

Barrel Organ

Education Pack

2016

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Please visit www.barrelorgantheatre.co.uk for more information.

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Information

“...using a series of monologues, sometimes interspersed with a series of games that practically reinvent the V-Effekt before your very eyes ...It feels like a company picking up Brecht’s ideas about political theatre, inspecting them scientifically for veracity, effortlessly working out how that could work in a modern UK context, and then just making this incredibly astute, searching, honest, raw artwork”

- Andrew Haydon, Postcards from the Gods

This education pack is intended to give some insight into who Barrel Organ are as a company and the way we make our work. Though we are still a young company and have only made two shows to date, we believe strongly in the importance of outreach and education, and hope that we can play a part in encouraging a new generation of radical theatre-makers to get out into the world and make work.

Although an awareness of Barrel Organ’s work would enrich the information and ideas laid out on the following pages, the pack stands alone as an educational resource and can be used by students, teachers and theatre-makers alike. We hope it inspires you to try something a bit different next time you’re making theatre, and if you have any questions or thoughts, don’t hesitate to contact us at barrelorgantheatre@gmail.com.

We hope you enjoy reading the pack and find it useful.

Barrel Organ x

Background to Barrel Organ

Barrel Organ was formed in 2013 at the University of Warwick, where all eleven company members studied. In the spring of that year, Ali and Lulu put an open call-out for cast members for an idea they had for a play. Lulu had written a set of monologues, and Ali would be directing. They were looking for a group of people who were unafraid to play around with form and try out new ideas, and after an audition session, they selected eight performers and an assistant director to help them make the show. That Easter holiday, we set about creating something that felt new, exciting, different and dangerous. The result was our debut show, *Nothing* (see page 5), which was performed in car parks, classrooms, houses and traditional studio spaces.

Only once the show was up and running did we begin to have serious conversations about being a 'proper' theatre company. Having made a show which we felt was open and accessible, we decided that we would be a democratic, non-hierarchical company where every company member would have equal say. It was also clear that Barrel Organ would be a theatre company which made politically engaged and theatrically aware work; this was the idea which connected the eleven of us who came together to form the company.

A year later, we were lucky enough to have *Nothing* selected for the National Student Drama Festival in Scarborough, and that summer we performed the show at Summerhall during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Later that year, Camden People's Theatre in London hosted us for a week. During the day, we began work on our next show. *Some People Talk About Violence*, and every evening we performed *Nothing*.

In 2015, we made and performed *Some People Talk About Violence* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and Camden People's Theatre. Since then, Barrel Organ has grown as a company, developing an outreach strand, curating a regular scratch night called 'LIVE' for emerging companies, and playing around with ideas for new work. Watch this space...

Production History

***Nothing* by Lulu Raczka**

first performed in 2013

Nothing is a series of eight first-person monologues, in which each narrator describes a violent act they have encountered. They are performed in an unrehearsed, improvised order every night, in which the actors cut and edit the script as they go. The audience are addressed directly, and the piece can be performed anywhere.

Venues: Humanities Studio; maths classroom; multi-story car park; student flat; over the phone; TJ's Bar, Leamington; Dressing Room, WAC; West London Trades Union Club; Hull University Scarborough Campus; Spa Centre, Scarborough; Summerhall Old Lab, Edinburgh; Lyric Hammersmith rehearsal room; Helen Martin Studio; Camden People's Theatre basement; the HUB, Leeds; Wardrobe Theatre, Bristol

Director Ali Pidsley, Jack Perkins

Performers Joe Boylan, Bryony Davies, Rosie Gray, Dan Hutton, Euan Kitson, Kieran Lucas, Jack Morning-Newton, Katherine Thorogood

***Some People Talk About Violence* by Barrel Organ, with text by Lulu Raczka**

devised by the company, first performed in 2014

Some People Talk About Violence tells the story of Girl, a young woman who is arrested for breaking into a stranger's house. She spends hours watching TV and struggles to engage with a modern age full of sitcoms and ultra-efficient microwaves, whilst her mother uncovers barriers to her own empathy, and her brother on the other side of the world tries to do the right thing. Interwoven in these monologues, the four performers play a series of games, thus distancing us slightly from the central narrative.

