

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

This interview was conducted online via Zoom on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 as part of the Live Art in Scotland research project at the University of Glasgow.

The following is an 'intelligent verbatim' transcript that is intended to be an accurate record which omits some small, repeated phrases or false starts (where someone has spoken and then rephrased themselves) for readability. Text presented in [square brackets] has been added during transcription to clarify meaning and/or to include details offered by the interviewee(s) during the review process.

For further details of this process and guidance on conditions of use, please visit the Live Art in Scotland project website: <https://liveartscotland.org/index.php/about-the-las-collection/>

-----

Andy Arnold (AA): I didn't train in theatre. When I was young, I just wanted to be an actor and a poet. All of the time when I grew up, from about the age of eight onwards, it was mainly a poet. Then my mother persuaded me to do a degree in something sensible. I chose law, there was quite a famous actor who did a law degree for the same reason as me I think and he used to be on the telly in courtroom dramas all the time, so being a barrister seemed quite a glamorous, theatrical thing. I didn't get good enough A level grades to do the law degree and ended up at Dundee University doing social sciences because it was a new university and they were taking on people with very bad A level grades so I got in there. The first thing I was going to do during freshers' week was join the drama group and I just remember going into the room and there was a group of very posh ex-public-school birds who were going to do *Waiting for Godot* and I just thought this is not for me and that was the end of it. That was the end of my theatre life in some ways. Instead, I poured my performing energies into debating society and I was involved in setting up what was then the first Dundee International Socialist Workers Party. I was heavily involved in student politics but I was always the one with the megaphone [laughs]. Back in the days of Margaret Thatcher the milk snatcher, that's what it was.

Anyway, so I did all that and I didn't know what I wanted to do. Theatre wasn't on the horizon at all. I wanted to live some sort of alternative existence and it was things like

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

maybe setting up a free school because I did a year of teacher training too. I ended up getting a job when I left after I finished teacher training, in a college in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire called Isle of Ely. This is where an extraordinary thing happened in a way, it was purely by chance. It was this remote rural college, and I couldn't find anywhere, with my then wife Connie, to live at all to rent in this little market town of Wisbech. I even wrote to the local MP who was just elected, Clement Freud, a liberal MP, and said this is ridiculous, this college is trying to attract teachers and so on and there's nowhere to stay. I remember he sent me a letter back saying I can't find anywhere to live either. That was the end of that. And then somebody told me about this rambling old place called Levington Hall where this guy sometimes rents out rooms. This is a few miles out of Wisbech and it was very run down. It had double decker buses in the garden and bits of theatre props. The guy who owned it was called Tony Gray and he walked around in uniform and he had very long grey hair, he was an eccentric guy. He had children who were called Simbad, Sadko and Shiva. I discovered that him and his brother, Douglas Gray, had been a troupe called The Alberts. They had a show in the west end for years called something like The Best of British Rubbish [*An Evening of British Rubbish*]. I was fascinated by him and I didn't really enjoy teaching at all, I felt I was stuck and his life seemed very exciting to me, even though he wasn't actually working. He and his brother came from London originally, when Fleet Street was ruled by union stuff and they had print workers' union cards. They would go down to London once a month and spend two days and two nights just driving a van for the print workers union and that would give them enough money to pay the rent and carry on. He had a show that was appearing while I happened to be there. It was on at the Stratford East when Joan Littlewood was still there. I didn't know who Joan Littlewood was either. I think it was called something like the *Electric Element*.

It was a new show and their first time on stage for years. They were completely mad, they used to work with Spike Milligan, but they were too chaotic, even for him. They never went on television. This thing was The Alberts and Bruce Lacey. Now Bruce Lacey, you should look him up. He died a few years ago and in his obituary, they more or less said he was one of the first performance artists before the word had been invented. They did this show at Stratford East. My experience there was going to the local rep, I'd go as a kid to see Agatha Christies and that sort of stuff. I remember going to the Theatre Royal Stratford East and

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

Tony Gray had his double decker bus parked outside. He lived in it, it was converted, with a couple of Alsatian dogs and his gun. I went into the bar and it was a really noisy, smoky old bar with music playing, and the door at the side looked like a door to the toilets so I went in there, and suddenly you're in the auditorium. It was a really scruffy old place. They did this show which was completely absurd. I remember Tony Gray himself coming onstage back to front. He had a mask of his own face on the back of his head and hands and feet which were reversed and holding a script reading his lines. It was just ridiculous. Then this massive great monster came on and suddenly peed on the floor. It was totally daft and I thought, that's what I want to do. It was just bonkers. I said to Tony Gray, how did you get into it? And he said, you just have to make a show and take it on the road. I was chucked in that job and I didn't enjoy it very much and I went into community work, working for an organisation called the Rathburn Society. We were based in Leeds, but we did projects in Liverpool. I worked with them for a few years co-ordinating projects. I lied my way into the job in the first place, I don't think I was qualified but I was quite good at organising things when I was at uni. I was there for a few years and there was a Punch and Judy guy. It's interesting because I've just read the obituary of Bruce Lacey and they called him Professor Bruce Lacey. The Punch and Judy friend of mine was called Professor, apparently Punch and Judy people are called Professors. But he wanted to break out of his Punch and Judy life and so we devised this idea. I used to make poems in those days, that was my outlet, sort of punk poetry. We made these life-size punk puppets which we operated from behind to go onstage between gigs. It was called *Life on the Twenty-first Floor*, a bloke and his dad. One hand would operate the head and the other hand would be the real hand as it were. My bare foot would be operating the tape recorder for the sound effects. It was very primitive. It was great fun but it was very silly.

