**Time, friendship and ‘collective intimacy’: the point of view of a co-devisor from within Little Bulb Theatre.**

Eugénie Pastor

**Key words:** *collective intimacy; time; friendship; process; virtuosity; collaboration; haptic knowledge*

I am an artist, theatre-maker and musician. As well as making work on my own, I have been an associate artist at Little Bulb Theatre for the past ten years. Founded in 2008, Little Bulb Theatre is a multi-award-winning company based in the South East of England that tours in the UK and internationally. The company’s work intends to ‘explore and illuminate minute human details’ through performances that ‘with humour and sadness will touch, startle and entertain’. (*Little Bulb Theatre* 2018)

I am a member of the company, but I don’t decide on its administrative or artistic direction. I write here from personal and individual experience, simultaneously from outside and from within Little Bulb Theatre.

My participation in the company and the relationship I have with each of its members are informed by the length of time we have spent together, as well as by the nature of that time. The blurred delineation between personal, professional and artistic time has proven to be a key condition of the way we developed, consciously or not, a company training. In this provocation, I suggest that our craft was acquired through training informed and shaped by time and friendship, and that this made a ‘collective intimacy’ possible. I propose that this ‘collective intimacy’ constitutes one of the particularities of the company’s performance style.

As a theatre-maker, I am not formally trained, and neither are any of the artists who compose Little Bulb Theatre. This is the case for several of our contemporaries in the UK. Some of us learnt music, a few studied performance practice and theory at university, but mostly, we learned our craft by doing it. We know how to do what we do because we have spent a lot of time practicing how to do it, and a lot of time doing it. At first, I didn’t fully notice I was both co-creating and learning a craft, because along with the rest of the company, I was mostly concerned with finishing and then performing the shows we were making. As time passed, I realized that the skills I was acquiring in Little Bulb Theatre constituted my artistic *training*, which continues to inform the way I make work today and has occasionally been what others have hired me for.

Little Bulb Theatre’s performance style is profoundly idiosyncratic: cartoon-like characters, stylized physicality, live music, narrative-led pieces that acknowledge meta-theatricality. I think of this style as ‘non-virtuosic’: by this I mean it is ambitious and, indeed, virtuosic, but unlike the virtuosity of the trained ballet dancer or guitar player, it is not technically impossible to reproduce. Without professional training, we individually and collectively work at becoming *the best at what we do*. This means mastering scores that we write for ourselves but that are often, at first, too ambitious to be performed by us.

This performance style is inevitably connected to the people who make up Little Bulb Theatre. To this day, all Little Bulb Theatre shows have been created, composed and performed by different combinations of the same seven performance-makers (including the company’s core of three), under the direction of Alexander Scott, whose influence on the company’s style cannot be understated. Another combination of people would have likely generated different outcomes. This is embedded in the company’s ethos and approach to theatre-making: Scott elected collaborators for their relationship to one another, not through an audition process, which means we were all brought in because of friendship, not solely for our artistic and professional merits.

I have spent more time working with Little Bulb Theatre than with any other company; in

this respect, my training is dependent on the very length of that time spent together. But the

fact that friendship is one of the bedrocks of the company suggests that this training didn’t

solely happen because we spent a long time together: it happened because this time is bound

by and constructed through friendship and a specific type of intimacy. It is time spent

rehearsing, performing, touring, living, cooking together, celebrating birthdays and weddings, mourning losses, being joyful or grumpy, anxious or carefree, meeting each other’s families… The very foundations of the company have depended on material circumstances that, alongside the friendship I have evoked and probably thanks to it, have meant sharing time and space outside of rehearsals and performances, into everyday life. In practice, this has meant that time spent working, and time off, are sometimes not fully demarcated. Many

dramaturgical debates, many song arrangements have taken place at the dinner table,

on transport to and from venues, when brushing our teeth before bed. In this respect, time

spent together, enabled by the comfort and support of our friendship, furthered our training

and our practice beyond the rehearsal room. The fact that there is not always a clean-cut

delineation between time for work and time for socialising, between private and collective

time, has taught me how to be on my own within the collective, how to think beyond myself

when I am alone, as well as new forms of intimacy that encompass friendship, siblinghood,

professionalism, a support network.[[1]](#footnote-1) I call this ‘collective intimacy’.

This ‘collective intimacy’ permeated the *training* we collectively built and enabled us to acquire a performance and musical style that is as individual and idiosyncratic as it is uniform and collective, for even though similar skills could be acquired, in one way or another, by anybody, there is still a Little Bulb Theatre style that is inherently the company’s and the sum of its members’ skills, abilities and relationships to one another. This permeates the work and is often commented upon by audience members: our apparent complicity, our evident friendship, blurred the frontier between fact and fiction in *Operation Greenfield*, where it became unclear for several audience members whether or not we were, indeed, the Christian teenagers telling their story in the show, even though the characters were obviously a lot younger than ourselves at the time of impersonating them. They also enabled the emotional undertones of the work to be embraced by some audience members, an intimacy that extended beyond the rehearsal room and the stage and opened up a space to be shared with an audience.

This ‘collective intimacy’ allows a different form of knowledge, one that extends beyond the distinction between individual and collective, self and other. In his article ‘Haptic Geographies: Ethnography, haptic knowledges and sensuous dispositions’, the academic Mark Paterson (2009) suggests that ‘the historical emphasis on sight and the optic solidifies perceptual “self” / “other” boundaries between “my” body and others’ (781). This, Paterson argues, favours a way of thinking about oneself as ‘a cutaneous subject conveniently enveloped … by skin,’ something which he argues ‘has no neuropsychological basis’. Instead, Paterson says that ‘there is no simple inside and outside’ because ‘the distribution of nerves throughout the body elides any neat distinction between interoception and exteroception in the ongoing nature of somatic experiences’. (780) This idea resonates for me because it suggests that there exists a form of knowledge that can be acquired through an understanding of the self that is less impermeable than we think. It asks us to think about what exists within us and between us, as individuals and as members of a group of people collectively responsible for generating new ways of moving, making, performing, being. This shared understanding of the way we move, individually and collectively, is what allows the high levels of ensemble virtuosity and synchronicity in *Orpheus*. Somehow, without actually looking, I know when my co-performers move behind or around me: the scene where I, as Eurydice, chase two of my colleagues holding paper birds, consistently turning to look where they have just left, has now developed in a way where I am able to time my performance with theirs, my movement with theirs. We have collectively developed a high level of control over the scene’s comic timing that is, in great part, due to our knowledge of each other’s ways of moving.

Acknowledging this suggests that the time I have spent with each member of Little Bulb Theatre and as part of the company has enabled a form of shared embodied knowledge that exists between all of us and as a part of each one of us. This ‘collective intimacy’ exists when we are together or when we are apart; it is a part of our lives that continues to live with me across geographic and temporal divides. It remains within me, a part of me that is uniquely individual, yet collectively owned.

**References**

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**Biography:**

Eugénie Pastor is an artist, performer and musician. She is a member of award-winning Little Bulb Theatre, with whom she co-devised and performed *Operation Greenfield* (2010), *Orpheus* (2013) and *The Future* (2019), among others. She founded She Goat with fellow Little Bulb artist Shamira Turner. Their debut show *DoppelDänger* (2017), performed by a pair of real-life doppelgängers, explores the boundaries between theatre and live music and what it means to be two women on stage. As an independent artist, Eugénie created *Pube* (2016), a one-on-one performance exploring our relationship with pubic hair. Eugénie is a part-time lecturer in Drama and Performance at London South Bank University.

1. It has also taught us how to effectively draw collective and individual boundaries between these shared aspects of our lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)