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Alice Theobald

Interview by artist and writer Yasmine Rix

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Alice Theobald's performances blur the boundaries between script and reality. Incorporating her own musical compositions and amateur actors we learn how she doesn't just explore, but exposes contemporary communications in all its conformity and awkwardness in an unadulterated approach.

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Your work blurs the boundaries between being on and off camera or adhering to a script, do you feel

that your endeavour to explore this division between stage and life brings us closer to a reality or truth that drama or TV cannot provide?

Drama and TV wants us to believe in it, to draw us in and generally asks its audience to give in to the fiction. It wants to look real and very often it does, and often we are drawn in without question. I like to play with the tools and methods used to get to this "reality". I think there is a reflexive relationship between fiction and reality and how they copy and learn from one another. They grow together. I'll probably make a lot of grand claims in this interview but wouldn't necessarily claim that my work brings us closer to reality or truth - rather it attempts to explore, understand and present them as very knotted and slippery constructs full of contradiction and irony. I want to create pieces that are aware of themselves and their status as a representation within a framework and want that awareness somewhere in the fore-front. The way I create scripts, use word-play, directions or situations is generally quite loose and used as a structure to allow gaps for improvisation, leakage and space to deviate, often using elements of the rehearsal process in the piece itself. What's scripted, improvised, real conversation, and what may be perceived as good or bad acting, false or genuine expression, is all treated in the same way and given the same amount of importance, it all gets mixed up and becomes one. Very diplomatic. I think actually reality can be found within bad acting because it's a strange result of being overly aware in its attempt to look like something else, yet completely un-aware of its appearance - we see through it. It's like putting make-up on badly; obviously the aim was to do it well and for it to look better than it does, but then as an observer we see the mistakes and the marks at the same time as knowing the intention. Where the intention becomes transparent and when we are aware of the self-awareness, mistakes visible, is where things become vulnerable and we find a version of some kind of 'truth'. Perhaps.

There is an inevitable tension in the conflation of the performers' and the characters' personalities because they are inhabiting the same skin. I'm interested in character construction on and off "stage". Character as identity, 'on' stage as the public, 'off' stage as the private. This extended notion of theatre and life isn't new but seeing these parallels, metaphors and circular relationships can become a bit of an obsession... Especially when it comes to how people communicate. People use satire, sarcasm and idiomatic language all the time, every day and some people don't at all. We all say things we don't necessarily mean to get a certain reaction will exaggerate or embellish experiences whether we are aware of it at the time or not. We have different sensitivities to all of these things but it's all a type of acting or role play in which 'truth', integrity and sincerity all gets lost in intent and in what is deemed as real. From person to person we don't know what's what anymore when ultimately all we really want is to be understood and connect. Cassavettes biographer Ray Carney said "There are as many different understandings of a situation as there are individuals in it." It's a simple enough statement yet we still insist on trying to understand. It's what keeps us going.



I'll finally lose the plot, 2014

Could you tell me how music and your band fits into this concept you are exploring? It's particularly interesting in your performance 'I Said Yes Now, That's it'.

I am in a band called Ravioli Me Away. It's a lot of fun. Because music wasn't what I was "schooled" in, it's wasn't the "career choice" (if you like) it feels less pressured. I think you can find a certain freedom in knowing less and not being trained in something in the traditional sense in a way that allows you space to experiment and feel autonomous. I've used a Ravioli Me Away track once in my work – In Mike Check. I think RMA has taken on it's own performative identity and really feels like a collaboration in the truest sense, it's like our sacred child. I feel very lucky. I have also collaborated with musician Tom Hirst (aka Design A Wave) several times in the past, but most of the time I compose the music my self or at least lay out a structure or framework (similarly to how I work with script...)

I've said yes now, that's it had a lot going on. Perhaps too much. Probably the closest I've got to some kind of Gesamtkunstwerk!

Music is so effective and ingrained within our everyday lives. It's seductive nature and potential to influence and manipulate our emotions and experience is so incredibly strong whether it's used in film, theatre or an experience we are living first-hand; in shops, restaurants, clubs, privately in our homes or out and about on headphones. I find it fascinating how it plays such a major role in how we encounter and perceive things. So, in that sense I'm very interested in the role of the musical-score in relation to

my films and performances, and also how it can effect or tell us more than what we can see - or more than what the characters are actually willing to tell us.

