

CROWDED ROOM

Interview with Harriet Madeley - Co Artistic Director of Crowded Room

- **How would you describe the work of Crowded Room?**

Driven by real people's stories. Because the stories we tell are real, they don't fit neatly into genres, so I'd describe our work as simultaneously powerful and gentle; funny and devastating; shocking and heartwarming.... much like real life.

- **Of all the work Crowded Room has done, what are you most proud of and why?**

The Listening Room was the first show I made for Crowded Room and I still feel incredibly proud of it. It goes to the darkest and the brightest places of human interaction so it's quite a rollercoaster. Making it meant meeting extraordinary people who had all undertaken the brave and unusual decision of engaging in restorative justice. Theirs felt like important, surprising and powerful stories to be telling.

- **How did the idea for The Listening Room come about?**

I read a newspaper article about a man who became best friends with his burglar, and I was instantly fascinated that there could have been a meaningful connection between people on either side of a crime. I started researching restorative justice, and the project developed from there.

- **Can you describe the process of developing The Listening Room from your experience?**

I contacted restorative justice organisations and went to meet people who had been through the process. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and a script was then created from three of the stories: one of them from the perspective of victims of crime; one of them from a perpetrator's perspective; and one from both sides. I was always keen to use people's precise words but it wasn't until I met the director (Max Barton) that the idea of using the real audio of the interviews came about: Max was keen to have the act of listening be a key part of the performance, so once we got into rehearsals, the idea of random casting and recorded delivery (actors listening to the audio recordings as they performed) was introduced... which took the production into even more exciting territory. During our performances of the show the real people we'd interviewed all came and watched, and gave talks afterwards, which felt like a fitting way to round off the process... although it's quite nerve-wracking portraying someone on stage to their face!

- **Would you describe your work as Verbatim? Why or why not?**

Many of our projects are verbatim, in that they use the precise words that real people

have spoken. The Listening Room is completely verbatim, as is The Colours. Some of our work departs from this a little - in 2030, we wrote fictional characters using the research that we'd done with real people, for example - but there's usually a verbatim element in our work. I find that real people are much funnier, braver, sweeter, more shocking and more contradictory than fictional characters, and using verbatim material is the most vivid way to get real people across to an audience.

- **What advice would you give to students wanting to emulate your style?**

Look for stories or themes you feel really passionate about - whether this is because you feel they don't get talked about enough, or because of a personal relationship to the subject matter, the important thing is that it's a story you're burning to tell... otherwise, someone else (who is burning to tell that story) could probably do it better. Once you've found the story, speak to lots of people, so you have plenty of material to choose from... and I often find myself using interviews with the people who surprise me somehow. We find it's important to cultivate a positive relationship with everyone we speak to, and make sure they know what will be done with their words. It's quite a responsibility telling real stories.

- **What do you want audiences to be thinking and feeling after they've seen a Crowded Room show?**

I hope that people will leave our shows feeling less scared to discuss certain issues, and with a new perspective on people who may not look or behave like them... I'd like to think they leave with a mixture of quite intense emotions, but feeling like they've had a good night out as well as a good hard think.

- **Can you describe the process of preparing for recording an interview?**

You need to make sure your microphone is on and properly set up - we had a few nightmares early on with microphones on the wrong settings, etc! Make sure you're meeting in a place that's comfortable for the interviewee, but also somewhere quiet enough that you can get a decent interview.

- **What is your process like when you're writing a new show?**

I think it depends on the show. Sometimes we'll have an idea of a theme we want to explore (as with The Listening Room or 2030) other times we'll be following a brief put to us by an organisation (as with Echoes). I'd say that early on in the process we always do interviews - whether these end up on the show or not - and from those, we find a mixed group of people whose experiences we're interested to explore.

- **How do you transition from writer to actor? When in the process do you make that change? Or do you keep them both ongoing at all times?**

If I'm writing on a particular production, I'll try to keep the two separate - so not thinking about the acting until rehearsals, and in rehearsals, giving myself over as an actor to a director. I think you can't be thinking about the writing when you're acting or you won't be present in the moment.

- **How does the movement/staging come to life in the rehearsal process?**
 We'll work with a director - sometimes we'll direct each other's work; sometimes we'll bring people in from outside. The director will probably do a fair bit of preparation in terms of the staging, often working with a designer. Then during rehearsals, we'll explore the play together - sometimes with a movement director. The director has the job of balancing their vision with the actors' instincts, so I'd say the fusion of those dictates how it comes to life.
- **How do you concentrate on what you need to say or how you're going to say it when you have the recording in your ear?**
 The interesting thing about recorded delivery - and one of the things that I think makes it so effective - is that you can't think about it, because you don't have time. In my experience, this makes the performance often feel much more 'live'. It's a tricky thing to get the hang of at first - you have to concentrate quite carefully on it - but once you're hooked in, it's very liberating, because you're completely unselfconscious, and unaware of your own performance in a way: you're just purely listening.
- **Can you describe a highlight and a lowlight (preferably comical) of your memories with Crowded Room?**
 A highlight was - after a performance in a high security prison - a man telling us he was now going to look to repair his relationship with his victim. A lowlight was earlier on that day, realising we'd left a key piece of equipment outside the prison, and having to somehow retrieve it (via fifty doors)!
- **How do you develop the idea for a new show?**
 We normally have a few ideas kicking around, and if one lasts long enough, we know it's a good one. One of us will take the lead on a project normally and pitch it to the others - then we'll all talk it through together, digging down into why it's an interesting area to explore, the kind of people we might want to engage, and what it might look like as a show. Then we'll normally apply for funding, and if that gets approved, we'll kick the project off - starting by meeting people with lived experience and talking to theatres who might want to programme the show.
- **What do you wish more people knew about making theatre?**
 I think sometimes people can feel intimidated or alienated by the theatre, and I wish people knew what a joyful and friendly experience it can be.

