

In this year of archive-making and show-reviving it seems an appropriate time to reflect, tell some stories and offer some thoughts and observations.

My first idea was to speak about the pioneers, to make the connection to the people who inspired me when I started. So I took a look at the Street Arts Guide, which was produced after the 2002 symposium and bummer me there it all is, essays by Bim Mason -*The Outsider Comes In* an essay on the provocateurs. (An early sketch of his new book). Brian Popay –*The Art School Tricksters*, Baz Kershaw Mike Lister among others. The centerfold is a reproduction of a wall chart that ran the length of the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden, made on the day where everyone present had written their own histories, who influenced them and on whose shoulders they were standing!

Its £8 still available from ISAN. Fantastic cover too.  
(Slide)

So not about the pioneers then....

Jo helpfully sent me a list of possible areas of interest and I have selected four.

1. How street arts have changed?

2. Managing to sustain a company and a career
3. Why street arts? What's special or engaging about it for you, Impressions of the sector in the UK?
4. The next 25 years of UK street arts?

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### **How street arts have changed? [\(Slide\)](#)**

#### **When we began**

In his book 'Street Theatre and other outdoor performance' Bim Mason describes how 'in the 1970s some artists acquired a taste for entertainment, whilst some of them already had it'. Here is a clip [\(Video\)](#) of what for me is a seminal group JBPRK (This is a film commissioned in 1973 by the arts council that resides in their archive and is only accessible to academics – (1:39 – 7:08) (5.5 mins) Des Willis, Al Beach and Mick Banks and George O'Brian in a much-copied scenario The Film Crew.

Many of the groups starting at this time Avanti, Whalley Range Allstars, Desperate Men, The Natural Theatre Company all sit somewhere on this spectrum of art and entertainment, we all

share a taste for the mischievous and whilst not taking ourselves too seriously we take the work very seriously (comedy is a indeed a serious business) We once features in a BBC film by Howard Jacobson 'Seriously Funny' Howard was serious we were ....well we were.... in the film). (I should say that The Natural Theatre Company started earlier than us but may have been called Bath Theatre Arts Workshop). We can see in these groups a de-bunking of the more serious artistic pretensions of radical sixties performance artists and it marks a softening of artistic if not political stance. It might be that in the long run this attitude has helped the established arts scene to sideline the work, 'if they are not taking themselves seriously why should we?', no such chances being taken today (a symposium Eh? wow)

Example of an interview with Hilary Westlake & David Gale I recently found in a copy of City Life (a Manchester what's on mag from 1985)

The interviewer

'This is what they Lumiere & Son want you to know about their show [Brightside]

DG

Did you know that Diogenes used to masturbate in public, to show how readily available is simple gratification

HW

You have told me several times. There will be none of that carry on in this show

DG

What then?

HW

In Brightside we follow the travails of a dancer preparing for a performance. She has boundless optimism and trust. She is betrayed variously by her colleagues.

DG

Fair enough.

There is the rhythm of a patter act in this exchange, it could be Morcambe & Wise and they get to have it both ways with something funny and slightly shocking followed by a bullet point version of the show. Genius!

So this is the rich compost that was around when we started along with the Covent Garden busking scene that was burgeoning the 'art expressed through life' of Welfare State and the strange poetic humour of I.O.U.

There were no courses in street arts at this time, most performers were self taught hardly, none were actors (I remember a dinner in Glasgow where the performers described our backgrounds, there were math's graduates, circus performers, Fine Artists, designers, sociology graduates and a plumber, (not me incidentally). A vocabulary or analytical framework that was appropriate to discuss or review the work did not exist and most performers and companies would shun it or find it pretentious in any case. As a company we learned as we went along, trial and error was the way, but the stakes were not so high as today, as there were no festival directors looking at your new work. We watched other more skilled performers and we learned what worked and what didn't we overlaid our ideas on these hard learned interactions with the unsuspecting public.

There is not time today to cover the last twenty odd years of changes, so a few key events. Bradford Festival a mix of community involvement, international and UK street arts and the Mela. Manchester Streets Ahead a visionary ten year strategic program to involve all ten Manchester boroughs.

SIRF 29 years old this year. I was there this year and we had people speaking with us who saw our shows as children, there are many people in the town for whom the festival has been part of their whole lives, it has always been there, an important yearly marker, like Christmas or their birthday it just comes around.

