

## Live Art in Scotland: Neil Bartlett

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Neil Bartlett (NB): Starting, I don't know. I grew up in a town with a theatre so that makes me quite unusual. The town was Chichester in West Sussex and they had a brilliant access scheme as we would call it now, although such terms were unheard of when I was a kid. I've told these stories so many times, but it's really important. They used to do this thing where the back row of the theatre only went on sale on the day of the show and the tickets were really cheap. We were middle class. By that stage, my father was a lecturer at a teacher training college, so we weren't poor, but we were a low budget household and my parents used to take us to see the shows from when I was seven or eight onwards. The way we did it was we went and queued up before school and then you bought the cheap seats. When I was eight, I saw Anthony Hopkins - I now know although I didn't know at the time – play Peer Gynt, I saw Alfred Marks in *The Italian Straw Hat*, I saw Voytek's amazing design for *The Tempest*, so my idea of going to see a show when I was little was going to see really good modern productions of classic dramas, but I watched them from the back row. I was a bird watcher when I was a child and still am, so I used to take my binoculars. Theatre and live performance were always a very wonderful and strange thing for me. Another thing which is a significant influence was a youth theatre in the town run by Sarah Maynoll. It was a bunch of kids and this woman who was an alternative hippie, not at all like my family background, and we used to meet in the evenings once a week in a semi-derelict, Victorian

school building. We put together shows, we made things up, and we did shows on the street. What was pertinent about that was the idea of a small group of misfits getting together to make something up. The council tried to demolish the building where we rehearsed to build a car park and we all climbed on the roof and called the local paper, and they came and took pictures, and the building was saved and is in fact still there. It's now a community arts centre and cinema. My background did not include any notion of adversarial politics or demonstration. That was the first demonstration I ever went on that was in the context of youth theatre. Other starting points, this is a classic I can't remember, but I think it was when I was still at school. I was in Edinburgh, and it was possibly during a family holiday. I think I was still in sixth form, that's right, and I'd gone up with a bunch of my friends from the youth theatre and we were doing a piece of street theatre at the Edinburgh Fringe. We were sleeping on the floor of a scout hut and doing what we thought was *commedia dell'arte*, although we just made it up from reading some books on the subject and I wandered into Richard Demarco's gallery. Richard was rabbiting on showing people around the gallery, and at the time Richard's great project was a thing called *The Journey*. He had this theory that the great discovery to be made in contemporary art was connecting European and American avant-garde practice with Neolithic art, standing stones. He was talking about the Neolithic art of Malta and as it happens, fifteen or sixteen-year-old Neil knew quite a lot about the Neolithic art of Malta because my dad had worked in Malta, and we spent a couple of cheap family holidays there. I got talking to Richard and the next thing I knew, he whisked me off and I went on the journey for three nights. We went to Carnac and I didn't have a passport, but he got me on the ferry, and we went to Carnac together. We went to some of the west country Neolithic sites. Richard Demarco brought [Tadeusz] Kantor to this country for the first time. I didn't see Kantor on the very first visit when Richard was still on the Grassmarket, but I did on the second visit. Kantor performed *The Dead Class* at the old art school at the top of the Grassmarket. I went to see that and that was a life changing experience, seeing Zofia Kalińska in the *The Dead Class*. It was unforgettable, I've still got the poster. Then I went to college, I went to Oxford. Partly as a consequence of growing up in Chichester, although I loved the excitement, the glamour, and the fun of the theatre there when I was a little boy, by the time I was a teenager I hated it. I hated theatre as a bourgeois hobby and I thought everything about theatre, that kind of theatre – lights, costumes, dialogue – was horrible. It was boring, sexist, it was all about

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reading *The Daily Telegraph* and voting Conservative and I hated it. When I was at college, while other people were aspiring to go and get a job as an assistant at the Royal Shakespeare Company, you know Pierre Audi was doing posh, expensive, experimental productions of Shakespeare plays so that he could then become Pierre Audi. With a bunch of friends, I was doing what I would now call live art, although we'd never heard of it. There was a bunch of us, and we were called A Company and there was half a dozen of us, I think. We used to put on these semi-theatrical action pieces in bedrooms and in the street. This was at Oxford; everyone was doing theatre and you could rustle up an audience by clicking your fingers. I held a seance for Oscar Wilde which involved making people covered in flour, smoking cigarettes, and eating bunches of red roses listening to the Verdi Requiem in Oscar Wilde's old living room. Now, I could do that at the Tate gallery, it would be fine. Where I got the idea from, I think it was partly through meeting Richard and seeing Kantor so there was that. Before The 1982 Theatre Company, there was a thing at college. 1982 was very much about a bunch of us who had left college going right, what are we going to do, and we didn't want to do any of the conventional stuff. All of the women in the company were very active feminists and I think we would now call ourselves multicultural to acknowledge the different cultural backgrounds of the company members. One of us was Latvian, one of us was Lebanese, one of us was Polish, one of us was Jewish, one of us American, one of us was Canadian. We talked about all of that, and me being out and queer as part of the company was really important. I performed in drag in the company. The other thing that happened, A Company at college, we actually did a show at Richard's gallery in Edinburgh. He asked us to go and make a show and we filled the gallery with newspaper. The audience all had to sit on the floor up to their necks in newspaper. Sounds brilliant, I can't remember why. I made a big coming out speech as part of that show, that's how I came out. The other thing that happened, and I don't know how or why this happened, my friend Nicolas Bloomfield, who was later one quarter of Gloria as the composer, and I bunked off and went to Glasgow for a matinée and we saw *Chinchilla* at the Citz and I have never recovered and I don't want to. That was how I first went to the Citz, I don't know how we heard about it. Someone must have said, there's this fabulous place, you should go. We certainly didn't know what the show was. We went on the bus and then we couldn't find it and I remember walking around the Gorbals as they then were and thinking this can't be it and then going into the building and thinking I've just died and gone to heaven. Of all the curtains I ever