At the same time, I pitched an idea to Yorkshire Television about doing a kids tv programme because I was based in Leeds. They were actually quite interested in it and I met with their producer and they were going to give me potentially a bit of money to do research on it, like a pilot project, and I was going to chuck in my job and do that. Then suddenly this job came up as director of a theatre workshop in Edinburgh and we really wanted to go back to Edinburgh, or Scotland anyway. It was an arts centre, but it had a theatre space and I liked the idea of getting involved in an actual space that had a theatre in it. I applied for it and

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

managed to get the job. I was a bit lucky actually. The other candidates were dreadful [laughs]. I didn't really have much experience at all. The guy was Bob Palmer who then went on to be director at Scottish Arts Council and I was grateful for him because he ended up being head of the whole European City of Culture programme in Glasgow. It was him that hooked me up with The Arches. They asked me what my vision for the place was but I didn't have a vision, all I knew was that things would happen somehow or other, and they were a bit worried about that. I didn't have any ideas, but I was confident because nothing seemed to be happening there. They would have a staff meeting every Monday and it would last all day long. Everything went through Bob Palmer himself. One of the candidates asked why he was leaving after five years and he said he'd been working seven days a week, fourteen hours a day. I thought I'm not going to do that. I realised that everything happened through him and as a result of that, not very much happened. The first couple of years, most of the staff, who were quite a young bunch, left and I managed to replace them with people who were a bit more experienced. This has always been my philosophy ever since: have people who have got talent and you let them have space to get on with the work themselves and then you're there to support them. As a result of that, far more work was going on and I could focus on what I wanted to do, which was direct theatre shows.

Again, by chance, I was a bit nervous about it all because I hadn't any experience of theatre. I persuaded a mate of mine who was working in Leeds for a theatre company to come up and work with me. It didn't last very long actually, but what he did was invite a theatre company from Leeds who were looking for space to base themselves at Theatre Workshop. They were a company called Impact Theatre and the guy who ran it was called Pete Brooks, not Peter Brook. That's a point actually, I should tell you that. My whole life has been a case of missed opportunities. When I arrived at Theatre Workshop, I knew nothing about theatre at all. I didn't know anything about the Edinburgh Festival. My first weekend there I was moving in and the Arts Council said we've got a director coming to spend a weekend with young directors in Scotland and obviously at Theatre Workshop you'd be very welcome to be part of that troupe, even though you wouldn't otherwise qualify for it. I said that's fine, I'm just moving in, I'll come and say hello to the guy but I'm not really going to get involved. And that was Peter Brook, the Peter Brook. People were cutting their arms off to be in the room with him. The other faux pas there, my first festival that I'd organised, we had a busy

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

programme and the main event was a company called Basic Space Dance Company, who were a really good physical theatre dance company based in Edinburgh and they were going to be on at eight o'clock at night for three weeks. Then their director came up to me and said look the company has gone bankrupt, we can't do the show now. She said my husband Steven has got a new show that he wants to do and he'll take the space. I got in some student mime company from Pennsylvania. Her husband Steven was Steven Berkoff and he wanted to do the first performance with Linda Marlowe of *Decadence* [laughs]. They went to the Bedlam instead. So, Pete Brooks' impact there, they were an amazing theatre company. They were way ahead of their time. In those days there was Impact, Hesitate and Demonstrate, Rational Theatre, who were performance arts companies really. A bit like Bruce Lacey. They were art school graduates rather than theatre people. They had a show already called *Beowulf* which was a couple of scaffolding bars on a set. It was a diverse cast as well, we're talking about early 1980s. They made a piece of theatre for Theatre Workshop and they devised this piece called *A Journey Round Mungo Park*. Mungo Park was a famous Scottish explorer. They completely ripped out the seats in Theatre Workshop and they changed it into a Victorian Music Hall and promenade through into another space like a jungle. It was an extraordinary piece of theatre. One of the performers was a guy called Graeme Miller who still does performance art work, music work mainly, soundscape projects. He does a lot of walking around and listening soundscapes. Graeme was a massive influence on me.

