



Theater
Iolo

THEATR IOLO INVITES YOU TO *join me on my journey*

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE MAKING OF OUR PLAY 'THE UGLY TRUTH'

READ GREAT INTERVIEWS WITH THE ARTISTS ABOUT THEIR CREATIVE
PROCESS

... if I can catch them to ask ...

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO DIRECT, TO ACT, TO WRITE, TO LIGHT, TO DESIGN FROM
SCRATCH?

AND FIND OUT MORE ABOUT OUR COMPANY www.theatriolo.com

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE PLAY www.theatriolo.com/current/theuglytruth.php

HOW WAS THE PLAY CREATED?

THE ANSWER IS ... IT WAS DEvised BY A CREATIVE TEAM.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE THEM TO MAKE THE PLAY?

THE ANSWER IS THREE TWO'S AND A HALF PLUS LOTS OF THINKING

2 days to think about it

2 $\frac{1}{2}$ weeks to develop it

2 weeks to rehearse it

... but what did they actually get up to in order to create the play you have just seen?...

... it's a week before they open ... will they let me interview them ... time is oh so precious here goes

INTERVIEWS WITH THE CREATIVE TEAM ABOUT THE 'DEVISING' PROCESS
here is a taster!...

THE DIRECTOR SARAH ARGENT SAYS

'Directing a devised play is the theatrical equivalent of freefall parachuting.'

THE PLAYWRIGHT GARY OWEN SAYS

'It's like not being a playwright, it's like being a script editor, it's a very different thing'.

THE DESIGNER CHARLOTTE NEVILLE SAYS

'You have to deal with uncertainty and change to be able to see when something isn't working.'

THE STAGE MANAGER AND LIGHTING DESIGNER EMMA HOLWILL SAYS

Zero88 dimmer racks, Juggler Lighting desk, lighting stands with cross bars on top, a number of theatre lights called fresnels and source four pars, lighting and sound cables and a Yamaha sound system!

THE ACTOR HANNAH McPAKE PLAYING LINDSAY AND CHRISTOPHER SAYS

What will they make of us, jumping in and out of character? Will they care about the characters we have created, at this stage just before we open, it's scary, unknown but exciting and we're still exploring.

SHEKIRA JOHNSON PLAYING PHOEBE AND BETHANY SAYS

Phoebe? She's about Attitude! Cool, not really, thinks she is ...bully ...feisty ...know it all...: disloyal ...manipulating ... sarcastic ...physically vibrant ...lively ... the leader.

AND ONCE THEY START TALKING THERE IS NO STOPPING THEM

... but let me explain their 'theatre speak' first ...

impro or impros ... short for improvisation, acting without a script, exploring an idea

'get off the book' ... means to know the lines so you don't have to work with script in hand

devising process ... a creative process used to make a play without starting from a written text

get ins ... unloading and taking the set from the touring van into the performing space

vocal warm ups ... preparing your voice by doing voice exercises

H&S ... health and safety

... here goes ...

MY QUESTIONS TO THE ACTORS

HANNAH McPAKE PLAYING LINDSAY AND CHRISTOPHER

SHEKIRA JOHNSON PLAYING PHOEBE AND BETHANY

Could you describe the process of devising the play from an actor's point of view?

We started with impro creating characters and situations that the director Sarah had asked us to do. Interesting things were then expanded in depth. Gary Owen the writer made the scenes into a plan and we improvised it, so the impros had something to achieve and a structure. We'd repeat and repeat the scene and hone it down. Then the dialogue was taped and the writer worked and rewrote from that. Then we had a week to learn it before it opened.

Do different directors work with you in different ways?

Yes, totally. Some work physically, some focus on images, visual stuff not words at all. And for some the text is the starting point before you get on your feet. Some start the work on your feet practically, some like to improvise around the text even if it's not devised. This devising process is very rewarding because we are so involved in creating it.

How did your acting experience at school or elsewhere, before you became professional, help you?

Shekira: I would never have got through this if I hadn't trained at drama school, the self belief and confidence, the skills of being in the moment working freely, I didn't know what impro was 'til I went to drama school.