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saw at the Citz, the first five minutes of *Chinchilla* is still oh my god. So, there was that. There are a lot of starting points, but at the time I got into the live art and performance art, there were very definite allegiances. You couldn't do theatre and performance, or theatre and live art. That was a huge no-no.

Stephen Greer (SG): What were the camps? Was it visual artists?

NB: Well, theatre was hierarchical, literary, old-fashioned, bad, and performance was contemporary, groovy, real, authentic, and good. That old chestnut, despite the fact that the work that I really loved, the greatest of that whole generation, was Rose English. What a great artist, just fantastic. I saw all those shows. I met Rose through Nikki Millican at the Midland Group. Nikki put on a programme at what was called Theatre Workshop in Edinburgh, down the hill?

SG: Yes.

NB: Yes, at the bottom. There was Anne Seagrave, Rose English, was I doing something with friends? I can't remember. I remember seeing Rose for the first time and that was it, I was addicted. I saw everything she ever did. Theatre was a dirty word. Something you should read, I don't know if you've seen it, I was guest editor for an edition of *Performance Magazine*.

SG: Yes.

NB: All the people that I picked were theatre artists. I talked to David Freeman about opera, I talked to Annie Griffin who had been part of The 1982 Theatre Company and I'd been co-director of some of her early shows, I talked to Lily Savage, to Roberta Taylor who was one of Philip's leading ladies at the Citz. The whole purist performance thing never –

SG: Never made sense, never held purchase for you.

NB: I didn't get it. I always took the view and still take the view of by whatever means necessary. My laughable body of work where I am the only person who has opened a show at the National Theatre and the Royal Vauxhall Tavern in the same week. My CV is a complete embarrassment, I'm supposed to be a medium posh literary novelist who performs in drag or takes their clothes off and I've done great big boring shows at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and I created *Stella* and *A Vision of Love*. I've always argued that the

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division between mainstream and whatever you term what is not the mainstream, is historically non-existent, but all cultural production in this country is about policing that boundary. You still get people saying oh my god, something has crossed over into the mainstream.

SG: That feels a lot of the time like a judgment about audiences, about which audiences exist for which kind of work and the idea that those audiences are somehow separate communities.

NB: Yes. That was one of my big arguments with purist arguments about live art, that what you're really saying is people who go and see *Mamma Mia!* are stupid, uninteresting, and victims of false consciousness. What the fuck is that about, why would you say that? When I was running the Lyric Hammersmith, if I was doing interviews there or if I was having conversations with local councillors, it would always come up 'do you really think you ought to be doing plays by Marivaux or Genet, or late Shakespeare?' and I would simply take people to my office window and say, 'there is the high street, show me which of those women you think is too stupid to relate to a play by ]Kleist]. I hate it because that goes back to the experience of Chichester which was theatre was a communal ritual of self-congratulation. Somewhere I've said all of this so much more eloquently and concisely.

SG: [Laughs].

NB: There is an essay. I gave a lecture called The Steve Rogers Memorial Lecture because Steve was the editor of *Performance Magazine* and there was a lecture, I think at Trent Polytechnic or Nottingham that was set up in his name, and I think I gave the first one and I think it was called what mainstream and I said all of this much better because I was twenty. You should look that up because I'm giving myself permission to ramble.

SG: I think I have read it, but I will look it up. There was a lovely turn of phrase, I was working with the archive of the National Review of Live Art and part of the video collection, a lot of it is performance work, but they also captured some of the discussions around the platform programme and there was one from 1989 or 1990 where people are talking about their responses to that year's programme of work. There was a moment where you're sitting on the floor off to one side and you offer this question in the room about whether the programme was about work which was offering different understandings of decorum

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and different ways in which work might offer itself to an audience, or invite an audience in, or imagine their presence. And that what the National Review or what the platform was doing was putting multiple and sometimes radically divergent understandings of performance decorum in the same space. I don't know if you recall that at all or if that resonates with you?

NB: I don't recall it, but that sounds like a good question that I was asking. I have always said the only thing that matters is the audience and we need to have much freer minds, much more critical minds about what is the audience for our work, what is the access route to the audience, because we're trapped on every side by incredibly damaging assumptions about who could or should be the audience and how they get to us, and audiences are always being hived off. One of my party piece arguments about hierarchy and division in the perception of new work was I used to sometimes talk about, and this would've been the late eighties, this incredible largescale piece of performance art which used older and younger performers from period and contemporary performance traditions to perform each other. You would have onstage a mixture of elderly people reviving classic antique performance modes and young people delivering contemporary performance modes and that was the content of the piece. People would say oh my god, that sounds incredible, you mean this is a large-scale show, it's not at the ICA. I would say well in fact it's two shows and one of them is the London production of *Follies* by Stephen Sondheim and one of them is *Kontakthof* by Pina Bausch at Sadler's Wells and the description pertains for both shows. Now I think we can safely say those shows are meant to have nothing to do with each other and shouldn't be talked about in the same breath. In the same way I was making a point of 'why can't we talk about Roberta Taylor playing Oscar Wilde's Mrs Cheveley or Philip Prowse and Ethyl Eichelberger working in New York in the Village and Lily Savage working in the Vauxhall Tavern?' Why can't we talk about those three things because I love them all. I think what's good about them is the same in each of the three circumstances. That's been an important through line for me.

