

Live Art in Scotland: AI Seed

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AI Seed (AS): I suppose I had a few first encounters. My interest in theatre came in stages. In my teens I was always at the local am-dram club, but that was never really about having an aspiration to make a career out of it. That was really a social thing. What I was really into was music and poetry, and it was really through that that I sort of got into the idea of making art and that's really where I began thinking about the possibility of creating as a living. So, theatre didn't really excite me until I was at university to be honest. I ended up doing theatre studies because it was something that I had always been engaged with, but then I found people like Samuel Beckett, Ionesco and David Mamet, that was the first time that the hooks got in. I think that was because of my interest in poetry, the idea that you could use language not as a storytelling tool necessarily, or using it logically, but using it musically and poetically and imagistically. The idea that you can use language to take people to spaces that are strange and only sort of half understood and that was really when I engaged with theatre as something that I might want to make. I suppose the big crunch moment came when I left university and I saw Slava Polunin, who was in Glasgow for the first time, doing *SnowShow* which was quite big moment for a few people. That was the original version of the show when it was just him and Angela de Castro, who I've been lucky enough to meet since. That was a total game changer because the opening for that show was Slava coming in and pulling on this rope, a five-minute routine of pulling on this rope and you didn't know what was on the end of it and it was hilarious. Then he sort of pulls and

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de Castro comes in with a noose around her neck. I remember I wrote a wee thing about that for something, I think it was The Arches publishing, and said it was more Beckett than Beckett. I was just like, oh wow you can actually do that and actually do what Beckett actually said he wanted to do. "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence", and all that kind of stuff, but yet he still spoke. You can actually circumvent the whole language thing and work completely in terms of image and space and physical experience. That was an awful moment, it was horrifying because I kind of felt in my guts, I knew in my guts that the past four or five years of my life might have been wasted having done my theatre degree. It took me a couple of years from that moment to get the courage to go, actually do you know what, this is the thing that I really want to do and then I went off and did all sorts of physical theatre training.

Stephen Greer (SG): I want to say that was at Circomedia?

AS: Yes, I went to Circomedia in Bristol. That was sort of a split between doing Lecoq and Gaulier-style physical theatre then more technical circus skills. Not that I ever had any ambition to make circus, but I figured that the kinds of skills that you learn in circus would be useful and applicable and it bore out being true that a lot of the physical discipline was useful. Although as I say, I was never interested in making a sort of skills-based show. That was the start of things. But weirdly now it's all come full circle and I've got this total obsession with tragedy. The work that I've been doing most recently is about the relationship between tragedy and Bouffon, a sort of Gaulier-style of working. I mean they're both extremely physical. I've become really engaged with the idea of you know, can you achieve a mode of performance that is tragic in the traditional Greek sense, but completely without words. I've been doing a lot of work in that area. Words are good, they're useful, but as we were talking about before, they do have a kind of tyranny which I'm very aware of and it has been a bugbear throughout the work that I've done. I'm not sure if we want to jump onto that.

SG: I mean yes, maybe we do jump into some of the work. I find it interesting that a few different problems are connected. It's the written bit that gets documented and then passed around and assumed to be the heart of the work. I don't know if we want to dip into a few of these. There are some of the works which maybe you're most well-known for, maybe *Oog* is the most well-known show, but I'm also really conscious of things like the *Red*

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Room made with David Hughes, so two different projects. I don't know where we want to pick up, but maybe we just start with one of those and its process of development, or its voice or language.