Hannah: Plays at school give you an idea about practitioners, text and the experience of performing

Shekira: I enjoyed drama lessons but I didn't think I could make a career out of it ... I didn't understand until a couple of years down the line when I was working in a nursery. I decided I wanted to change from the routine of it and I remembered how much fun drama was in school ... so I started drama workshops and I went to the Careers Wales Office and had a meeting with them. We talked all about what courses I could do. Because I'd been to work for four years I was really focused by the time I got into drama school. I used to think clothes, music, boys were the most important thing when I was 15 to 19 but since I chose something I really enjoy doing I find it much more satisfying. Drama College came before everything, I only missed one day because of a sprained ankle. Drama is still lots of fun and games but it's not as easy as you think. It's hard enjoyable work.

Hannah: Neither of us decided to be actors until we had left school. I never had the confidence to say at school that that was what I wanted to do.

How do you prepare in the half hour before a performance?

Shekira: I run and I do a vocal warm up.

Hannah: It depends on the situation, the 'get in' warms you up physically, and I stretch and do vocal stuff, and with this play I need to get my head and emotions ready, I sit and reflect, I think my way into the characters - what they have to go through.

When you improvise a character, what is your starting point; an idea, a costume, imitating someone from memory, your own behaviour, where do you get your character from when you improvise?

Impulse, I always react to a situation, to other actors ... all the things in your list can be true, but it is dependent on where and who is asking you to improvise, the skill is to stay open, and not try to plan or invent, really be in the moment and receive from others...

Tell me about the characters you play in The Ugly Truth?

Well the starting impros were about us as people, getting to know each other first.

Shekira can you talk about Phoebe?

She is about Attitude! Cool, not really, thinks she is ...bully ...feisty ...know it all...: disloyal ...manipulating ... sarcastic ...physically vibrant, lively ... the leader.

Hannah can you tell me about Lindsay?

She has been uprooted and dumped in a new situation she doesn't want to be in, but she tries to make the best of it. She's intelligent and can be manipulative. She has gone from fitting in to not fitting in which is a huge shift in her social status, it makes her behave in a more desperate and needy way.

She can be very funny and quite quick witted. She does eventually stand up to Phoebe but takes a lot of flack from her before she does. She has a conscience that plays on her a lot.

Hannah can you tell me about Christopher?

He is the bottom of the pile at school, he is badly bullied, which makes him very quiet, angry inside, he doesn't want to be seen, so he hides under his hood. He is very interested in science and space, he's probably very clever. Science and space are his passions. He wants to fit in socially but he is socially inept, he is very prickly, very selfish, self centred, in his own world but he eventually lets Bethany in. He learns not to be so absorbed, he learns through Bethany, he learns that others are going through the same thing.

Shekira can you tell me about Bethany?

She's the same as Christopher, the bottom of the social pile and she gets bullied and picked on. The only person she talks to is Christopher but although she is more outspoken than him she is very vulnerable, sweet and imaginative. The only person she opens up to is Christopher. She's in love with him and she tries to be strong for him ...otherwise on her own she is weaker. She really wants to be with Christopher and for him not to be bullied, she hates Christopher being bullied ... it hurts her more than when she is bullied.

What is it like when you are about to open the play?

At this stage, a week before we open the play, we are wondering what the audience will think. What will they make of us, jumping in and out of character? Will they care about the characters we have created, at this stage before we open, it's scary, unknown but exciting and we're still exploring. During this last week we get off the book, stage it, find the emotional journeys, work out what it's about, do the scene changes, get familiar with the set and costumes, and see how the music will change things.

MY QUESTIONS TO SARAH ARGENT, THE DIRECTOR

What skills do you use when you direct?

I think a director is a combination of:

a visual artist ...using the stage & lights to paint a picture

a storyteller ...helping the actors to make the story clear to the audience

a coach ... encouraging each member of the team to create their best work through praise and encouragement and constructive criticism

a taskmaster ...cracking the whip when necessary

a psychologist ... trying to assess the different personalities within the team - not just the actors - and what each person needs at each moment to bring out the best in them, but also to make sure that the actions carried out in the play make sense in terms of psychology of the characters

a parent ... supporting and nurturing the creative team, resolving disputes and, ultimately, learning to let "the children" stand on their own two feet once the show is up and running and the time comes for you to let go.