SG: I'm interested in your role as MC in the context of the National Review. You become a bit of a mediating figure between these different possibilities. Maybe you can tell me what the job involved, because it is quite a practical job of getting people from space to space.

NB: Pain.

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SG: And doing it in high heels as well.

NB: Yes, high heels. I mean that was the biggest thing. I don't know why Nikki asked me.

SG: Was that at the Midland Group the first time?

NB: Yes, it was at the Midland Group the first time. You'd have to ask Nikki why she asked me or how we met, I can't remember. The National Review of Live Art was a good and serious thing. I think maybe I'd been there. I think *Complicité's* first show in the UK was called *More Bigger Snacks Now* which I directed. We played that in Nottingham and maybe that's how Nikki met me. No, I don't know, you'll have to ask her how she found me and why she asked me. The biggest thing was that I was doing it in drag. I used to get into the building for eight or nine o'clock in the morning and by ten o'clock I was in full drag, wig, high heels, moustache always, so it was punk drag, queer drag, performance drag. I wasn't Lily Savage, I wasn't either a comedian or a pub glam act, I was a punk. It had come out of the work that I'd done with The 1982 Theatre Company where I played one half of the queer couple in a Brecht play called *In the Jungle of Cities* and I wore a fabulous black ballgown to do that and high heels. In the early eighties I was going out in drag as well as going out in leather, because you did. Anyway, that was already a big thing. I was funny, I was sexy and out, gay drag probably wasn't the first thing that you expected if you were coming to see the National Performance Art Festival. The job was every day, and it used to run for three or four days, from ten o'clock in the morning until when we turned the lights off when the bar finally closed at eleven o'clock. There was a rolling programme of work and some of it was performance in the sense of if *Dogs In Honey* were doing their show was at three o'clock. Sometimes it was durational, so when we went to the Riverside Alastair MacLennan was in an upstairs room nailing mackerel to the wall all through the day and all through the night. I loved him. I had to stay in the building overnight and take him little cups of tea and at four o'clock in the morning there he was nailing mackerel to the wall. It was a really beautiful piece. It was so beautiful because he had a window looking at the Thames and these fish round the wall. I had to keep on saying to people and now ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, if you'd like to make your way over to x, y, z. I would introduce every show if that was relevant, certainly the platform pieces were especially tricky because you had ten pieces to get through on the day and they were mostly early career or student artists so they would tell you their piece was ten minutes long but actually it was an hour

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and ten minutes long, so you had to deal with getting people in and out, coming on at the end and saying thank you so much now if you could all leave quickly because we've now got to blackout the studio and fill it with ice and get some kettles boiling, whatever the next piece of work was. Sometimes it involved troubleshooting. There was a piece at the Riverside Studios, I can't remember who it was, somebody set up monitors in the coffee area and started playing pornography as part of their piece and I had to deal with deciding to turn that off because there were children in the room and then deal with an artist who was accusing me of being a fascist. There were simple things like getting everybody out of the CCA and up to The Art School at ten o'clock on a Saturday night.

SG: So, you're going out into Sauchiehall street.

NB: You're going out into Sauchiehall street basically dressed as Patsy Cline dragged through a hedge backwards and dealing with that which was fun but getting sixty people up the hill without getting lost and then discovering, I don't know if you've ever walked from the CCA to The Art School but it's fucking forty-five degrees. I've been in three-inch heels for three days so I'm ready to scream with pain. I made the audience form a human chain and drag me up the hill. It was marvellous. Dealing with when I helped Nikki persuade Derek Jarman to do his installation piece at the CCA with Keith and Tilda and Joanna Scanlan and there were occasions there when members of the public got very angry because there were live homosexuals in the building, and I would have to talk people down. If we were having discussions, I would be moderator. Sometimes I'd get roped into a performance. Nancy Reilly, a member of The Wooster Group, I remember having to lend her my shoes at the last minute and then something happened, and I had to be part of her performance. It was a very wide-ranging and active brief. I was also kind of company manager, in the sense that I would be the one running around saying are you ready yet to technicians and artists. Having a strong one foot in theatre was very useful. Theatre is about giving people a good time. Live art at that point was mostly about giving people a really, really bad time, it was very important that we all had a terrible time. It was about confrontational difficulty, newness, uncertainty, all of the great stuff so it was good to have someone who could say 'yes, you can have all that but we still need to start at 7.30pm and I need to make sure everyone is comfortable and having a nice time. Now please put your hands together for Lloyd Newson and Nigel Charnock climbing the walls'.



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SG: I'm thinking about those interventions that were required or invited by the job particularly in relation to Derek Jarman's installation having watched quite recently a lovely documentary of him showing people, the documentary crew, around the beginning of the exhibition and him walking past one of the walls which had been decorated with tabloid newspaper covers and him saying this is just a selection of what was available and a real shudder of memory and recognition kind of going through them. It struck me as perversely funny that the objection was to the live homosexuals rather than this wall of hate. That was then I suppose.