This then leads me to exploring it further as a construction - The type of instruments, sounds, chord structures, key changes and patterns used to evoke a certain feeling, taking me back to the question of representation, intention and integrity again. If you look at a stock music website it's both hilarious and quite scary how it's categorised and laid out bare with a price tag on the end. Boxed commodified emotion.

Because most of the time music is presented to us as something sincere and as an honest pursuit - but the composer/musician is aware of what they are doing because they are fabricating it... It becomes a type of rehearsed and refined emotion. Even improvisation is something that's practiced and then Minimalist, Noise or Industrial music which seeks to defy representation will still at the very least provoke some kind of emotional reaction in its recipients. Complicated emotions all over the place!
We can't get away from them

I'm not calling all musicians big manipulative frauds, I just think there is a paradox that exists within in it that's phycological and which I can't get away from. It's interesting to play with. The very idea of practicing to present sincerity seems to contradict itself but then I think the honesty lies in this deep desire to somehow translate our sincerity to other peoples reality. I think this truth gets tangled up with the rest.

There really is a lot to say about it...



I've said yes now, thats it, 2014

Where did the inspiration for your dance come from in 'Il Finally Lose the Plot'? I find it quite captivating!

Thank you. Well I am a big fan of Dennis Potter. His BBC TV serial dramas Pennies From Heaven and The Singing Detective go from dark, gritty socio-political British realism to these amazing musical interludes of song and dance spectacles that expose to the audience something about the characters private inner thoughts or fantasies. The dance in I'll Finally loose the Plot came about quite organically. I had these songs that I composed and when Scott and I were doing the film shoot I wanted to try it out as a possibility for something that could perhaps function in a similar way. It was all improvised and we would take it in turns to take the lead with the other trying to follow and keep up; so the moves would be just slightly out of time with these moments of harmonious synchronisation. I see it a bit like a metaphorical sex scene, apart from this one is very awkward and un-sexy.

How do you feel your work has been received? You have an extensive portfolio of residencies and exhibitions so it must feel like your work is going in the right direction, or is there anything different

you want to change or try out?

The work is about performing, and very much routed in the back and forth of interaction and various ways we perform for one another. Performance, drawing in and manipulation it is where my interests lie and so then of course the idea of the 'receiver' or audience is very much bound up in that on many levels. I think about audience a lot and the myriad ways things could be perceived or understood - which is also a part of it. I'm always flittering between caring about the audience, resenting the audience for my caring (because they'll think what they want, like it or not), to then not caring and wanting to rebel against the audience. I sometimes feel that if the consensus appears to like something I do then something has gone wrong. It can feel maddening but I think all in all, probably a healthy cycle. It helps me to have a hand full of specific friends (not necessarily artists) who I think about now and again through out the making process. Friends with who I feel I share a sense of humour, understanding or attitude to life with. It amuses me to imagine their reaction helps navigate the tone - it can be the decider on a particular line, delivery, dance move or edit and I think keeps it grounded somehow. I suppose I can then only hope that it's interesting or speaks to other people in some way too... or not.



Mike Check (install shot), 2013

What have you got planned for the near future?

I went to a spa for the first time the other day for a Hen Party. I would like to spend more time on my well being and being in a spa. There is a show at Wysing Arts opening end of May. I was an artist in residence there last Winter and it's a group show with the other three artists I was there with. I will be showing new video pieces. I am also making a new piece for Open Source, an Arts Festival taking place in London 2-3rd May. In October, Ravioli Me Away are touring THE USA, so we are writing a whole new repertoire.

Alice Theobald lives and works in London. Recent exhibitions and events include *I've said yes now, that's it*, Outpost, Norwich and Chisenhale, London, *Too Much*, Two Queens, Leicester, *Royal Academy Schools Show*, The Royal Academy, London and *FOAM; touring project by Mat Jenner*, P/N Gallery, AND/OR & Wysing Arts Centre.

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