AS: Yes, I suppose in some ways *Oog* is the thing that summarises how I'm thought of and I'm very proud of that show. We were talking before about genre and people saying, oh no I'm not a live artist, I make performance art or whatever. The thing that I like about shows like *Oog* that I've made, and that's a sequel to an earlier show called *The Factory*, is that I'm quite mercenary about how I go about labelling those shows. Those shows have been to dance festivals, visual/visible theatre festivals. I'm quite happy for it to be called live art. It's creating something that is very plastic and it's really about making a performance that is driven by a strong sense of need to make it and having a concept or a feeling for it, and really just using whatever tools, or combination of tools, that you have to make that happen. The other thing that I find interesting is the most respected film magazine in the world is called *Sight & Sound*. With films and with theatres it's like the sound/music can be half of the world and certainly when I'm making solo stuff, the sound is another performer on stage. Guy Veale, who I do a lot of work with, and actually having said all of that, it's Alberto Santos Bellido who does all my lights as well. I don't have any physical architecture, but the light becomes the architecture and actually the light and sound are really vital performative elements that I think are other personalities on stage. In that way it does feel like it's getting to making installations or visual art, but it's fundamentally theatre. For me, what theatre is really is about is the magic trick of a live metaphor. You know, you've got a cardboard box on stage and it's a boat. And you look at it and you see both things at once. You know it's a cardboard box, but when the person gets into it, it is a boat. It's about being able to hold that complete oxymoron in your head, the riddle of the thing. It's magic. I think what you get from that experience is what I term big stupid emotions. I like big stupid emotions and the playfulness of the magic of that thing. I suppose that's one point where perhaps, not that I'm particularly interested in drawing distinctions, but that is maybe something that I feel is distinct from some work that I see. It does feel like this difference in terms of live art, where there might be a metaphor, but the metaphor is sort of lived out. I don't know, I was watching a documentary about [Chris Burden], an American performance artist who locked himself in a locker for four days. It was literally a three-foot by four-foot

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locker that he squeezed into. It was a metaphor for consumerism and packaging and industrialisation, but the point is, it's a man in a locker. There's no getting around it, there's a man stuck in a locker, and that's what creates the thrill and the excitement and the danger. It's an actual thing happening in real time. The guy in the cardboard box boat, he's not going to drown, it's still in the world of illusion. Whereas it feels like with a lot of live art, part of the thrill is that people are actually doing real things that are actually really dangerous or happening live, for real in the space. So yes, I feel that there is a difference there. That's one of the solo things. The dance work, I really got into that from an invitation from David Hughes who basically gave me a blank canvas to propose what show I wanted to make. I chose to do a completely visual, wordless adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*. I chose that because that's a really good example for me, of a bit of text, of a bit of literature that is sort of anti-literature because it's not even a story. It's a place that you go to and that you inhabit. It's really just a succession of images, the way he describes it, first it was the blue room and then the blue room blah blah blah, then there's the red room and there was this black grandfather's clock. It's literally just throwing a sequence of images at you. There's basically a storyboard and there's not really any sort of internal motivation of character. It's not even a story, it's sort of an emotional journey. That was the first time that I experimented with trying to translate a text into purely visual language which has become something that I'm more and more into. *The Spinners*, for example, that was all based on the fates of Greek mythology and then *The Shadow of Heaven*, which was a couple of years ago was an adaptation of Milton, it was text but it's really about the physicality and the music of *Paradise Lost*. Doing the whole of *Paradise Lost* in an hour sums it up.

SG: That's a project where you're working with people like David Hughes who are from the space and maybe the traditions of contemporary dance. What was that working relationship like, where you are coming from a physical theatre, or a visual theatre background and they are coming with language which is maybe to do with contemporary dance and choreography? Do those languages just naturally meet, or was there a sort of process of, if not translation, of discovery?