NB: That was then. They've just reissued all of Derek's journals and I think it's *Modern Nature*, hang on. No, I can't remember which one it is. Anyway, I did the introduction for one of the reissues of the diaries. It's not *Modern Nature*, it's *Smiling in Slow Motion*, I did the introduction of the last volume. I write about that day at the CCA in there.

SG: Great, I will look it up.

NB: The other thing I've forgotten to mention, which I want on record, is I used to change my outfit at least five times a day. One of the things was you needed to keep people going. We've all seen live art since ten o' clock this morning and at the weekend when it was the platform, you'd be seeing a new piece every half hour and they were very challenging because they were mixed in quality, but they were also completely different. It was like seeing an art school degree show where everyone is doing their own thing and so it was very important to have me introduce a piece, disappear, and then come back at the end to say thank you so much, now you all have to move over here. I'd be in completely different outfits, so I used to go up to Glasgow with suitcases of Oxfam drag. I always used to do the same trick at the end of the festival. My last outfit was always my best little black dress, no jewellery, no wig. The last day I would basically put more and more on until I could hardly move for jewellery and there's nothing you can do with a wig except make it bigger, so I'd be backcombing and spraying. I remember a marvellous occasion when, who was the other dancer with Lloyd, not Nigel who went on to have a big solo career, the most beautiful of them. Oh god, his name has gone. Beautiful dancer. He used to warm up with a little trampoline, this was for *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men*, in the dressing room. They all wore little white y-fronts, the most beautiful crotch in Christendom would be bouncing up and down and I'd be madly backcombing and spraying, and I remember it got to the point

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where he was checking something with his hip alignment in the mirror and he couldn't see because my hair was getting bigger and bigger.

SG: [Laughs].

NB: It was very mad, but I think it was a good trick on Nikki's part to realise that there needed to be an energy that could run through and connect all the disparate pieces together. I can remember in Nottingham there was one evening where we went from Man Act to the Brittonioni Brothers. That's such a huge change of taste and I think part of my job was, by sheer force of will, to say to people these things are all connected somehow, they're all about live art. Every single piece that you are seeing is somebody putting themselves on the line to create a new piece of work and let's try and open our heads to that. That year there was also a wonderful company from Poland who did a sort of classic post-Kantor, post-Grotowski, men in dark suits, girls in flimsy white dresses, lots of blackouts and screaming and angst. It was absolutely wonderful, absolutely beautiful. That was the same weekend as the Brittonioni Brothers.

SG: I know exactly who that is and the name, I'll look it up and I'll send you a note, I can't remember who that company is.

NB: It wasn't Theatre Babel?

SG: No.

NB: No, they were a bunch of English art students who wanted to be Polish, and they did very solemn things about breaking slabs of concrete. I remember the Brittonioni Brothers forgot to turn off their smoke machine and so while they were performing, not only the upstairs studio where they were doing their show but the entire building filled with smoke. It was like being in the blitz. Gradually, you couldn't see their show at all. It was just Timmy, I can't see. Darling, keep talking, it'll be fine Timmy. Timmy where are you.

SG: [Laughs].

NB: I loved the Brothers I still do. They were great.

SG: It sounds like part of that role is not just making the case for these are people putting themselves on the line for this live event, it was also about creating conditions of permission. It's okay to enjoy this work side by side.

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NB: Permission, I mean it was very good training for the job I had to do at the Lyric, which was one week I'd be in the foyer as artistic director loitering and welcoming the audience for the first preview performance of Anita Dobson and no one had any idea what's going on or what this piece is or why it's interesting. Then two weeks later, I'd be dealing with the school parties arriving for the pantomime, or we'd be putting on Robert Lepage, some touring theatre company doing something we don't really programme but out of complete desperation I somehow had to carry the can for that too and make the public feel cheerful about it. That was one of the great lessons at the Citz. When you went to the Citz, someone opened the door, there was somebody at the street door and sometimes it was Giles. Everything about the foyer, the décor, the bar, the ushers were always brilliant. Everybody said yes, come in. There was no screening or scanning. So many cultural institutions, without realising they're doing it, have a screening policy and something about the way the building presents itself means that some people feel really comfortable going there, which is fantastic, but the knock on from that is a lot of people really don't feel comfortable going there and they never go there. That needs to be constantly interrogated and one of the things I learned from the Citz and from Giles in particular who I adore and revere, was there's a real politics to believing everyone is welcome. If you really believe everyone is welcome then you have to be prepared to be in a crowded café or on Sauchiehall Street or giving an interview to some absolute expletive from Radio 4 who starts off the interview saying so this live art thing, tell us, it's all sort of people taking their clothes off and screaming, I understand it's being paid for by the council. You have to be able to suck it up and say yes, you're absolutely right and do you know what, it's really wonderful, can I interest you in a ticket, there's one piece that I think your kids would really like. You have to believe in welcome and I believe in my own Catholic taste. I'm in recovery from Covid, I was diagnosed with Covid thirteen days ago and one of the things I did because I'm immunocompromised and because I know people who have died, I quickly rewrote my funeral instructions. And I have the live recording of [Maria] Callas singing the funeral aria from *La sonnambula*, I have a passage from Genet, and I have my favourite song from *Follies*. I mean it, I don't have a hierarchy. I don't think you can't have Callas and Ethyl, that you have to choose between Callas and Ethyl Eichelberger. I don't mean indiscriminate taste, I mean the opposite of indiscriminate, I mean finely discriminating taste. It's the space where different practices meet that excites me just as it's the space where different