Funnily enough, only a couple of years ago, before lockdown, Pete Brooks came to the Tron with his company Imitating the Dog. They're based in Lancashire. They did their own production of *Heart of Darkness*, which is that famous white explorer thing but they had a black woman playing the main character in it. They had all these amazing visuals. So that was again a chance that we happened to have that company who were a huge influence on me in terms of the type of theatre I wanted to do. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but that first encounter with The Alberts and then Impact Theatre and just people that I seemed to get friendly with. People like Gerry Mulgrew were there, who then formed Comunicado. And Andrew Dellmeyer, who has died now. They had incredibly irreverent attitudes to theatre and doing work which was not at all naturalistic, surreal work which just hit a cord with me. It was a learning situation. I didn't produce anything of note to be

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

honest. I was there for a few years at Theatre Workshop and then I was freelance. I got a job running the Bloomsbury Theatre in London for a bit. I was pretty bored there. Then the 1990 year of culture was happening and I got in touch with Bob Palmer and said is there anything I can get involved with and he said the Tramway are doing stuff but they haven't got any artistic person there. They're also building an exhibition under the railway station. They'll have a theatre person doing something there, doing street theatre. And I thought, street theatre. When I was in London at Bloomsbury, I used to spend all my time going to pub theatres rather than the big theatres and that's where I felt happiest in places like the Old Red Lion and King's Head and places like that. The Tramway was this massive great space run by the council and I thought no. Then I visited the guy at the exhibition at The Arches and he was a very dynamic architect guy, Doug Clelland and he said you could have a theatre space in one of these arches. It was amazing. The exhibition was a bit of a disaster actually. It was very controversial because you had to pay to go in and at that time, there were no paying exhibitions in Glasgow. They scrapped that after a while. But it was made by architects who didn't understand about public events at all. They got very excited about things like ship propellers, but it each arch was meant to be part of Glasgow. He said to me that every arch would be like a theatre set so you had a close or a shipyard and my little team could come and perform things so that was quite exciting. They had a team of architects and designers responsible for each arch. It wasn't just the arches that we inherited, it was the arches on the other side of the street as well so it was a lot of arches. Doug looked at these models for each arch and he said no, it's too naturalistic, I want something much more surreal. So, everything was scrapped and instead it became much more minimalist actually with metaphors for things, wonderful design swoops but it didn't mean anything for Glaswegian people. People would go there and there would be the section which was the Gorbals and it would be just nothing but architectural shapes. You'd open a little cabinet, and it would be the smell of the Gorbals, there would be a little thing here and there.

Along the road there was The People's Palace who had a literal thing and they were raging because they were getting no money and all this money was going there, so it was a very unpopular project and I thought it was a complete disaster. What I did was, we decided to have an old medieval playhouse and we made an old cart and three times a day we would

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

take this cart through the spine of the arches and there used to be all this noise, a cacophony of noise and I insisted that everything had to be silent when we took our cart out. I took on a team of people who I hadn't worked with before and they were like street artists really, playing a saxophone and a banjo. We trundled out this thing and we would do the story of St Mungo from his birth to his death in ten minutes, or the body snatchers, or great inventors and everybody crowded round. I learned a lot about theatre then. That thing of drawing people around a cart and grabbing their attention, that was very instructive for me. We just kept working away. We had a little team and we'd be there all the time, living in the place more or less for seven months. We would make shows every now and then to put on in a theatre space. At the end of the 1990 thing we all went on the dole and the idea was to salvage as much money as they could by ripping everything out and taking it down to the scrap yard or reselling it. Even the fire alarm system which was designed especially for that place, everything was ripped out. I pleaded with Bob Palmer and said don't rip out the theatre seats because at that time, there was no other theatre in Glasgow for a small-scale work. That was before The Citz had its studio spaces. I said you need somewhere where young companies can come and perform in Glasgow. I said what are you going to get for theatre seats, about a grand if you're lucky and so they left that. I didn't know how I'd get back in there. I went to British Railway who were trying to find a commercial tenant for the place. I said could I just get in there and maybe have it as a temporary venue for Mayfest while you're trying to find a commercial tenant and they said of course. They didn't charge me any rent for it and we managed to get all our lights and stuff at Tramway. I got a licence for it to have a programme of work going on in the theatre space and we got a local publican to put a bar on and so on. They gave me a licence and it was meant to be just for Mayfest for a few weeks but they made a mistake and it was a twelve-month theatre licence.

Stephen Greer (SG): [Laughs]

AA: So we thought well, let's just carry on. We had no money. Every day I'd go and check the electricity meter and we had things switched off all the time because I was terrified about the cost of that place. It was literally on the back of a fag packet that we'd be divvying up the money between us. We didn't get any grants. Because we could carry on, I managed to get some money out of the council.