AS: A better example to take is the work that I've done with Lina Limosani, who was in *The Red Room* but then who I collaborated with for *The Spinners*. The way that worked was it

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was her company and she's the choreographer and she was one of the three dancers as well, so she was choreographing while she was dancing on stage with the other two dancers. I provided the concept and the structure of the show and the theatrical direction. We found a working method that was the dream. It was perfect for both of us. I had the idea for the structure of the show. I knew what each scene should do in terms of what it should feel like, what the themes were, what was being suggested, what metaphors were being used, so that more conceptual stuff. I'd then describe that to Lina in very broad terms that this is what the scene should be like, this is what the elements should include. Then she'd go alright, and then she'd go off with the dancers and I'd just sit back, sometimes for a couple of hours and just watch. She'd go through the nitty gritty mechanics of the choreography without having to think about what it means or how does this fit with the superstructure of the rest of the show. It's sort of a micro task, so she could work really quickly and always produced something totally different from what I envisaged and a lot better, pretty much every time. Then she'd bring that back and show it to me and I'd go, great, well if we're now going in that direction, because she'd inevitably shift the meaning of that thing, I'd go well can we swap the beginning with the end, take that bit out, and instead of making that thing green make it red, for example. We just worked like that until we had a scene that worked. Inevitably, we were just bouncing off each other the whole way by being very clear about who was in charge at any one point in time. Inevitably her choreography changed the concept of the narrative of the show, but as we moved on, she began to feel in a very visceral way where I was trying to get to and she began to finish my sentences and go, well if we did that in this scene then surely you want this and I'd say, yes let's do that. The way that worked was not by collaborating constantly and being in constant conversation. It was a tag team, right you've now got the next couple of hours and I'm going to sit back and that kind of thing.

SG: Through that tag team approach as you describe it, it still sounds like there was a sense of, as the work progressed, that the internal logic, or architecture, or heartbeat of the show started to either be discovered or to communicate itself to you as a pair.

AS: I think something that's really important about that is that certainly the way that I direct physical shows like that is you've got to work with the people that are actually physically in the room. I mean people just walking in and they bring a certain energy and attitude with

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them that's just not repeatable and I think language disguises that thing. People can be very clever with what they say, and they can sort of bamboozle you and you lose a sense of the physical, not even just physical, it's the sort of energy that people can omit. When you've got physical performers on stage, you have to kind of use the energy that's there. The characters that you create so to speak, it's more about extending and accentuating personalities that are already in play and exploiting dynamics that are already there in the group. If you do that well and you put the magnifying glass on who people are, when it works, I think it's great because they have this feeling of authenticity because it is authentic. People are acting out some kind of fantasy, but it is very much about watching the journey of the performer as themselves through the narrative that they themselves have made. That's something I really enjoy about making kind of work. There's a degree of psychoanalysis involved, like oh wow I really wanted you to dance in this way and that's just not going to be right because you have to do it like that. Okay, now what do we do? You have to sort of bend with the energy there.

SG: I'm interested in maybe following the trail of that practice back a few steps and maybe thinking about your involvement with The Arches because I know you were, I think, the first artist-in-residence there in the early or the mid-2000s. I'm interested in your work there and maybe also the sense of The Arches as a particular kind of space in Scotland during that period, or at least what your experience of it was. Partly because my interest in this project is about either creating or sustaining spaces of possibility for new work. Maybe the question is a simple one, what was your experience of being the artist-in-residence there?

AS: That was really when my career began, being in that space. I can say without exaggerating that that space and Andy Arnold's management of that space launched my career as is and it just wouldn't be what it is without it. I think there are a number of things involved in that space that many people really describe as being invaluable. One thing that was really important for me was the space because it had the clubs, the bar and all that sort of stuff. It was a space of arts as pleasure as activism. This goes right the way back to how I got interested in the arts in the first place. We were talking a bit earlier about music, about falling in love with 60s music. Music was about decadence, but that decadence was also a kind of politics and an activism. That's kind of what The Arches was about for me. That really was the energy to a lot of my work, that my work sort of rode off, because when you've got