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audiences meet. My decision to go and see a show is always guided by do I want to sit in the same room as that bunch of people who are in the audience, not by what's the show or who's in it, but do I want to be with those people. I have a horror of smug, homogenous audiences either as a punter or as an artist, when I'm onstage or if I'm sitting in the back row watching a show I've directed. I want to be going where the fuck have these people come from. There was once a matinée at the Lyric where Cher was sitting next to a bunch of schoolgirls from Hammersmith and that was fabulous. The best nights at the Lyric were our opening nights because on opening nights the tickets were free, which was a trick we stole from Glasgow. You would get people who the only other time they had been to the theatre was to the panto, or they'd just come because the tickets were free and they'd seen a queue and said what's this for, oh it's free, alright I'll go. Then they'd be sitting next to Alan Rickman or people who were coming because it was a show that I'd made, gay men who wanted to see my latest piece. A lot of that scrambling of possibility I think the National Review of Live Art subliminally was about that. I think Nikki would take a very different perspective. Nikki was very much the reason why this matters is because this is not theatre. What you said at the beginning about the problem with most histories of performance is that they really are histories of the kind of performance where the primary record is a script. This is a problem because with most performances, the primary record is not a script. Most performance is predominantly visual, musical, and physical, either literally within the live event or in terms of genre. More people go and see music and dance put together than go and see theatre, but you wouldn't know it.

SG: No. That idea of what are the conditions of possibility for that kind of work. I'm also thinking about the personality of the Third Eye Centre before it became the CCA as a parallel institute on the opposite side of the city to the Citz. The Citz still does a fifty pence ticket deal, that's the current version of that approach. I think the Third Eye was so loved and succeeded at that moment because of the way people seemed to feel comfortable walking in off the street. It was their space, whoever they happened to be. I think that the change to the CCA was difficult for that reason because it felt like something that had belonged to Glasgow was replaced by a shinier new building, which still had the wrapping on it.

NB: Yes, I only went back once, and I didn't know how much it had changed. My kneejerk reaction was oh, this is awful. It's suddenly become like everywhere else, it's essentially a

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posh café with some art to help brand it. That was nostalgia. Things come and go. It was great how scruffy, low budget, and stylish it was and how much got done with, as I remember it, a staff of three people with a few technicians.

SG: I'm conscious of a body of work with Gloria that toured or was developed in partnership with the Third Eye and the Tron and then also touring to places like the Traverse. It feels like there was a sequence of works there. It's a history cycle isn't it of *A Vision of Love*, *Sarrasine* and what would be the third one?

NB: *Night After Night*.

SG: I'm interested in, and this is maybe separate from the conversation we've been having so far, those works as being linked by historical investigation. I think there was an interview, maybe with Alan Sinfield, where you talked about a sense of the crises of the past running in parallel with those of the present and that each of those works was speaking to or from that sense of urgency.

NB: Yes.

SG: Where's the way into this? It's maybe a link back to *Performance Magazine*. I was reading through old issues of *Performance Magazine* and I went through a sequence of them where I realised I'd read a series of obituaries and then a few issues later, I started seeing the first adverts for things like their gay and lesbian, what was the phonenumber called?

NB: Switchboard.

SG: Switchboard, that's the word I was looking for. I realised these were obituaries of people who had died in the AIDS crisis and there was no mention of that. I was reading absences. I read those plays and I read them as, and you've said this directly, conscious interventions or responses to that moment of the AIDS crisis in the late eighties going into the nineties.

NB: The AIDS crisis was concurrent with the other crisis, which was the deliberate and systematic stoking of homophobia. It was getting crazy in that levels of violence against gay people were through the roof and there was a sense that it was normal. The kind of constant belittling and cultural assault from all levels of the media that you're now seeing against trans people over the past two years was specifically focussed on gay men like me,

so people who were visible as out gay men. You were the devil incarnate. You would be spat at, you would be shouted at, and you would get beaten up if you were unlucky. You would avoid going into newsagents because as you said that thing that Derek did in his installation at the Third Eye Centre was a transposition of what life felt like. You'd go into the newsagent, and you would have to not look at the front pages because there were times when it was every day that there was a new story vilifying us. There was a need to counter all of that. I was in my twenties and thirties, so I was in the time of my life which was all about who am I, what is my life, what is my culture, what am I doing, what is it for, and I was of a very particular generation that was on the back of the first heroic wave of British gay liberation. Two of my closest friends were Simon Watney who is very much the political activist HIV end of British gay liberations, and Bette Bourne and the Bloodlips who were absolute street intervention, put a frock on and dynamite the patriarchy before you eat your breakfast. I was standing on their shoulders, and I was responding to all of that, so yes, all my work is pursuing that agenda. All my work. Those three pieces most obviously, but I can't think of a piece of my work that doesn't pursue from a queer perspective the question of how do we live. It doesn't matter if I'm doing a new piece for Duckie at the Vauxhall Tavern or if I'm doing a tragedy by Racine at the National Theatre, it's the same thing. I wrote the first draft of my translation of *Bérénice* in the sauna. There was a fabulous sauna on Sauchiehall Street, do you remember? You came out of the CCA and turn right about fifteen doors down on the left-hand side, and I used to take my pad and pencil in there. When you're translating something it's often when you're not actually sitting at your desk you go ah, I've just got the rhyme or the image or the line. Part of my manuscript for that translation is a bit blurred because I was in the sauna. Also, that work with Gloria was addressing at an institutional level, how do you create a liminal space, as the young people these days would say, where you can have the best of both worlds between the mainstream and not-the-mainstream. Why can't you have a devised, queer, musical comedy with radical politics at the Royal Court. Why does it have to be at the CCA or the ICA. Part of the argument for that was historical, of going queer people have always led the mainstream British entertainment industry, never mind talking about literary theatre culture. Name a part of any branch of British entertainment whether that's low comedy, ballet, opera, literary theatre, or live art that hasn't been led by distinguished queer practitioners and by women. A lot of Gloria was about that. Those co-productions that you mentioned, it wasn't