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

SG: Was that the Glasgow Development Agency?

AA: We went to them and the guy there who ran it was by chance an arts buff and he was chair of the jazz festival or something like that and he was very keen on the idea of doing something. So, he agreed that they would guarantee the rent to British Rail for a year because they were looking for about seventy grand a year in rent, and we would pay them what we could, which was about one hundred pounds a week. It gave us time to set up a business plan. Nobody really knew what that could be and how that could work. I remember the GDA got together loads of leisure developers to have a brainstorming day [laughs] and they came up with nothing apart from that it could be the biggest pub in the world, which unfortunately, it looks like it is now. So, we just carried on making theatre in that little space and at the end of the first year, Pete Irvine who ran Regular Music, a brilliant, very clever guy who set up the whole of the fireworks and was a real cultural entrepreneur, when clubbing was really getting going, he said to me that he had this idea of a club night which could be a bit more old-fashioned and theatrical rather than just house music and he said it would be great to do it at The Arches. I knew nothing about clubbing at all. And the guys from Slam who were round the corner at Sub Club were coming as well and would do something. I came up with the name Café Loco, a theatrical nightclub that ran on a Saturday night. The idea was that I'd get some actors involved who would be in costume like drunken sailors or bouncers with cocaine all down their shirts arresting people as they came in, putting little bags of jelly sweets in their pockets, lots of silly things going on. Ian Smith got involved to do a little bit of live art in the space and another guy used to paint images on a canvas. The idea was that I'd start the night off with some announcements, some silly stuff, or maybe a bit of bingo and a piano would be playing and then it would be over to a live band. The first band was the Gods of Glam, we had the Scottish Sex Pistols, really mad bands and then it would be over to the DJs. The DJs wouldn't just play house music, they'd play disco classics like Sister Sledge and then there'd be house music. It was incredibly popular and you'd get a real trendy crowd. You had two crowds, one was the trendy, art crowd and then you'd get the more hard-nosed house music young clubbers. Every time a disco classic came on, the trendy crowd would all leave the bar and go on the dancefloor and then go back again. The trouble was Pete Irvine had to pull out of it because he'd been commissioned to write this book called *Scotland the [Best]*. He said I can't do it, you can do



## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

it. I said I know nothing about clubbing and he said look, we'll get you the DJs, you're going to do the theatre side of it, it'll be fine. It'll just be like a big party in your house every week. The big mistake was that we ran it every week for two years. The trendy crowd didn't want to come down every week, they'd come now and again, whereas the house club people, that's what they did. It got taken over by the young house music clubbers, who just wanted the house music, they didn't want all the performance art. They didn't want the mad bands, they just kept saying when's the DJ starting and the atmosphere changed a bit. It wasn't as fun as it used to be. Had we made it every month, it would've gone on forever. I got a bit tired with it because it was not what I wanted to do anyway, it was a means of paying the bills for the theatre. There was a guy who used to come down who ran Love Boutique and he was keen to run a club and I said well why don't you take over the Café. Love Boutique became one Saturday night, a thing called Colours was another Saturday night and we basically gave the space over to them. Love Boutique was great actually. It was a bit like Café Loco, it was more aimed as a gay club night but it was very theatrical as well, it wasn't a shift to something completely different. A lot of the Café Loco crowd carried on going to Love Boutique and that was great. The most important thing was that that enabled us to pay the bills. The first couple of years we had the publican from Blackfriars running the bar. At the same time as that we set up Alien War, this big exhibition thing in the derelict empty arches. Bands would rent it so they could rehearse there. There was a lot of stuff going on down the bottom of The Arches because we couldn't get a licence for the rest of the place. We realised the money was in the bar really. Club promoters or gig promoters would say they wanted to come and do something, and we'd say we have to charge you and they'd say well you'll take the bar and I said well we don't own the bar and they said that's daft. So we bought out the guy because the licence holder had to agree to hand over the licence so we had to be totally in his debt. He went back to Blackfriars and we started running the bar ourselves. That's when a business plan came up for The Arches and we were able to make it work. Then of course, after a few years, a clubbing guy knew that Cream from Liverpool were looking for a Glasgow venue and then suddenly we got a license to use the whole building. Cream came up with a superclub and filled the whole place, it wasn't great actually, but that was the ethos that carried on. That became a model for club nights.

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

SG: Okay. I know that there's a lot of touring work coming to The Arches at that stage, and obviously you're making work at that stage, so what's the theatre and performance life of The Arches in that period. What work are you making in that time?