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that kind of environment everything is inherently sort of multi-art form. You want to put lots of things together because there are lots of energies in the space and collaboration is very easy because there's the physical space to do it. Of course, with a space that big with such facilities it attracts so many people, so you get all of these accidental crossovers. It was a very democratic space because you'd have these sort of unplanned meetings and conversations over a pint, but then you were working in rooms next door to each other so then that social thing morphing into a work project was very fluid while usually it's quite a sort of stilted thing trying to set up a new collaboration. The other thing, I mean Andy was, is, just an amazing enabler. He's an old punk so it makes total sense, it all fits. He just set up all sorts of opportunities for me. I think the first year I was there, he did his big production of Dante's *Inferno* which was a big promenade production round the basement and things. That was my first big movement directing job and he just let me get on with it, as he did with so many people. He didn't help you in so far as he's just gone right there you go that's your job, do it. He didn't even monitor you, just trust, well of course he monitored you, but he just let you get on with it as an equal rather than trying to train you. I just had so many similar experiences there and that was when I first did performance in night clubs, which completely changed my ideas about how you can work with a crowd. Every Death Disco I would do a stint and of course the stuff that I could get away with there was quite wild and so it just completely extended my sense of what was possible in terms of, let's say safety, that's not quite what I mean, but it encouraged me to be more daring so that was very useful. It was tragic when that building closed because it was a very specific type of space. I think it's very difficult to have genuinely daring cross-artform ecology without spaces like that. Certainly, there are people making work now, but there's a different sense of community and how that community is organised without The Arches.

SG: I'm interested in your work following that or maybe that period where you were when you started Conflux and a year later than that, starting Surge as the festival as well. That's been an organisation, or that's a framework which is about supporting physical theatre and street arts and circus in Scotland. But I also know that there was a circus school or a circus skills training programme which ran in association with The Arches, so was there some overlap there or was that after?

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AS: The way that I ended up getting that post of being the artist-in-residence at The Arches came about because in the early 2000s there had been a circus summer school that was for young people aged between 16 and 22 or something like that. At that point I was actually based in Bristol because I'd gone down to Circomedia and done my training there and then stayed because it was a really exciting place to make work, but I was keen to find a way to try and come back up the road. They were looking for a team to run the circus summer school because their last team had become unavailable, so I leapt on that and said I'll do it. I came up and did that for a couple of years, both as a thing in itself but also because I saw it as a potential route to come back up from Bristol. I didn't planned on being the artist-in-residence. The circus work that I'd done was the springboard to get offered their artist-in-residence role, which was obviously a much wider remit than just circus. It's kind of interesting because I've been associated with circus for a very long time and I've certainly not discouraged that because it's been useful, but I'm not really a circus maker. Sometimes I feel I get thought of as that circus guy, but I don't actually produce circus.

SG: That is really interesting to me, the strength of those associations and how they end up framing work or an artist's work almost regardless of what you might make. Maybe we'll carry on talking about this, but there's also that inflection between skills based training and forms and other registers or other priorities in performance making. I want to be really careful there because I don't think they're exclusive. It's not like skills based training doesn't produce art, but there is an emphasis placed in different ways. There are certain circus performers for example, which are heavily invested in a skills based discipline.

AS: I think that's a really interesting point. I have to be careful, I do when I make the point that I'm about to make, that I don't come across as being disparaging of circus or actually contemporary dance, but I think for me, again it's one of these distinctions that's become clearer the more that I've worked across these different forms, is that I'm really into the idea that what makes theatre theatre, which may be different from other forms, is this idea of failure. I remember being a talk in Amsterdam and Romeo Castellucci was giving a chat and he said, oh you know theatre is the place of failure. I thought actually that's true. For me, what I took from that was that we love seeing people fail, we fall in love with people failing. Every great show, whether it's *Waiting for God* or *Death of a Salesman*, or I mean name any show, it's these people with aspirations. Or *Macbeth*, you know I want this, I will