Venues: The HUB, Leeds; New Diorama Theatre; Derby Theatre; Summerhall Old Lab, Edinburgh; Warwick Arts Centre; Camden People's Theatre; New Wolsey Theatre

Director Ali Pidsley

Tech Management Kieran Lucas

Dramaturgy Dan Hutton, Jack Perkins

Performers Joe Boylan, Bryony Davies, Rosie Gray, Craig Hamilton, Euan Kitson, Jack Morning-Newton, Ellice Stevens, Katherine Thorogood

Artistic Process

Like all theatre-makers, our process is not a fixed, unchangeable thing, but something which is edited and honed for each specific piece of work we are making. Everything here, therefore, should be taken with a rather generous pinch of salt. It is a streamlined, simplified version of our process, and would not work for any other show or group of people. We've written it out here more as a stimulus for other ideas about how to make theatre, and to give you an insight into the way our shows come about.

Our process begins with an idea. This may be a piece of written text, an amorphous theme, or a basic storyline. We will sit for hours - in pubs, in kitchens, in rehearsal rooms, in pairs, in threes, or as a whole eleven - talking about and around that idea, interrogating what it might mean, how it speaks to us, and the theatrical form it might take. This latter point is crucial for Barrel Organ; at the root of every show we make is the need to make the form speak to the content, and vice versa. Thus an improvised, atomised series of performances is perfect for dealing with the isolation and alienation of *Nothing*, and a story intercut with rule-oriented games helps an audience to discover the violence of societal structures in *Some People Talk About Violence*. The way form and content are linked won't be discovered in these early stages - that's the goal of the rehearsal process - but the kernel of an idea has to be there before we throw ourselves into the process.

The next step is to throw around as many ideas as possible. We'll play games, read the text, re-read the text, do some dancing, write new pieces of text, cut these up and tear them apart, discuss relevant (and irrelevant) research, play around with video projectors. At this stage, it feels important to gather as many ideas and options as possible; very little of it (if any) will appear in the final show.

Throughout all this, we'll also spend a lot of time talking. And talking. And talking. Probably a bit too much, to be honest, but it's the only way we know how to make stuff which everyone in the company feels somehow attached to. Seeing as liveness is an important aspect of our shows, it's crucial that everyone involved has to feel connected to the things we make and has ownership over the decisions which are made. This way, the shows can run smoothly and effectively whilst also feeling totally live and fresh with every performance.

As time goes on and the original performance gets nearer, we hone in on the formal aspect of the show; what is the most apt theatrical form for this show, which will enlighten an audience to its themes whilst also complicating and deepening its ideas? It's never really clear how or when we make this crucial discovery, but there's no doubt that it comes as a result of all the previous work, and feels like a true 'eureka' moment. Then, as we get the show on its feet in front of audiences at scratch nights and previews, the work begins in earnest on editing the script to make the story clear. We find tricks and rules for the performers so they can perform the show effectively, and find a dramaturgical rigour which allows the show to (hopefully) stand on its own two feet. Only in performance, with an audience, do our shows truly come alive.

Managing a Company

Managing a company of eleven people is no mean feat. There are accounts to manage, emails to administrate, venues to liaise with, applications to send off and calendars to synchronize. Most theatre companies do not operate like this, but we feel it's important to share a bit of insight into how we work and the way we ensure things don't fall apart, so that any makers thinking about setting up companies have a starting point.

Company Structure

The first thing to say is that although the original decision to be a democratically-run company with no clearly defined roles or structure was a political one, it has turned out to be a pragmatic, positive idea. Seeing as none of us can afford to give all of our time to Barrel Organ and we all have our own lives outside of the company, having an organisation in which different people take on different jobs and everyone has to muck in means that there's always someone to pick up the slack, and no one has to spend too much of their free time working on company business.

It perhaps goes without saying, however, that this choice also creates challenges. We try to ensure that every decision is run past the rest of the company, which means things sometimes take a little longer than they normally would to get done. We're still working out the best way to make this process work to ensure both democracy and expediency, but we're getting there.