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just we want to make pieces with more than three people in them and we want to pay the women in the company childcare therefore we have to seek supplementary funding, it was saying why can't we talk to the audience at the Nottingham Playhouse or at the Tron as well as the audience at the ICA or the CCA. If you look at Gloria, the first shows were at the ICA and then we end up at the Nottingham Playhouse, at the Lyric Hammersmith, at the Royal Court, and the last show working with Artangel was in Southwark Cathedral. It was very deliberate; the systems of production were thought about as much as the scripts.

SG: Okay. It's interesting what you were saying a few moments ago. There's a line from the beginning of a book by Judith Butler, the patron saint of queer theory, and she writes that the ethical project of queer theory or of queer studies might be extending the range of lives which are liveable.

NB: Yes, totally. That's it, making more life possible for more people. One thing that really interests me, that I don't have any perspective on at all, is that all the work that you're talking about, there was no such thing as queer studies and there was very little professional teaching of live art. Now, my life is full of twenty-three-year-olds who have got degrees in live art and performance practicepractice, and they've got intersectionality tattooed across the top of their dick. When was the first queer studies degree, it wasn't in the 1980s. There were beginnings of stuff. I can remember going and teaching at Trent Polytechnic and there was as much live art as theatre going on there, so the live art thing was definitely bubbling and brewing.

SG: I don't know when the programme at Dartington started, but that's been hugely influential.

NB: Yes, I remember people coming out of Dartington. Didn't Ralph come out of Dartington? Do you remember them, Jonathan and Barnaby? They were great, I love them. That show with the table that they did forever and ever, that was a cracker.

SG: I've remembered the question I was going to ask and it kind of links to what we were just talking about with *A Vision of Love*, *Sarrasine* and *Night After Night*. I was really delighted a few years ago when you did the restaging or revised version at the Tate of *A Vision of Love* and the reading in 2017 in one of the gallery spaces where one of Simeon's paintings is hanging. More so than any other encounter with your work, there was

something about the labour of performance in that work. I'm trying to think of the question I'm asking here. I watched that and I reencountered more recently the reading of *De Profundis* which is a six-hour work and I'm interested in that durational quality. That would be the theatre studies lens that would be applied to it. But there is something about an extended engagement with those histories, both in terms of you returning to them on multiple occasions, but also in terms of the act of performance itself, of you spending time and inviting or requiring audiences to spend time with those histories that feels really important. Maybe it feels like an intuition. I don't know if that is part of your encounter with those works or the way you approach them as performance events?

NB: I've never thought of it as durational. I think a hallmark of my work and a really important thing about me is that I am sometimes a performer and so the notion of engagement, the notion of this really is me, this is me in the room with you and I know that ought to be a given, but it isn't a given in performance work of any kind. Of course, most performers' work, like most of everything, is superficial. I'm not making any claims for myself as a performer or as an artist because I don't have that perspective on my own work, but there's a quality of personal engagement. On one level, the easiest way of identifying that would be to say, yes, I am walking up Sauchiehall Street in three-inch heels on Saturday night or I'm performing *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* naked. But on a larger level, in 1987 when I was performing *A Vision of Love*, to be there in the room and most of the audience was other gay men and to talk not literally, because there was nothing literal about the performance at all, it couldn't have been more highly wrought. It wasn't confessional or low-key let's talk about how we're feeling, it was very wrought theatrically, but to be there and to talk about what I was talking about and to propose myself as a vessel for the communal feeling in the room, that's something I also require of myself. If I'm working as a director, that's what I love in performance. The performers I love can do that. When I worked with John Lithgow at the Royal Shakespeare Company, he played Malvolio. I'm deliberately choosing something that is the least queer, least mainstream, least oppositional thing I've ever done, but that man was right there. John and I really understood each other on that level. The primary task is to be there in front of the audience with utter frankness. I can't talk about that in anything except the most subjective terms because there's an aesthetic dimension to that notion of presence, there's also a professional