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get that, and then just watching them come undone and get bogged down in the mud. I mean that's what theatre is, and we fall in love with people in that situation because lots of people don't know what it's like to be a success, but we all know what it's like to fail and that's what makes it an experience that we can access on mass. Whereas with circus, that is about success. When you got a trapeze artist up in the air, or somebody juggling those balls, there is nothing worse than watching a juggler drop the balls. It's just like, oh my god and then they get nervous and then they drop it again and it's not fun, it's like you want them to succeed. I also think there's a thing when you're watching these people in the sequin gowns swinging through the air, there's a sense of awe and you go oh wow that's successful, but I think there's also a secret part of you that secretly hates them a little bit because they're being a success and, in that way, I think there's more of a relationship between circus skills and more technical dance with sports than the theatre. If I was going to make my circus show, what I would do is make it about failure. Basically, a length of rope and somebody trying to climb it for an hour but who can't climb and just watch the torture of that.

SG: It's of interest, the way you describe that. I'm thinking of earlier bits of our conversation. I'm aware of a few shows which are interestingly in this space of circus and new performance and live art, somewhere in the middle of that Venn diagram, and the success of those shows, for me at least, has been in paying really close attention to the work and the labour and the embodied presence of the performer. So rather than presenting it as this thing of the effortless muscular athletic body in flight, it's paid really close attention to what it means to be a body doing those things and the cost and the pleasure and the demand, but it's paid really close attention to the live body in a way that works against this framing of the body as this sort of glittering object in the distance that works really hard to make you not look at them sweating.

AS: It's this interesting thinking about a dancer in training, you can't have any expression in the face because the body is the tool, but I've often thought when you watch these very po-faced ballet dancers, what would it be like if they actually just allowed themselves to look how they feel at that moment in time. It would be a whole different thing. I mean then it would be theatre, you'd see the pain.

SG: Maybe not on the point of pain that's not the link, I'm trying to think why this question was prompted, but maybe doesn't matter. I guess I'm interested in... we're talking here

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about disciplinarity and training and that's the link that's in my head to this project that's really brand new. So, we're at the beginning of April, and you've just done the launch for Waypoint-1 which is a programme of support for early-career performance makers. So maybe you can tell me a little bit about where that project came from and what its ambitions are.

AS: The idea for the project came from this point last year where I, like a lot of people, was trying to figure out how do I productively use my time now that the theatres are shut. I decided that one option was obviously to do what a lot of people have been doing, which is to try to keep making my art, but you know make shows that could be documented in video format and make these kind of strange hybrid video performances, or, to do what I have done a lot of in the past, which is to really focus on outdoor site-specific work. But to be honest, at this point last year I didn't have a burning ambition to make a show like that. There wasn't an idea that I needed to realise so it was kind of a thought experiment where I thought, well what would I do if I just try to think of a project that was just as practically useful as I can make it. Could I completely let go of any sense of having a creative vision and sort of support other peoples' creative visions. So that's the idea, to basically create essentially a blank canvas opportunity with the gist of it being that people could come with a request for support, especially people with less experience and basically if I can provide that support, I'll provide it. If I can't, I can't. The idea being that, rather than having a very clever idea for a residency programme, is to allow ideas to develop through what actual demand was. Things have been moving so quickly and it's been so impossible for anybody to plan anything in advance at all. The important thing for me with this project is just to be as flexible as possible and to leave as much room to change direction as I could. I was quite impressed that Creative Scotland funded it because in these applications they like to have a timeline, and a structure and what are the outcomes going to be, how many participants will you deal with, all these sort of deliverables. I was quite frank about the fact that this project's identity is going to get created through making it. I'm very pleased that they supported it. Weirdly, as it happens, I'm now really excited about the creative aspects of it, and it's become like a whole new avenue of creativity. By trying to not be creative, it's opened up this door of, I don't know what's going to happen, I don't know who is going to get in touch and then what connections might be made and how things might get taken off

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out of my hands and in directions I hadn't even thought of. I'm really excited about it and certainly it's nice to feel like it's something that is actually wanted and practical.