Finances

As a young theatre company, we have no regular or definite funding streams, meaning we have to rely on three main areas of support. These break down broadly into Arts Council Funding, Ticket Sales and Partnerships.

Our biggest funding stream over the past twelve months has been Arts Council England's Grants for Arts Scheme, which has supported both runs of our shows and development time. G4A is available to any individuals or organisations "who use the arts in their work", and is a huge help for small companies like Barrel Organ, allowing us to pay ourselves a professional wage and think properly about the work we make for extended periods of time. Crucially, the Arts Council ask for some of the money they offer to be 'match-funded', which means either cash or resources have to come from other sources. For us, these other income streams tend to be Ticket Sales and Partnerships.

Even if a show isn't Arts Council funded, ticket sales form a crucial part of our income. When we're doing one-off shows, scratch nights, or the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, for example, a

large portion of the money for these ventures will come from ticket sales. Similarly, if ACE is supporting a run of one of our shows, they will ask for some of their funding to be matched by income generated by ticket sales. So when you buy a ticket to a Barrel Organ show, you're helping to pay the artists involved.

Since our inception, we've been extremely lucky to have the support of a number of theatres and companies, who have offered us space, guidance and money. Spaces like Camden People's Theatre, Warwick Arts Centre and SlungLow's HUB have all given invaluable support by offering us space and cash, which has helped us to develop our work and ensure that any money made from our projects goes directly into the pockets of the artists rather than paying for space.

For more information about the Arts Council's Grants For Arts visit their website: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/grants-arts>

Marketing

As a company, Barrel Organ seeks to interrogate and question existing modes of theatre-making and its surrounding economic structures, which means we don't think about marketing in the conventional sense. Our posters, for example, have only featured the titles of the shows and crucial information, rather than trying to overload audiences with visual information or our 'brand'. And though it could be argued that there is a Barrel Organ 'brand', it feels more important to us to talk about our ethos and our work; this is what sticks with people, and what drives all our work.

We believe audience engagement is crucial to creating exciting, radical work, and this is as true outside the theatre as it is inside it. For example, we make use of Twitter, Facebook and email to talk to audiences and artists about our work, and maintain an open, inclusive tone which invites conversation rather than bombarding people with information, which often feels like a one-way conversation. In a more connected, online world, this is an important part of maintaining a plugged-in presence as a theatre company.

Making Some People Talk About Violence

This is an edited version of an article originally published on [Exeunt](#).

EUAN: Hello, my name is Euan and I'm going to talk to you about working with people.

KATHERINE: Hello, my name is Katherine and I'm going to talk to you about expectations.

KIERAN: Hello, my name is Kieran and I'm going to talk to you about ideas.

PERKINS: Hello, my name is Jack and I'm going to talk to you about making stuff.

EUAN: Barrel Organ is a funny thing. We have existed as a proper entity for less time than our debut show, *Nothing*. *Nothing* was originally a five-show run, with each in a different location, but it took on a life of its own and we're still doing it when we can. We formed off the back of *Nothing* and like a foal we're still finding our feet.

JACK: As a company we frequently find ourselves taking the hard route. Often pointedly and sometimes unknowingly. We investigate the 'how' of making theatre alongside the 'why' and 'what' of the show itself. We began the company frustrated with the restrictive roles we'd had as solely performers, directors, writers, etc, and that continues to motivate our work.

KATHERINE: Beginning work on the new show brought us a raft of new perspectives on our own work and our reasons for doing it. As well as considering the nature of the content we deal with in the show, most days of making brought us into contact with our own individual expectations of the company's collaborative work.

KIERAN: The central idea for this show was formed around conversations with Lulu we had around a year ago. We spoke about creating a show centering around the notion of violence in which nothing traditionally 'violent' happens; thus the notion of violence becomes much more of a thematic concern as opposed to a dramatic action. The process of removing the physical act of violence from the play has created a vacuum at its centre and instead the play becomes about the act of filling this vacuum.