How do you start an improvisation with the actors?

I don't have a single way of starting an improvisation - I will use all sorts of different techniques. Getting them to respond to a photo or visual image, getting actors to play together, when I spot a moment that looks interesting in terms of story or character, I hone in on the germ of ideas and ask them to develop it. We pool responses to a question or even pool our questions about an issue. We are often asking questions, not providing answers.

I set up improvisations and exercises in order to generate material, but the actors then do the work so that many of the stories within a piece and many of the lines they speak will have been created by the actors themselves. When you've got a group of actors who are good improvisers, once they get inside a character, they often have an instinctive ability to come up with believable dialogue.

Sarah what skills do you value in the actors you choose to work with?

Playfulness, openness, spontaneity, a vivid imagination free from constraints, a sense of humour, an ability to be emotionally truthful and to genuinely connect with the other actor/s on stage. These are skills which both Hannah and Shekira have in abundance - that's why it's been such a joy to work with them.

How do you intend the sounds and music to work, what meaning do they bring to the experience of The Ugly Truth?

We haven't yet decided exactly what music to use as we want to get a feel for the intrinsic rhythm and shape of the play to make sure that the music enhances the piece rather than imposing something on it.

Music can serve a number of purposes: from the moment the audience members enter the hall and hear music playing, it establishes the 'feel' of the show; it helps to create a mood; it gives the audience (and the actors) a chance to breathe after particularly intense scenes; it tells the audience something about particular characters by showing what kind of music each of them is into; and it establishes the time in which each scene is set.

Why did you choose the theme of body image?

It seems to be something that increasingly affects everybody, including teenagers and adults. The way we look, and more importantly, how we feel about the way we look plays a major role in our self esteem, in how we judge other people and how we are judged.

How did you work with the playwright to make the script?

This has been an entirely new way of working for Gary and me. We were both interested in the theme of body image and had shared views, concerns, and thoughts about this prior to the two development days. On these days, I then set up a number of discussions and improvisations with the actors. What we achieved during these two days far exceeded our expectations in that Hannah and Shekira devised some beautiful, delicate, nuanced work which gave us the basic characters of Phoebe, Lindsay, Bethany and Christopher.

We knew we wanted to explore these characters further and so, when rehearsals started, we set up further improvisations between different combinations of characters and put them into a range of situations.

During these basically very free improvisations, Gary and I would occasionally feed in ideas to the actors - "Could you make her say 'yes' to that request instead of 'no'?", Then, at the end of the first week, we discussed a whole series of questions about the characters and the story and came up with some avenues we wanted them to explore.

In the second week, we gave the actors the very difficult task of improvising as freely as they could but within a particular set of circumstances ... "In this scene, Lindsay does X, Phoebe does Y, and the scene finishes with Z happening".

Gary then went away and wrote a detailed scenario which we all then looked at and shared so that we were all happy with it. Then Gary went back to his computer and his Dictaphone and took all the material from the impros and edited and shaped the material to come up with the script.

Gary then took all the material we'd created and shaped and filtered it and turned it into a detailed scenario - what has now become the plot of *The Ugly Truth*. We then did even more tailored improvisations to create the dialogue for the piece - but we created much more dialogue than we used in the final script.

Normally, when I'm devising, I am both author and director and it can be quite a lonely and rather terrifying experience. It's been wonderful sharing that role with another person - even though (I have to be honest) it was a challenge at first to relinquish my role as both author and director (I'm a bit of a control freak!).

Did you begin creating the play with a story and a message in mind?

I most certainly don't start with a message in mind ... in fact, I don't ever want a play to have a message even when it's finished. I firmly agree with this quote from Anton Chekhov, "*the function of art is not to provide solutions, but to state the problem more clearly*".

Having said that, people make choices in their lives against a backdrop of pressures from friends, parents, teachers, society at large and the media. In order to make these choices and to withstand the negative effects of some of these pressures, it is important for young people to work out who they are and what things are important to them - appearance, friends, family, money, the environment, independence - and to set their goals in line with their values.

Could you describe the process of devising the play from a director's point of view?