dimension to it. The great dancers, singers, performers, painters, live artists, they all have that in common, that ability to be there. It's very rarely the people who talk about it. This language that I'm using now is to do with the context of this interview where you're asking me about this stuff, I would never talk about this in the press or anything like that because it's hopelessly subjective and people claim it too often. All of the artists I love as a punter and I've worked with great people and they know this truth, which is about – what's that wonderful phrase of Raimund Hoghe who was Pina Bausch's dramaturg? Throwing the body into the fight. Bringing your body to the table with everything that it is and everywhere it has been and its journeys, bringing it to the table and using it. Knowing how to use it. A lot of it is about aesthetics. I remember doing *De Profundis* and I have no idea why I did it but as it was time to begin, I was dressed up and I was in my suit, I had my jewellery, my handkerchief, my glass of water, I had my picture which was a beautiful original publicity photo of Wilde that I brought with me so he could be with me in the room, and I stopped and took my shoes and socks off because I needed to have my bare feet on the floor even though I was sitting down. I'd read it through myself and I knew it was going to take six or seven hours and I said to Michael, I don't want to take a break. If he can write it then the least I can do is read it. I'm not going to say I'm a bit tired now or I'm a bit upset or I need a sarnie or a pee, I'm not going to take a break. I needed my bare feet on the floor, so I'm offering that as an image of engagement and presence. It's engagement on all sorts of levels and it's no good really being present if you fixed it that only people who can afford thirty-seven quid for the ticket are there in the room for you. Then you've failed. Your present in one way, but you're so hopelessly compromised in another. People have said to me, Neil *Twelfth Night* at the Royal Shakespeare Company what the fuck are you doing? I'd go A, have you ever read *Twelfth Night*? It is one of the few perfect works of art in the history of the human race, there is not a single comma wrong with it. B, do you know how many teenagers will get their first exposure to gender fluidity by seeing *Twelfth Night*. *Twelfth Night* is a perfect example. Is that a mainstream project or not? I knew what I was doing when I cast it. I cast Jason Merrells from *Waterloo Road* which guaranteed the moment that he walked on stage, every teenager in the room turned their phone off. 'Oh my god, he's kissing a boy!' I cast those great women to play the three male comedy roles so you had essentially drag kings littering the stage. Chris New wasn't Chris New when he played Viola for me, he didn't have that kind of queer profile, but he reeked.. he was queer. Every

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teenager in the room knew that's a queer on stage. He just had it in his body and that's fantastic. All the grownups went, 'wait a minute, isn't that John Lithgow playing the butler, what the fuck is going on?' Creating a mainstream like that and then really fucking with it so that there was real substance to the event. One of my favourite possessions in my archive is a letter from an outraged punter at Stratford who ends their letter by saying I think if Shakespeare had intended his play to end with the sight of a grown man kissing an adolescent boy, then he would've said so in the script. Lovely [laughs].

SG: [Laughs]. That idea from Raimund Hoghe's work and also what you were saying about the tangible presence of queerness, is making me think about what part of the allure or the potential of what drag is. I think there's another interview I've read where you talk about one of the qualities of drag performers that you prize so heavily is that what they deploy onstage overlaps or is borne of the survival strategies that they deploy in life. We're talking about different registers if you like of the same order of presence.

NB: Yes. It's an extraordinarily subtle yet powerful thing even in the most removed form. Ru Paul when she's sitting there being filmed for the umpteenth time in this shitty overextended franchise, there is not a frame where you do not know how she got there and not just her, but the history that is sewn into her gowns. It's very hard to see how it's done and the answer is she's a really good artist, she knows how to do it and she brings it. Sometimes she brings it really obviously because she talks about it. She gets her politics there in front of the camera, but mostly, she does it by the way she breathes. That's it.

SG: Yes.

NB: It is something that women and queens bring to the table and have always brought to the table for me, that notion of this is my body and my body has a history and it has a history of all my sisters. I've always taken great inspiration from women and queens because they get it. The good ones. I'm not saying it's biologically or culturally determined, but the people who can articulate that knowledge through their art, those are the people that I want to collaborate with. They're amazing.

SG: Where it plays out, I'm thinking about the form as much as the narrative content of *Stella* of having these two stories of the same life at different moments. Two unclear moments, at the beginning and the end roughly, speaking to each other. I think there is

something in the foreword to the published version of that play where you talk about the slipperiness of language. Now, we might imagine either of those characters potentially talking about themselves as being trans. I can't remember how you phrase it, but there's a lightness of allowing for that without fixing on it, or without closing off what those stories might have to say. I'm interested in that dynamic particularly when queer performance makers engage with historical past that all of this language, all of these terms are historically and culturally dedicated and that's no great surprise, but then how do we go about creating spaces of recognition.

NB: Yes. Well through the deployment of our skills as artists. I always say to people, take what you need from history. For me it comes from within my culture as a queer man. I grew up in a time where it was normal to find your inspiration in people utterly unlike yourself. A really obvious example, idolising drawing real cultural and spiritual strength from either working-class women or very grand women, so either Cilla Black or Callas. No one ever said to me, that's cultural appropriation, you can't be enthusiastic about that. You can't dream of being more like her, of being as brave as she is or as wise as she is, or Lily, Ethyl or Regina. No one ever told me those sources of inspiration were off limits. So creating *Stella*, I'm queer, I'm a sort of butch passing queen, Richard is a much less butch queen. Oscar was a young, straight man. Rebecca, who was our movement director, is a trans woman. I don't think any of us tiptoed around the question of 'am I allowed to be inspired by this person? Am I allowed to be Stella, am I allowed to say Stella is me? I feel her courage, agony, giddiness, beauty, her lust' I think I'm just trying to illustrate the terms of reference that I bring to those sorts of discussion, rather than starting with let's define categories and let's include some people in those categories and exclude other people from those categories. I suppose I'm trying to say that isn't the same thing as saying therefore I can speak for trans people. I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying I can be inspired by trans people. I can dream of emulating their courage and their skill. I'm not saying I'm really a trans person, I know all about that. I'm saying I celebrate the space in which we meet, or I create the space in which we meet but on the explicit understanding that I sit at their feet. Not I'm importing them so that they can prop me up as an artist. I think that's important.