AA: It was fairly scruffy theatre actually. Pinter plays and Beckett plays and particularly Irish theatre because I'd split up with Connie and I was with Miriam, my wife now. We got together in those early days and she's an actress from the west of Ireland so she introduced me to Irish theatre and we started doing mad, eccentric stuff, it's always the eccentric stuff. Things like Seán O'Casey work, not his most well-known work, but things like *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* and *Purple Dust*, clearly mad pieces. We did one of the pieces I was proudest of in those days. There was an Irish theatre festival going on in Glasgow and a lot of high quality Irish theatre companies going to the Tron where Michael Boyd was and we decided to do our own piece, which was *The Hostage*, an unfinished play by Brendan Behan. There wasn't an Irish person in the cast, it was all of us, including me doing con Irish accents in this completely nihilistic piece of theatre. It wasn't a play, it was just a happening in some ways. It was completely daft and it was packed out, whereas Michael Boyd was struggling with his famous Irish companies. It was very strange, but yes, I fell in love with Irish theatre and work by Brian Friel and Sebastian Barry, we did a piece of his. I was making what you would call theatre plays, but they tended to be on the surrealist, existential side of things, I think. That's the best way of describing it. In the early days, I did a big promenade production with a Russian theatre company and we did *Metropolis* and we had about one hundred volunteers and some professional actors and musicians. Angie Ian's partner, she played Maria this iconic character for *Metropolis* and Ian was in it as the mad professor. That was great fun. When you talk about live art, I thought well I didn't really make live art myself. I did a lot of site-specific theatre. Obviously, we housed live art because we had National Review of Live Art and that was a major event at The Arches for a number of years before they moved to Tramway. I don't know how that came about, The Arches always seemed the right place for it. I think it went through quite a dark period, it was during the period when a lot of live art seemed to involve people lacerating their bodies. By modern standards it wasn't that hygienic and cleaners were coming in the next day having to clean up things they shouldn't have to clean up. They started protesting about it and it moved on. The thing about those National Review of Live Art events, a lot of it I really didn't enjoy at all, I thought

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

it was very pretentious, but some of it was extraordinary. It's finding those little moments in those pieces which are still vivid in the memory now after all these years. My live art bit would've been in the type of things we set up during Café Loco, or for example, I wanted to produce the very first piece in the year 2000 and I thought we're having a club night that night, on the stroke of midnight we should perform a piece of theatre. I had this idea, it's a piece by Heiner Müller, which I don't think we've performed since. Do you know Heiner Müller? I should mention, that was the other big influence on me. When I was at Theatre Workshop in the 1980s there was the International Theatre something.

SG: IETM?

AA: IETM that's it yes.

SG: I can't remember what it stands for, but they were here in 2010 as well.

AA: That's right, they were. Well this was back in about 1983 during my first years at Theatre Workshop and they invited me to be a delegate in East Berlin, when the wall was still up. We were going across the wall at Checkpoint Charlie and we were staying in people's houses because there wasn't much money. I stayed in this woman's house and she didn't speak English and I didn't speak any German and it was very bizarre. When I was there, in East Berlin going to the Berlin Ensemble the Volksbühne theatre and seeing the works by Heiner Müller was just unbelievable. It blew me away. The following year I tried to stage something at Mayfest inspired by one of the Heiner Müller pieces. To try and replicate that work, unless you've got the time and the money to do it, it's extremely difficult. That was a massive influence on me actually. There was a piece called *Die Schlacht*, The Struggle. Three or four pages of script but it was like a two-hour piece. One visual image after another. That was the other thing that made me want to do that sort of thing. For the millennium, it was almost like a life cycle in five minutes. Two people come together and they have sex and suddenly they get married and have a baby, it was a visual performance piece and I thought we'll do that in the theatre at midnight. Almost the day before I thought there's no way these clubbers on the dancefloor are going to come into a theatre space, it's just not going to happen, it'll be empty. I thought no, fuck that. So I had these four performers and we brought a stage in front of the DJs in the main dancefloor and at midnight they just jumped up onto the stage and did this performance piece while the music was still playing and they loved it. It was great for the young actors, suddenly a

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

thousand people cheering at them. Trying to mix clubbing with theatre never really happened. It's a completely different culture. Clubbing was about this hedonistic thing of being out your face and jumping up and down and whenever theatre companies tried to do that, like Boilerhouse which was a Scottish company, and Frantic Assembly, they'd come up to The Arches quite a few times. It was based on club music playing, but what happened was, the music was stopped and somebody would tell a story and then they'd carry on again. There was a piece on the television called *Tinsel Town*, which was made by a company called Raindog at The Arches in the early days, Robbie Carlisle was involved with them. They tried opening a club night with *Tinsel Town* but it was ridiculous because obviously the drama would unfold and they had to keep turning the music right down. One thing you don't do in club nights is speak to anybody because it's just too loud. Sometimes you'd see a clubber coming into a theatre show and saying can I have a ticket for the theatre show please and they'd come and see the theatre show and then we'd be clearing it out for some big club night happening with some major DJs and you'd find this person hiding in the toilets. After *Metropolis*, I did *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and just called it *Caligari* and I got the Slam guys to make the music for it. Because Slam had done the music for it, Meikle and Stuart were the two guys, and it was essentially a visual pieces anyway, we got quite a lot of young people turn up for that so that was a nice marrying of the two things in a way.