I normally describe creating and directing devised plays as the theatrical equivalent of freefall parachuting ... you launch yourself out of the plane on day one of the devising process and you just hope that the parachute opens (i.e. the play is ready) before you hit the ground. It's incredibly exhilarating but also absolutely terrifying!

There are probably as many processes for devising plays as there are directors ... in fact, probably more, as my process has been different on every play I've ever devised. The material you take as a starting point (be that an issue, a story, a visual image, a piece of music), the group of people you're working with, the time of year, the space and place in which you're rehearsing/devising, what's recently happened to you in your own life all play a role in how a particular process unfolds. Devised work takes on a life of its own.

No two devising processes have ever been the same. With '*The Ugly Truth*', it became apparent that one of the ways of working with Hannah and Shekira was for me to be in role as a teacher, "Miss Argent". Miss Argent's role was to stand up to and provoke Phoebe, to operate as Lindsay's conscience, to gently support and encourage Bethany, and to coax Christopher out of his desire to hide under his hood and not speak to anyone. We spent many hysterically funny and often very moving periods of maybe 2-3 hours at a time as these characters. I had never intended to work in this way, but, on one particular afternoon, while I was directing as myself, Shekira (as Phoebe) looked at me challengingly and asked, with real attitude, "What?!" It spontaneously felt as if I needed to respond to the character, not the actress, and a whole new way of working developed.

With *The Ugly Truth*, the immediate friendly, humorous rapport between Hannah and Shekira on the first day of development work had a major impact on the shape of the piece. It was clear that we should capitalise on this and create characters who are friends (although, as the devising process has gone on, their friendship has become more and more "spikey"). The actors were asked to improvise fat people, skinny people, ugly people and then to embody these people in a grotesque almost cartoon like way. These exaggerated characters sowed the seeds for the much more subtle characters of Bethany and Christopher.

MY QUESTIONS TO THE PLAYWRIGHT, GARY OWEN

How did you work with the director to make the play?

It's simple, we met up in the Autumn with the actors and Sarah gave them tasks, that she set them, impro tasks ...some characters emerged out of those and we were particularly interested in a couple of them ...in fact two pairs ... and it seemed there was material for a short story in those characters.

How do you use the improvisations of the actors in your script?

When we started rehearsals we did more impros regarding the characters we were interested in for a week. I then went away and worked out an outline for a story involving the material the actors had come up with. We worked through the outline in order with the actors improvising the scene I'd outlined. I recorded the impros, then I went away and shaped the impro material into a script.

Did you begin creating the play with a story or a message in mind?

In terms of message we started thinking about body image, health, weight and those sorts of things ... and quickly what we became interested in was not the way we actually look etc, but how we use body image as a weapon ...when we want to fight, hurt or bully ... how we use body image and appearance to hurt each other.

Do you research the ideas outside of the rehearsal or only in the devising rehearsal?

Mainly within the process, not outside. It's so in our culture. For example, in Heat magazine, one week it's saying 'look how dangerously thin Victoria Beckham is' and then the next week it says 'look how Britney is putting on weight etc' ...its everywhere in our culture.

What makes a good play from your point of view?

For me there is no defining characteristic of a good play, the ones I like may not have the same characteristics at all.

Gary could you describe the process of devising the play from a playwright's point of view?

It's like not being a playwright, it's like being a script editor. It's a very different thing ... and a script editor is a job in TV that I've done, where you give notes on successive drafts to the playwright.

Can you tell me now about the characters?

There are two pairs: Phoebe and Lindsay and Christopher and Bethany. Phoebe and Lindsay were friends when they were very young and Lindsay moved away from the area and has now moved back. She hopes she can latch on to Phoebe again hoping Phoebe will introduce her into her social circle at her school. Phoebe thinks Lindsay doesn't fit in with how people dress and her Scottish accent and the acceptable style of her friends. Phoebe fears that if she turns up with Lindsay she will be mocked, and Phoebe herself will be mocked. Phoebe doesn't want to be Lindsay's friend, so they start having this strange friendship where she won't be seen with her at school but she will meet her out of school.