The opportunity to play shows in Europe and see what might be possible.

We are now in a very different place, audiences have an appetite for our work and will often wait for a show patiently sitting or standing in the perfect half circle, having been stewarded there. So no need for audience gathering strategies then?

On today's programs there are groups now featuring trained actors and dancers giving the scene a more professional appearance. We see new faces in the dressing rooms, larger companies employ performers for a tour, and if one meets the show a year later the cast may have changed. Outdoor festivals too have changed to accommodate these groups, providing staging, warm up spaces, stewarding, high quality PA systems, lights; all that's missing sometimes is a roof and a ticket.

I think we should be careful not to lose what is best about those earlier more chaotic forms in our professionalization. I also wonder if the new performers will ever gain the experience year on year of the smaller artist led groups. (The Natural Theatre had a quite formal system to pass on this 'what worked and what didn't' as it was gained through doing the gigs. It involved team leaders and report writing and even workshops from the lead performers.

Another new feature of today is the creative producer. At best its this role is someone who understands that an artist or artist-led-company may well not have the resources, fund raising skills or more likely the time to invest in getting a large-scale project off the ground. Here an extra person on the team can realize work that otherwise could never happen.

At worst the producer seems to use the project or the artist as a career move, or to realize his or her own creative ideas. This is fine but I have noticed that sometimes the artist is left out of any later discussion, documentation or simply not credited for the work at all.

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## **Managing to sustain a company and a career** **(Slide)**

How do you sustain a company over 30 years? Avanti are not and have never been revenue-funded, we have been funded through G4A on a project-by-project basis and we are very grateful for that. What we aim to do when we make a new piece is to think about its shelf life, considerations like 'will this work in Europe?' and can a 'UK festival afford it? Is it priced as a festival ending show that only delivers audiences of 300? Will the fee the show can command pay everyone wages and leave something in the company to re-invest or mend the van when it breaks down. We look to create work that will stay in rep for more than one year, this is important as very few shows (I would argue none) achieve their potential in the first year most shows taking at least two seasons.

Small companies like Avanti needs to have two things, one shows that are in rep, have a known touring cost, and two new projects that are in development. We also have a large production



that can be mounted by utilizing freelance performers, new and existing collaborators such as Les Grooms and the skilled technicians we have worked with over the years. Hydromania ([Angers Slide](#)) is a site responsive show usually based on The Spurting Man but which we extend or adapt to include more performers and more spectacular water effects. In rep we have four shows ranging from a one hander to a three hander, the arts council initially funded all, except The Spurting Man.

More recently I have done some consultancy work for other companies mainly how to squirt water about but sometimes how to create some special effect.

We keep our overheads low, we have a workshop and some storage where I live but our fixed costs are very low. This makes us administratively lean and therefore more able to withstand the lean times. It also means emails are sometimes not answered immediately. We have accountants who act more like our admin team controlling VAT, PAYE and tax matters. And some valued associates and collaborators.

Other changes would include Carrying public Liability, writing risk assessments and complying with COSH regulations.

As we are such a small company all Avanti projects involve working with collaborators and I have been very fortunate over the years to work with some of the people who inspired me at the start of what I insist on calling my career, first by stalking them and when that failed offering cold cash. They include

Emil Wolk

Trevor Stuart

Hilary Westlake

Brian Popay

Neil Hornwick

Lou Glandfield

Avanti work with other artists who are very close to the company and I think of more as associates

Bryan Twedde

Helen Statman

James Macpherson

I should say though that collaboration is not always a straightforward process; ownership of

ideas and who gets to exploit them can be an issue. In our project '6 Impossible Things' we looked at how a scheme might work to pay some kind of royalty to contributing artists but the truth is that the market cannot sustain the extra fee the company would have to charge. Or to put it another way it would reduce the number of places the show could play, a smaller pie split more ways.

The availability of the co-creators can also be a problem. Working with Trevor and Helen from Cocoloco for example. They have their own projects and sometimes are not available, (In Australia for the winter) using deps is possible but there are re-rehearsal costs to consider and there is always the perception amongst programmers of being sent 'The B Team'.