SG: It's hard for me not to sort of draw a line of flight back to parts of the way in which you were describing that sense of possibility and maybe trust that was coming out of that relationship with Andy Arnold as well. Not to say that this is in any way intended to be like an extension of the legacy of The Arches, but is there a connection there in terms of that was the sort of mentorship and support you'd had at that stage of your career and there is an ambition here to do something, not the same but informed by that?

AS: Actually yes, I think that's fair enough. I've been extremely lucky, I've had a number of influences in my work that have been absolutely invaluable. Andy Arnold is definitely one of them, I'm also thinking of Dimitri from BlackSkyWhite who did a lot of the physical training with me that I rely on the most. He comes from a very sort of Russian tradition of doing things. Definitely with Andy, I think the spirit of how he encouraged people to create work, he's had an enormous influence. When you think about it, obviously Jackie Wylie was the arts programmer, she's now heading NTS, LJ Findlay-Walsh is now at Take Me Somewhere [Festival, and Tramway] and I'm close friends with both of them and we still collaborate in various ways and there's that camaraderie and there's a kind of a spirit, an energy in which we talk about things that's definitely come from the building which is Andy, which is the building, which is also everybody else that passed through it in a certain time. It was definitely Andy's leadership of the building that created a space where people were encouraged to, not to think in a certain way that sounds a bit Stalinist, it's certainly created a sense of excitement about the democracy of making work and the joy that can be had in a sort of anarchy around creativity and I'm using anarchy with a big A rather than in the making a mess sense.

SG: The last thing that was on my list of things to ask you about, was the broader picture thing and this is maybe slightly informed by how Waypoint-1 is perhaps speaking to a need across Scotland to support early career performance makers who aren't attached to, let's say, a playwriting tradition or to a visual arts tradition. There's a gap there. I guess my question is about your sense of the broader landscape of the spaces and places in which new performance, whether it's live art associated or not, is happening. The Edinburgh Fringe plays this really outsized role in I think the life of Edinburgh, certainly, but as a space

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for experimentation I think it's really quite a difficult or a compromised one. Obviously, we're in Glasgow, we're in the post Arches moment still, five/six years down the road. So yes, your sense of the available spaces and places for experimentation in Scotland, where do you see those existing and where do you see that there's a need?

AS: I've been in various discussions with people around these sorts of topics and for me, and for a lot of people, it really does feel like a moment of total crisis. I remember having conversations after The Arches shut in 2014, there was a lot of talk about there being a lost generation of upcoming performers and makers of work because The Arches had become such a hub for all that kind of thing. That was in 2014 and now we've got Brexit which has stuffed European touring models, we're in the middle of a pandemic, there's less and less money for funding. Accessing funding is in some ways harder, quite apart from the lack of money. It's really alarming to be honest, and I think there are certain sorts of routes that are valuable in taking. One thing I would say is that there are incredible organisations and people are creating spaces and opportunities. I'm thinking of people like Morag Deyes at Dance Base who is visionary, especially after The Arches shut. It feels like my sort of spiritual home, that's where I feel most at home, is that space for the creation of my own work and that's really to do with, beyond just having presented a lot of work there, Morag having this very welcoming sort of cross-artform approach to everything. The stuff that she puts on and programmes that she's happy to call dance, I don't want to speak on Morag's behalf, but I'd be interested to hear what her definition of dance is. She comes from, her philosophical bent, it's definitely eastern, and very sort of open and elastic shall we say. She's encouraging. What I feel from Morag is that she realises that for any of us to survive there has to be an exchange of ideas across platforms and across art forms and any idea is a good idea and should be encouraged. I have to be really careful that I'm not putting words into her mouth, but that's the sense that I get from her or certainly people like her, or organisations like EPAD [Edinburgh Performing Arts Development] or Magnetic North in Edinburgh that are deliberately multi-artform and deliberately encouraging of professional development as being a lifelong career thing. It's an open mindedness and generosity of support married with a sense of urgency that there simply won't be good Scottish arts in the decades if we don't pick up the newbies coming through and really put opportunities in front of their faces.