One thing they enjoy doing together is mocking other people at school, particularly Christopher and Bethany who are the least popular, most hated kids they know. We first meet Christopher and Bethany through Phoebe and Lindsay doing impressions of them, so we don't know if this is what they are like or a cruel impression of them. We meet them as themselves later and see that the version Lindsay and Phoebe have created is pretty close. What happens is that we trace the story of Christopher and Bethany having a relationship.

What is the play like dramatically?

It has a dramatic crisis ... but I think there is a sense that all these relationships have a long way to go, they are not decided easily. It's a short piece ... a few moments from the beginnings of two sets of relationships.

MY QUESTIONS TO THE DESIGNER, CHARLOTTE NEVILLE

When there is no script how do you know what to design for the play?

I have a meeting with the director to discuss any ideas that came out with the actors in their development days. In this case, specifically we knew it was two girls who weren't necessarily nice! At this point the only design idea was to keep it 'theatrical' not realistic. The director asked me to provide particular bits of furniture to experiment with in the rehearsal room. Also she gave me paper images of girls and sofas, shoe installations and a reference to look in All Saints clothes shop.

What do you have to consider when you design for a Theatr Iolo tour?

Lots!: the size of the touring van, the size minimum and maximum of the venues, the amount of people on the tour which will indicate the trips to and from the van when loading because there is a time limit and H&S to consider. The budget set by the company has to cover set, props, costume and sometimes lighting. I have to consider payments for building and painting work if there is any.

Do you have the freedom to design what you want to or are you following any rules?

See above! Really the point of the devising process is that it involves everyone's ideas, so there is freedom but guided freedom. It could really look like anything as long as everyone agrees that it is relevant and embodies the play.

Do you have to work practically, making things as well as drawing the designs?

I do, yes. Working with the stage manager, we will reinforce the set where necessary for safety of the actors. We will order or go out and buy things together. I paint the set. I make models and drawings of the set designs but not on *The Ugly Truth* because of the devising process it was always open to change. I go clothes shopping.

Charlotte could you describe the process of devising the play from a designer's point of view?

You have to deal with uncertainty and change to be able to see when something isn't working. I will also sit in rehearsals and see how they use what they have got and be able to suggest ideas and ways of using the set. That is the challenge of devising, but it is creatively satisfying.

How would you describe the design of The Ugly Truth?

It is quite dark, contemporary and minimal. Everything there is used, functional and necessary, but with artistic metaphors like the cracked mirror and the shoe installation around the edge. Everything was chosen because it has multiple uses in suggesting different times and places. The sofa was chosen because it could be moved, sat on, lounged on, turned on its end. I look to get as much as I can out of one thing, one object. We wanted the costumes to be removed from reality so as not to be patronising to the relevant age group and the way they may dress, so the characters can't be associated with any particular social group - and to enhance the theatricality of the drama.

MY QUESTIONS TO THE STAGE MANAGER AND LIGHTING DESIGNER EMMA HOLWILL

Emma what is your role as the play is being devised?

My role is to liaise between the creative team and the administrative team. To supply anything that is needed such as rehearsal props costumes, bits of set and so on. To be in rehearsals and operate the sound system, do line runs with the actors once the script is there, feed in any ideas or responses I may have to the work being created.

What is important to you when you light the play?

That the lighting fits in with the play and enhances it, that it doesn't distract from the play. I may use light to indicate the place, the time of day, the atmosphere, to enhance tension and emotion in the drama. Lighting has to be adaptable to different size venues with different resources because we tour the play. Also, I have to take into consideration how many people are on the tour when thinking about how much equipment we can take.

What equipment do you use?

Zero88 dimmer racks, Juggler Lighting desk, lighting stands with cross bars on top, a number of theatre lights called fresnels and source four pars, lighting and sound cables, Yamaha sound system. We tour two CD players, LX tape, gaffa tape and strips of dance floor used to secure cables onto the floor.

Phew! Is that all? Thank you. Now Emma, what do you have to do when you tour the play?

Our Tour Administrator books the tour and I then phone each venue the week before to check all details are correct and make sure our needs are met, including parking space and the performing space. I draw up weekly schedules of travel times and 'get ins' and performance times, taking into consideration meal breaks and overnight breaks are met. I liaise with people when we arrive at the venue. I'm in charge of loading and packing the van, driving the van to the venues and overseeing the 'get ins' and 'get outs'. During the play I operate the sound and lighting. I follow the script and respond to cues. I oversee the Health and Safety of the touring team and audience members.