SG: Nice. It's interesting the way you're talking about that and thinking about the line of travel to Kieran Hurley doing *Beats* and I'm just now thinking about how in that work, he navigates trying to talk to the audience and speak in the context of the soundtrack for that show, which is so much of it. How did they exist in relation to each other, literally, so you can hear him.

AA: I know. My ears were damaged actually after those eighteen odd years of club nights. After I stopped running Café Loco I stopped being involved in running the clubs but I always went down to them, I'd always pop in. So every Saturday night I'd go in and say hello and often be standing by a speaker booming away. It was mad, some nights I'd be running through the place and people were drifting about half naked and out of their face and I thought our whole organisation depends on these people. Glasgow is such a hedonistic city. When the whole thing went pear-shaped, before I left there, I thought the whole clubbing thing was dying. All those big clubs had all gone. The Arches was about the only one left. It

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

never bothered me because we had a licence for two thousand people and I thought people will always want to party. But pubs then had a late licence and you could go there for free rather than paying twenty quid or something, so I knew the end was in sight. When they did lose their licence, they couldn't think of anything different. They just carried on trying to run club nights until midnight but it just wasn't going to happen. It's tragic really.

SG: Maybe tracing back a little bit before that moment, I'm thinking about how the programming on the theatre side of The Arches and the place of the festivals and obviously Jackie coming on board and working with you. Do you have a sense of those festivals coming together because I know there was The Arches Theatre Festival and Arches Live. What do you remember of those? I'm interested in how they might relate to part of the work of The Arches in creating spaces and supporting the development of younger artists. Was that a conscious part of the work at the time, or is that something that you realised you were involved in as you were doing it?

AA: No, it was always a conscious commitment by me to give space to young local artists. That's what we were about. I used to say we will discriminate in favour of local young artists in terms of the way we programmed the place. After I left the Workshop I went down to London and when I came back, I didn't want to get involved in any of that type of theatre. I thought I don't want to work with people I've worked with before. I didn't fall out, but I just felt I don't want to go back to that. Working on the street theatre thing and the exhibition were mainly untrained young people, they weren't what you would call professional actors. And that carried on, so when we started programming work in The Arches, I wanted to make sure that we were always programme young local people as much as possible. For the health of the place it was also important to bring in a Russian company, to have that international, cosmopolitan feel, to see what is possible in theatre. But most of the time, it was giving space. In the early days, we just had that one space. It was only later on after refurbishment, we had all these extra rooms and that was part of it. It's such a massive building and the best way of trying to create an atmosphere in a place, was when you had a lot of things going on. In a way, it was tailor-made for festivals, because you could have all of these events going on without sound bleeding. I always loved that. In a small way, when I went to the Tron, they'd stopped using the Changing House as a theatre space, it was used for rehearsal space and I immediately said let's make that into a performance space again

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

and have both spaces going at the same time. Yes so Arches Theatre Festival and Arches Live and New Works Festival, it was huge really, having a load of things happening all at once and Jackie was totally into that as well. Jackie was great because she'd originally come to me when she was doing the Theatre Studies course at the University of Glasgow with Megan Barker who was a writer and they had their own little theatre company. They wanted to do something and I gave them space to do a piece of theatre, which was okay. Then, after that, I think Jackie tried to sort of work in television and we had this job going as programmer and she applied for it and I just always remember how much energy she had, even though she had no experience at all. She started programming and funnily enough, Megan Barker did a few projects. I did this piece called *Spend a Penny* in the toilets and Megan wrote one of the scripts for that which Jackie performed actually. At the Tron I got her to come and do a piece with me. She's a great writer, Megan. She lives in Wales now. What was great for me, was Jackie and LJ was an intern and became part of the team. They were great. Because I was always working on my own little projects, this company came to us and I didn't really have the time to meet them or whatever sometimes, and Jackie would always be looking after people and made them feel very welcome. Bit by bit, she and LJ started programming the stuff anyway. It's exactly like it is at Tron, because even there I was getting old. There were young, emerging companies who they were more in tune with than I was. It's the same at the Tron, working with Viviane who is my assistant producer, she'll make sure she's in tune with a lot of the stuff that's emerging in Glasgow. It meant I could focus on my own work and know we had this busy programme of work happening. After all the clubs I thought at last, I can relax a bit. It's just a theatre. Whereas those last few years I had LJ and Jackie, a whole infrastructure, suddenly the Tron was like starting all over again. I was programming all the visiting companies and directing the theatre shows and so on, and I was the only creative person there. It was really hard work. When Michael Boyd was at the Tron, he loved what we were doing, all these mad shows like *Purple Dust* and so on and he'd invite us to go to the Tron. I remember the same show that we did at The Arches we did at the Tron and the age group would go up by about twenty-thirty years because it's an older audience. I was really shocked when I went to the Tron how old the audience was actually. Because of that, I did the worst possible thing, and tried to cater for what I thought they would want to see, rather than what I wanted to do and I did some fairly uneventful productions. The first one *The Drawer Boy* was a great play, but after that I

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

did things that I thought would appeal to an older audience and it didn't work out at all, so I just abandoned that and went back to doing the type of work I like doing myself. That's what you've got to do really haven't you?

