venue like the Marlowe Theatre is also keen in supporting theatre-makers in the region. Together with Pot Luck, we are now able to offer some great opportunities for artists to make new work and involve audiences in the process. These platforms are also a chance for people to 'taste new flavours' and try out kinds of performance they may not usually go to see. It's a bit like tapas, you get to have a bit of everything and, even if it's not all your cup of tea, there's bound to be something unusual that you really like. As a Pot Luck audience member said: "It's more than the sum of its parts".

What is our experience of working outdoors and in unusual locations? How have we been influenced by Canterbury and its cultural landscape?

When we formed Accidental Collective back in 2005, we didn't deliberately set out to be an outdoor theatre company. At the time, there weren't any platforms in the region for the kind of performances we wanted to make. Venues were somewhat conservative with their programming, perhaps because they thought that audiences were very set in their conventional tastes. So rather than performing in theatres we began making pieces for unusual locations. As they say: if the mountain will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain. We then quickly developed a taste for making work that punctures or interrupts the everyday. With this kind of work we were and still are particularly interested in the way that people can stumble upon it by accident. Our first funded project (*The Watching Game* funded by KCC, 2007) took place in different shop windows around Canterbury for a whole day. We were then commissioned by Canterbury City Council to create a special piece for the Herne Bay Festival (*Pebbles to the Pier*, 2007). Over the years we found (or created) more opportunities to perform off stage than on the stage, so we have built up a significant body of site-specific work. Thanks to this we have gained some extremely useful skills. We always aim to make our work accessible to a wide audience, regardless of their background. People should be able to connect in their own personal way. Our performances have, in a sense, many openings and doorways; there is more than one way to engage. We have also learnt to respond to all sorts of circumstances and to improvise on the spot. When you create outdoor performances you can plan and rehearse all you want, but what really matters is the live moment. There. On the spot. With an audience. We have also learnt to overcome all sorts of creative, technical, and bureaucratic challenges. For *Pebbles to the Pier* we had to endure two days of wind and rain and were then thankfully blessed with perfect weather for the culminating event on Herne Bay beach; for *Lost in Translation* (2008) we had to find a way of mapping various UK cities onto Canterbury city centre and then Liverpool's St. George's Hall, ensuring that we had permission from the relevant authorities to set up our installations; for *BIKINI State* (2008) we had to deal with passing members of the public who were taking the performance a little too literally; for *Postscript* (2008) we choreographed a whole piece around the tables and chairs in Bramley's bar; and for *i am small THE WORLD IS BIG* (2011) we had to cross all sorts of red tape to 'occupy' Kent County Hall in Maidstone, including the Council chamber, for a whole day. All this has pushed us creatively and taught us to think outside the box. We are, of course, terribly excited to bring these skills back to the stage for the new show we are creating for the Marlowe Studio.

The term contemporary performance may intimidate some audience members who aren't sure what it means but may presume it is along the lines of contemporary dance or embarrassment inducing audience interaction. Actually one of your performances focused on sharing a cup of tea – perhaps one of the least alienating British experiences you could think of. So why should mainstream audiences come along to performances such as those of Accidental Collective? Should they be afraid?

'Contemporary performance' is just an umbrella term for pretty much anything that goes beyond traditional narrative and traditional acting. It is shorthand for a kind of theatre that defies definition, because a strict definition would immediately negate all the possibilities of what it could be and what it could become. There are all sorts of 'contemporary performance' out there! The kind of shows we make fit more easily within that category than within the category of straightforward theatre. We have created pieces where the audience was free to make their own associations and navigate the performance in a personal way. We have even created projects where the audience shaped the show, where people were in charge of their own experience, where 'accidents' could happen. However, there is nothing intimidating about what we do. For a start, you don't need to be an expert or have a lot of knowledge about this kind of work to enjoy our performances. Like all good art, we like to create pieces which are affecting and can be enjoyed without having to read an explanatory note about it first.

I find the expression 'mainstream audience' somewhat problematic. People are easily lumped together into groups like that, simply according to their habits. Just because you are used to seeing traditional shows does not mean that you cannot enjoy a different kind of theatre. We like to think that everyone has possibility to engage with the performances we create. All we are asking people to do is to come with an open mind and to realise that, whatever happens, they are already an important part of the performance. Whatever we put in front of you, ultimately it will be you who makes sense of it. We offer something new, something refreshing. Precisely because we are aware of that, we like to 'take care' of our audiences. People's expectations about what a theatre can be should be expanded, but gently. Coming to one of our performances is definitely going to be a different kind of experience, but it will never be an intimidating or threatening one. Of course, we are not saying that there should be a ban on all traditional theatre; we would just like people to have a more 'balanced diet'.

One of the advantages of this kind of performance work is the level of autonomy involved – that you will make things happen for yourselves – what are your backgrounds and how did you find yourself creating the work that you do

I've also always loved stories. My German grandparents used to buy me cassette tapes with fairy tales. I listened; and I imagined. As far back as I can remember I have always been involved in theatre; at school or in after-school classes. In a way, it was an extension of playing games. Considering that I grew up in a Spanish provincial city (Alicante), my mother took me to some pretty exciting stuff: opera, dance, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by the Black Theatre of Prague, *Manes* by La Fura dels Baus, etc. I also developed a weakness for contemporary visual arts, in particular sculpture and installations. Having a dual nationality as I do, when I was at secondary school in Spain, I joined a student theatre company that performed cabaret sketches in German. We were called Lampenfieber (stage fright). Back then, my knowledge of theatre was

reduced to learning lines and being told where to stand. It was simple, but it was good fun. Then, I came to the UK with a scholarship to study at an international college, and I took theatre as one of my main subjects. Suddenly, it was as if someone had opened a huge window. I realised that there was a whole unexplored landscape before me. Theatre could not just be a hobby, but that it was a whole field of enquiry and experimentation. So, the natural course of action was to study it at a British university; at the time there were no degrees besides drama school in Spain, and I knew that before settling in to learning the craft, I wanted to learn more widely. I came to the University of Kent in 2002 thinking that I'd like to be a director of playtexts. However, as I discovered more about theatre, I was drawn towards its more 'unusual' forms and a more collaborative way of working. Then I met Daisy and, well, the rest is history.