What skills do you have to have to be a Stage Manager in a small scale touring company?

Good communication, enthusiasm, diplomacy, creativity and a wide range of skills - lighting, sound, general stage management, carpentry, prop making, costume maintenance, IT, budgeting, good overview of Health and Safety. Good inter-personal skills as I deal with actors, designers, directors, education officers, administrators, teachers, theatre technicians, caretakers and the audience.

...any more questions? I've done my best honestly! ...

... if you really wanted me to ask completely different questions, you'll have to email me at [Theatr Iolo](mailto:TheatrIolo) and I'll do my best to catch a passing actor before they jump into the van and disappear off to their next venue... glenys@theatriolo.com

IMPROVISATION

... if you want to know more about improvisation in theatre and film find out about Keith Johnstone and Mike Leigh...

Impro: *Improvisation and the Theatre*, by Keith Johnstone, published by Methuen.

Keith Johnstone is thought of as one of the world's most celebrated Impro practitioners. He is really excellent at revealing the ways in which understanding status and spontaneity can help actors to improvise. He is also very funny!

The Improvised Play: The work of Mike Leigh, by Paul Clements, published by Methuen.

Mike Leigh is an internationally famous film and theatre maker who has refined a process of using improvisation with his actors to create their characters and relationships. Take a look at films and plays created, written and directed by Mike Leigh.

WRITING REVIEWS

... if you are going to write a review this might help...

You have now seen the play and been part of the audience. What did you think of it? Nobody except the company has seen the text. You haven't had to study the play as a written text. Rather you have experienced it, in the moment, first hand. There are no 'expert' opinions to refer to or look up. The play was created for you.

The play has been created for young people and Theatr Iolo would really value your review of our work if you would like to send us a copy. If you are studying drama, you may well have to evaluate a piece of live theatre and our play may count towards your work. Ask your teacher if it can.

Here are some informal questions to prompt your thoughts. You could write a sentence or a full review. If you want to write a formal review there is another structure below that will help you and plenty of guidelines if you look up 'writing a review' on the internet.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE UGLY TRUTH?

How would you talk about the play if you had to describe it in one sentence?

How did the play affect your feelings?

What reaction did the audience around you have to the drama?

What was the play about on the surface?

What layers of meaning could you see under the surface?

What mood was created?

Who were the characters?

How did they behave, what did they do?

Why did they behave like they did, what did they really want?

What themes did their actions and dialogue reveal to you?

Did the characters change?

Are there any words or phrases they used that come back to you? Why?

What type of language was used in the play?

Having watched the play, what point of view or ideas about life does it leave you thinking about, if any?

Have other people who saw the play got different points of view than you about it?

What are they?

What was the stage setting like? What did you see when you looked at the set?

How did the stage setting help you to understand the times and places of the world of the play.

What sounds did you hear?

How did what you were hearing add to the meaning and feel of the drama?

What did you think of the costumes? What did you understand from the look of the costumes?

What did you think about the acting? What other acting styles have you seen that you can compare it too?

A POSSIBLE PLAN FOR YOUR REVIEW

Think about the text, the production and reception.

The place of the performance. Describe the place you saw the play in.

The performance space.

The audience space and the actors' space.

The set.

The lighting.

The sound.

The costumes.

The actors and their performances.

The direction.

The overall impact of the play and the audience reception.

...I have been thinking about body image and what Gary said about how people can use it to hurt each other. humour is a minefield of course and sometimes teasing someone about their body image is a real shared laugh ...but sometimes it really is not ... it can damage your health...

...I like this quote I found, what do you think?...

'Beauty for me is self acceptance.'

(Lauren Fleishman Photographer)

...thank you for coming on this journey with me...

Glenys Evans

THANK YOU FROM THEATR IOLO

Kevin Lewis - Artistic Director
Wendy York - Administrative Director
Glenys Evans - Education Officer
Kerry Shelley - Tour Administrator
Tania Lucas - Communications Officer