Interview with Mark Knightley - Co Artistic Director of Crowded Room

- **How would you describe the work of Crowded Room?**
 We make co-created and verbatim theatre. The co-created work is made in collaboration with communities who want to explore stories or issues that they have lived through or been affected by. The verbatim work centres around people who have stories to tell but

who, for a variety of reasons, may not want to be as creatively involved. Each form seeks to put real people at the centre of the work.

- **Of all the work Crowded Room has done, what are you most proud of and why?**

I think La Lucha (The Fightback), which started out as a co-created play between us and 9 female cleaners from Latin America. The women are all part of the radical trade union the IWGB and are fighting for justice and understanding in the face of workplace exploitation. The pandemic meant that a live output was no longer possible, but we managed to stick together and create a 20 minute documentary together that we're now releasing to film festivals.

- **How did the idea for The Listening Room come about?**

The Listening Room was Harriet's instigation. I believe she'd come across restorative justice after reading about a burglar who had met his victim through the process. She then started looking for more stories around the same theme and unearthed some incredible stories.

- **Can you describe the process of developing The Listening Room from your experience?**

We had two new plays almost back to back. One was at VAULT festival and The Listening Room was on just after at the Old Red Lion, which is a very small, but very atmospheric theatre above a pub in Angel, London. So I remember being very busy! And money was very tight. There were early jitters in the cast about the random casting, meaning as an actor you could play any role on any given night and about the recorded delivery, which, for us, was a new technique. However we knew we were onto something special. The stories were incredibly powerful and the director did a brilliant job of finding a way to allow us to tell them truthfully. I remember, before the first show, feeling excited about the fact that I didn't know my lines, I didn't know who I was going to play and that felt quite freeing.

- **Would you describe your work as Verbatim? Why or why not?**

Yes, some of our work is verbatim but I think there is a broad range of work that could fit into that. I think verbatim is just another tool that we can use to tell a story and probably the most important aspect of our work is that it centres around real people.

- **What advice would you give to students wanting to emulate your style?**

If you have an idea then a good way to start talking to people about it. Start building connections and testing the idea out. Find the people who are part of the story and see how you can work together. If possible (and after checking it's OK with them) it can be useful to audio record your interactions. You never know what might end up being part of the play or film.

- **What do you want audiences to be thinking and feeling after they've seen a Crowded Room show?**

I want people to come out of our shows feeling that they've had a new experience and discovered something new about the human condition. I hope that the experience is both provoking and empowering.

- **Can you describe the process of preparing for recording an interview?**

It's always a bit different, but I try and find out as much about the person as possible before the interview and to establish rapport before meeting in person. Sometimes we've interviewed prisoners or had groups set up through a facilitator so it's not possible to prepare much for exactly who we're going to meet, but I read up on the issues that might affect them and often create an interview guide with a list of questions and prompts to steer the conversation. Some questions I'd include in every interview, like, for example, 'How has this experience changed you', which often is the crux of the story.

- **What is your process like when you're writing a new show?**

It's been very varied but essentially the challenge is to find the story. Which is, of course, identifying what the people in the story want and what is stopping them getting it. Then you work with your collaborators, or sometimes by yourself, to assemble the materials that you have into the story.

- **How do you transition from writer to actor? When in the process do you make that change? Or do you keep them both ongoing at all times?**

I find this quite difficult sometimes. At some point you have to stop worrying about the script, or the lights, or how many people are in the audience and commit to the performance. I try and do that at around the half (35 minutes before the show starts) when I'll be warming up in the theatre and thinking only about the performance.

- **How does the movement/staging come to life in the rehearsal process?**

We use different techniques and it depends on the demands of the play as well as how much time we have! We've done a lot of laban work, where we work with different physical gestures to find the inner and outer rhythms of the characters and how they relate to each other.

- **How do you concentrate on what you need to say or how you're going to say it when you have the recording in your ear?**

I think the trick is to let go and not over think it and to simply, honestly, communicate what you hear, not just the words, but the pitch, the tone and the emotion. Most importantly, you have to know why the person is saying what they are saying. What effect are they trying to have on the person that they are saying it to? Do they want to impress, or to amuse, or to challenge for example?

- **Can you describe a highlight and a lowlight (preferably comical) of your memories with Crowded Room?**

A highlight was during the first run of The Listening Room at The Old Red Lion when we got a superlative review from the Spectator. Fringe theatre survives on such a knife edge and that really saved our financial bacon and gave the show a future life.

An amusing lowlight was during SpacePlay at the VAULTS when the set unintentionally collapsed around me. I was playing an astronaut so should have been floating through space after that. As it was I just had to pick the wall up again and carry on....

- **How do you develop the idea for a new show?**

This could be a very long answer... I guess the main thing is to keep pushing it, to keep testing it and to keep talking to people about it. If it's a good idea then people will get behind it and it will gain an unstoppable momentum. First steps are to talk about it with trusted collaborators, then to talk to the people who are in the story. Most of the time they will be very happy to talk to you and maybe to be involved creatively as well. Then you have to decide how to go about it. Do you want to do an interview? Or a workshop? Do you want to write something yourself? I'd always think about how the process can serve the people that the story is about, especially with co-created or verbatim work, you want to align your aims and objectives with the people, or groups that you're working with.

- **What do you wish more people knew about making theatre?**

- 1) Theatre can have a huge impact on society, the economy, health and wellbeing and yet has been consistently underfunded by successive Conservative governments. A little more money would go a long way!

- 2) Theatre making is fun and hard and often exhausting and occasionally transformative.