SG: That's really clear. I had an interesting conversation yesterday or this morning about the inflection between the idea of cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. What is the

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line. I think that what we were talking about is that nearly always or very often it is do with a dynamic of power. So, the image there that you offer of sitting at someone's feet captures that, what's at stake.

NB: Yes. A huge influence on the writing of *Stella* is I went to Japan.

SG: Oh yes?

NB: I spent two weeks there and I went to the Kabuki every night and I was lucky enough to meet with Tokizo [Nakamura V], one of the great contemporary onnagatas and there you're having all of these discussions where none of this framework exists. Why, Tokizo-san, sir, how do you prepare to incarnate the princess Yaegakihime whose a delusional, fourteen-year-old sixteenth-century aristocrat? Well, I've been preparing for forty years to play this role. I was born to play this role, I didn't choose to play this role, my family heritage determines. In my country, assuming the role and the spiritual destiny of the princess Yaegakihime is simply a role of technical dexterity. My only concern is probably forty years of preparation and he'd literally been rehearsing this particular role for thirty-two years. He was taught it thirty-two years ago before I saw him perform it. He was worried it wasn't long enough. Being with a great artist who had that frame of reference was incredibly liberating because it meant I could put aside everything and pay attention to what he said to me, which was can I accurately portray her spiritual destiny, that's what matters. The princess Yaegakihime has a famous opening scene where she has to move you beyond tears by sitting still with her back to the audience and he does. You felt it come from the stage, it was like one of those special effect things in the X-Men when someone sets off the death ray and you see it shimmer through the crowd and everyone ripples. The curtain passed and there she was, she's sitting looking at a picture of a picture of, as she believes, her dead lover who it turns out, is next door. You felt the grief come across the auditorium and hit you and were silenced by it. That was quite a lesson. Then, three hours later the show was over and with an interpreter and my friend who was taking me, we were told that we could meet him after the show and go and have dinner with him. This is an incredible honour. We were told to wait by the side of the stage, and they were taking the set down because it was a touring show. Then this little, rather hot I must say, white-haired, suntanned man in an Armani suit comes up towards me extending his hand and I'm just about to say 'I'm terribly sorry I'm waiting to meet Tokizo', when of course I realised it's him. Amazing. That was the

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biggest influence on the creation of *Stella* and that was deliberate. I set myself the task. I said well, I've been working with cross-dressing performers, male drag queens of different denominations all my life, and I really wanted to tell this story. I wanted to go back to this story because I'd written about Stella in 1985 or 1986. I really wanted to touch base with that, but how can I come to it new, and I thought I'm going to go to Japan where they do it better and they do it completely differently. They don't share any of our cultural assumptions about how a man wearing a frock for a living works. It was a complete revelation.

SG: That's beautiful. That's quite a high bar to come back to. That level, the artistic and technical accomplishment.

NB: You need to be clear that of course, you're not aspiring to that level of technical accomplishment, except Richard and Oscar did a pretty amazing job in that performance. The things I did to Oscar's body in that performance that he learned how to do was incredible. Oscar was the young Stella. He never showed it, I don't think the audience ever knew that he'd learned how to do all that. All the things that you have to do with your neck, your shoulders, and your knees, with your voice, and he had to put make-up on, wear shoes, and he had to wear a corset. It was beautiful. Richard is a great actor, I didn't have to do anything except enjoy watching him work. He's a great actor and he's a great technician.

SG: I'm aware that you've made some pieces which have responded to or have been shaped by the conditions of the pandemic over the last year and a half.

NB: I've just finished a new book so that was really good because writing is really hard, so I'm very happy about having done that. That's being published this autumn and that's another meditation on queer history. As for what I'm doing next, I was meant to be making a new piece for Duckie for the Vauxhall Tavern in a couple of weeks' time, but I'm not sure I'm going to be doing that because I'm still sick. After that, I don't know. I have a couple of scripts that I'm working on. I want to give, that's the next thing I want to do. I think I feel really sorry for young gay men. I was so lucky when I was twenty, I could go to pubs, I could go to clubs, I could see Divine, I could see Ethyl Eichelberger. I could step over Boy George and Marilyn because they were having another fight in the gutter. I could see Michael Clark, I could go and fuck my brains out all night. I could go and see Bloodlips. Riches, riches, riches, everywhere I looked. Now, all they've got is the fucking screen. I think it's a nightmare. How

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can you be homosexual if you're learning to be homosexual from your phone? I know of course, it's fine, because queers are tough, queers are brilliant. All the kids are finding their own solutions and that's wonderful. They've got Ru Paul and that's fantastic, but I really want to be making work which continues the project of sharing the queer body. I've got some things that could continue that project, which are a couple of theatre scripts that I'm writing for other people which are about bringing queer bodies and women's bodies on to the stage. One is for a theatre and one is for a theatre company and they both have really great audience policies. I want to make work in places which have great audiences. But I'm very old so I have no idea what the next year holds. I'm sort of just expecting to be unemployed, but we'll see.

SG: We'll see.

NB: We'll see.