A few words about The Spurting Man ([Slide](#)) show which has been our most successful show and is twenty-one years old this year. Directed by Emil Wolk we took it to Tarrega in 1995 where we were seen by Pierre Layac (five times actually) leading to an invitation to the 'on' program in Challon dans la rue in 1996 where we had an even bigger success. From then on we toured the show all over the world and are still doing so with Trevor Stuart taking over the role in 2003.

The effect of this success on both the company's profile as well as its financial position cannot be exaggerated. Although less useful things come from having such a 'hit'. For example we are known for using water, so new pieces that have none are often not sustained, 'where's the water then'? Spurty is the show that the bookers want, so selling a new show becomes a harder task.

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### **Why street arts? What's special or engaging about it for me? (Slide)**

So what are street arts, it can be anything from dance to sand sculpture from epic theatre with pyro to a solo clown whose suit appears to be smoldering. Here are a couple of questions I ask myself when looking at a new piece. Its not meant to be comprehensive but.

- What is the specific connection to the environment? [Slide](#) (NTC bike ride comfort station on the moor) Why outside, would this idea be better served in a theatre space or as

a film or short story? [Slide](#) (Theatre in The Park).

- Is there a connection to or even acknowledgement of the history of performance? [Square Dance Video](#)

Forkbeard Fantasy, performing their Square Dance created in 1977 at the time of the queens jubilee shows them making a work with outdoor context (Businessmen in bowler hats) connection to history, (there is more than a sniff of Morris dancing) and a sly political dig at nationalism, celebrating the flag whilst deconstructing it and stamping on it, and don't the people just love it! (3 mins).

What is great about street arts? Well

I'm not sure if I could put it better than Paul Herrmann in His book *Playing With Fire - Art on The Streets Of Manchester*, ([Slide](#)) he talks of 'the unpackageability of street arts' He says "PWF"

I think that is why I am interested in making performances outside the desire to create THAT moment and if you can slip in some imaginative ideas, whilst the audience is laughing so much the better.

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## **The next twenty five Years (Slide)**

I hope I 'm not, in my enthusiasm for these early groups, coming across as someone saying 'it was better in the old days', because clearly it wasn't there were many dispiriting gigs, being ignored by the public or moved on by unsympathetic police, even when we were booked by the council, poor accommodation, no food provided, changing in the back of the van. We thought we had found Nirvana when we first worked in France, what food, wine and a parking space! There are certainly more prospects now for funding and commissions. We have festivals dedicated to presenting our work, (although it has to be said fewer actual gigs on the circuit). There are promoters who believe in its value and the arts council now knows what we are, unlike when we used to be passed between the Visual art and the Theatre panel with neither knowing quite what to do with us.

I also do not believe that younger artists should be in thrall to the 'old guard' when creating their work. BUT.... Outdoor arts and outdoor

performance specifically has a history and a legacy, it has a range of techniques, tactics and aesthetics that even if they are ignored should at least be understood, if you want to stretch the boundaries you should at least know the geography. I look forward to the next twenty five years of outdoor arts, for example I look forward to someone cracking how digital media can be integrated in a way that brings the audience together rather than isolating them behind their screens. About AR and VR. On how the arts councils, and general European emphasis on active participation will pan out.

#### Future Advice (In the light of Brexit & Cuts)

- Work small scale but with big ambition, this is a mistake many, including Avanti have made feeling a pressure to make a work that is of a larger scale rather than a larger ambition
- Make a show that is a two hander and can travel by rail (not heavy)
- Take advantage of the weak £ We are cheap just now
- Collaborate with other groups and artists share resources
- I have some experience in telling the future here is what Mystic Monty (available here at this festival) would say.

## (Slide) Mystic Monty

I confidently predict that the future will be amazing. However, I can also say with absolute certainty that I haven't the foggiest what it holds. There are tough times ahead but the cupboard is not entirely bare. Your mood should be one of reckless pessimism.

I would like to thank you for your attention and wish you a fond farewell a happy birthday and a merry Christmas. I'll leave you with this short film of 'The Herculeans' a group featuring Johnny Hutch he would have been 103 this year. He was 53 in this video. Johnny is someone Emil Wolk talked to everyone he worked with he was born in 1913 look him up.

- [Emil Johnny Hutch \(Video?\)](#)