SG: Yes.

AA: I remember, who was it, a famous London empresario, not Lloyd Webber but the guy who does stuff with Lloyd Webber, he did *Les Miserables* and *Cats*. He's extraordinarily successful. And he once said, I put on the theatre I'd like to go and see myself and that just happens to be very popular stuff [laughs]. Working with Jackie was brilliant. Despite our age difference, we were very much soul mates theatrically. She knew exactly what I wanted to do and likewise. We liked the same things so it was great. I got her to perform in a few things actually. She's quite a decent actor. She couldn't change her accent though. We did a play, *Moonlight* by Pinter, and I played in it with my own London voice and she played this ghost daughter who died and she kept appearing behind this gauze and speaking and she had her Edinburgh accent and I said look, we're all doing London, can you not just do an English accent and she couldn't [laughs].

SG: [Laughs]. I didn't know that Jackie had ever performed. It's sort of obvious in hindsight, maybe. In knowing her over the years, I'd never realised.

AA: We did a thing, the first one-to-one piece of theatre I did was called *I Confess* and it was in the basement area and it was all these five-minute confessions to the audience. One of the actors doing one of the pieces went off sick and I got Jackie to go and learn a five-minute piece and perform it. And she did it and she was great. After that, it was about that time that somebody said we have to celebrate fifteen years of The Arches and I was dead against it because I thought we've still got this idea that we're the new kids on the block. I didn't want to make noise about being there for fifteen years. So I said perhaps somebody can watch somebody do a piece, they can be sitting on the toilet and they can watch them having a crap and I was being very silly. And then I said those toilets are massive in there, let's do a piece of theatre in the toilets. So we did this thing called *Spend a Penny* where we had four actors in the men's toilets and four actors in the women's toilets, so eight audience members would be together and they would go into a toilet cubicle and there'd be a five-minute piece. I got four established writers, James Kelman, my friend Frank Deasy, Liz Lochhead and David Harrower, to write five-minute pieces. And I got four emerging writers,

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

one of which was Megan Barker to write the other pieces. The audience member would sit on the toilet seat and the person would come and shut the door and there would be somebody hiding in the toilet. Some were quite serious, for example, there was a woman waiting in the toilet for her results for a breast cancer diagnosis. There was another one and they were working in a supermarket and they were transgender and this person who'd been at school with what was then him just made fun and called out and it was upsetting. They were all different unrelated stories. The one that Megan wrote for Jackie was in the men's toilet, hiding and pretending to be a boy on a club night in the men's toilets watching the guys go in. She was great, she was brilliant doing that.

SG: It's interesting to me that you've got this one-to-one work and there's a theme of confession and there's a bit of my head that's immediately drawing a line to how important both confession and one-to-one stuff becomes in a British live art tradition. These are micro bits of theatre. I suppose I'm interested in how practice gets seeded in lots of different ways no matter what you call it.

AA: I love that type of work. It was by chance I came across it. We were doing the promenade type things before, but the actual one-to-one, that came from an English dramatist who lives in Milan and she was working with an Italian writer and she came to The Arches to develop a piece of theatre and the guy was going to come over but didn't come over, and the piece they'd done in Milan consisted of literal confessions to a priest based on Catholicism. So I got involved and said let's do that then, but it won't be a religious thing, we'll just call it confessions of different types and she worked with these young writers who all came up with these five-minute pieces. Before Christmas, I did the promenade piece at the Tron: *high man pen meander*. If we were allowed to get audiences in with social distancing, we could do that as a one-to-one theatre piece. It would be great. We couldn't, so we just filmed it. I love all that. That's my next project that I'm planning on. My son Luke, who lives in Cambodia, he watched *high man pen meander* and he said oh, it reminds me of *Russian Ark*. Have you seen the Edwin Morgan piece?

SG: Yes, the online piece?

AA: Yes. Have you seen this thing, *Russian Ark*?

SG: No, I know the name, but just having read it.



## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

AA: I hadn't seen it at all, but I've been captured by it ever since. It's the same thing, it's just one person. It's extraordinary, it was made about ten years ago. It lasts about an hour and a half and it's one single shot, it never breaks. There are thousands of people involved, it took years for them to set it up. They were allowed to have this massive museum in St. Petersburg for one day. The night before they spent all night long getting stuff in. It's a historical piece, there are people in costumes, extraordinary costumes. There's this character at the beginning, a bit like a character I would play, talking to the camera saying, what language is this, is it Russian, okay. He's very much dismissive of Russian architecture and is a great believer in European art, but he takes the camera and you come across ballrooms, orchestras, all types of things and it couldn't go wrong. After twenty minutes, something went wrong with the battery and they thought, we've got one more chance to do this and the person carrying the camera was exhausted. But it's amazing. I've got this idea to celebrate us getting back in the theatre in Autumn, of maybe just having about fifty actors over a couple of days and have something happening throughout the building and then maybe going outside and along the street and end up in the Panopticon. That's my plan.

SG: That's lovely. There's something so appealing about it being an act of film, but it's also film as a live event.

AA: Yes, absolutely. I was pleased about the *High Man* because it felt like it was theatrical even though it was being filmed. That was interesting that piece. Originally, we were going to do a live piece and I invited actors to share how they would interpret a Morgan poem, rather than casting actors and giving them a script. Those pieces there were devised by the people who performed them. It was a really interesting bunch of stuff. It was just choreographing really, putting the whole thing together, without necessarily directing at all.

SG: That sort of strategy, when you're talking about *Spend a Penny* and working with established playwrights and then emerging ones in that instance.

AA: [Phone ringing] Can I just take this call?

SG: No worries. What was I asking? In that project, where you're asking artists to respond to that brief to respond to the work of other people, that sort of invitation to work with other artists, or younger artists, is that a conscious strategy of you or the Tron? I'm interested in

how theatres and other organisations try and make space for experiment, or make space for risk. What's the offer that you have to extend to other artists to make that happen?

AA: I don't know if there's a rationale to it. I think I'm constantly wanting to explore other ways of making work. If you work through the conventional thing of just choosing bits of work and then casting them and so on, you keep coming across the same people all of the time. What was fascinating when I did that piece, the person who did the Marilyn Monroe thing, Oskar [Kirk Hansen] did the cigarette poem, I would never have met them otherwise. In fact, Lenor who did the astronaut one, Leonor Estrada. I think she's brilliant, I love working with her. She did a piece for Manipulate and it was extraordinary, unbelievable. A very clever piece of work and she's Peruvian so she brought a different ethos about making theatre, I think. The mentality of doing things in an off-hand way, in a fringe sort of way, a fairly chaotic way has always been my ethos in some respects. When you make a piece of theatre like *high man pen meander*, we literally did it in a day, and same with *Spend a Penny*, we got all these rave reviews for it and we literally rehearsed in a day. Even with a conventional play, I just want to play around with it, whereas you'll get some directors who will spend a week just working on the text and talking about the intention of a line. That intellectualisation of theatre has never been my thing really. To a lot of the staff at the Tron, I was a bit of a disappointment when I arrived there because The Arches had been reputation of doing stuff on a shoestring and not what they would call proper theatre. I tried to do proper theatre and we had elaborate sets and eventually I realised that it doesn't have to be that way and now that's accepted. Maybe it comes back to having not trained and having been introduced to theatre by The Alberts and Impact theatre. I don't ever want to lose that either. The older I get, the more eccentric I want the work to be because I realise that there's a time limit now. I always have the culture of The Arches, which is the same in the Tron to some extent, the right to fail, to explore work. The big difference with The Arches was the theatre space was just one in a massive operation. There'd be a few thousand people coming to a club night, so if there was only twenty people in the theatre for the show beforehand, who cares. When I got the job at the Tron, I suddenly realised that everything was built around that theatre space and having audiences in – all the bar staff, the technicians, everything. There are only two hundred and thirty seats so it's not like a six-hundred-seater where you are compromised in terms of what you can do. I think in Glasgow

## Live Art in Scotland: Andy Arnold

we're very lucky, we have audiences who are far more adventurous than in most theatres. If you think of the main repertory theatre, The Citz, right through Giles Havergal's days right through to what Dominic is doing, in most cities you couldn't have that sort of programme. When I look at work Leeds Playhouse do, or Manchester Royal Exchange, they're wonderful theatre but when you think about The Citz and Stewart Laing doing *The Maids*, it's just not going to happen in the main house at most provincial theatres so we're very lucky that way. I always feel confident. My theory is that because half of Glasgow is second or third generation Irish, that there's a literary tradition there so that good pieces of theatrical work, there's an audience for it. I think we're very lucky that way, more so than Edinburgh. In Edinburgh, there are three weeks in summer when it's brilliant but other than that, it's hard work getting an audience. Traverse struggle to get people in the rest of the year. I think that encourages you to take risks which is great.