KATHERINE: Our expectations of the show have evolved massively since we first got together and began looking at the text it's been great and we've been really lucky to have each other whilst navigating our company's relationship to new ways of performing a story.

EUAN: None of us has any training, really. We've all got degrees and Joe went to clown school for a bit. We're all slashes, or so we think. Everyone is an actor/theatremaker/designer/poet/chef/taxidermist or similar. Yes, this is great because it means we have a huge range of skills to draw upon, and our influences are diverse. However, it can also be a nightmare because everyone thinks they're right and is very good at explaining why.

JACK: Led by the title and some initial scenes, we've made some of our best discoveries about the show in circling around it. In collaborating with written text and without, talking and playing, and when stuck not trying to tackle problems head-on.

KIERAN: The process of creating this show has, for the most part, been about exploring these thematic off-shoots. We've spent a long time picking apart and wrestling with several ideas about differing ways of representing violence and the socio-economic factors which we feel are creating a more violent society. This process of expansion and exploration has created a show with themes that feel very open to interpretation.

KATHERINE: Having a constantly changing group in the room has been useful for keeping ourselves in check with regard to what we expect to make -creatively, politically, and humorously. We challenge each other to evaluate our expectations and complacencies in rehearsal as much as possible, which means at this point we're very open to the expectation of being proved clangingly wrong.

KIERAN: As a company we always feel it is important for the content of a performance to be reflected in its form and the openness of interpretation is also present in the machinations of our performance of the text. The show is built around a rotating cast and each performer is able to play multiple parts. Each performer has been given licence to interpret the text on their own terms and perform it accordingly.

JACK: And when, in a roundabout way, we return to the exact things we rejected or purposely avoided - action-ing characters, finding their objectives - it is all the more fruitful for the mound of work beneath it. By finding meaning in moving far and wide from our point of origin, and applying scenarios to performance that find drama in the struggle between two opposing forces.

EUAN: Our two shows so far have been made by all eleven of us. We're the same size as a football team and theatre companies aren't really meant to be that big (not if you have dreams of getting paid well). However, we're proud that we've made it work, defying logic, sense, our finances, the odds and gravity. I'm sure we'll scale down our operations soon, but for now we've stuck to our guns.

KATHERINE: Making this show has been an exhausting process on every faculty and idea we have brought to the table, as it should be with new work. We knew we wanted to explore the representation, expectation, and viewing of violence onstage, but getting the resulting moments and thoughts on their feet and mingling with text has been surprising to all of us in different ways.

JACK: There exists a show about the violence we know, and act on or choose to ignore. And there is our show which interrogates the inherent violence that we not only ignore but never recognise as violent in the first instance. There are demands in presenting that; bringing an audience with us into that way of thinking, emphasising the necessity of the work as a piece theatre.

EUAN: We're making it up as we go along but it seems to be working okay for now.

Interview

This is an edited version of an article by Billy Barrett for Noises Off Magazine.

The spectacle of violence that once blasted the British stage has long reached its limit. What's followed in the work of some of our more forward-thinking playwrights has been a theatre of absence, a dramaturgy concerned with not showing. It's an idea that seems to reach a logical conclusion in the title of Barrel Organ's first show, *Nothing*, which appears at NSDF this year.

At least, that's my take. *Nothing* is written by Lulu Raczka and directed by Ali Pidsley. I've seen it evolve from a single monologue at a scratch night to an eight-hander, centred around "very violent" narratives spoken by "people who feel alienated or disconnected from the world around them". Each performer has a monologue, but may speak or interrupt another in whichever order they choose. Devoid of set and costume or any attempt to recreate the events described, *Nothing* plays with dramatic form and spectatorial engagement.

"We're asking a fucking lot from people who see this show," says Lulu when I phone the pair between rehearsals, "because so many art forms allow you to be passive, but our audience's imaginations are necessary for the play to exist." At the same time, she says, "it's a play that's happening in the room around you, because these are public confessions, not interior monologues - that's the theatricality, the liveness of it." The speakers in *Nothing* "become a sort of isolated community - the tragedy is that they don't listen to each other and engage." Lulu reflects, "They'd gain so much from having a chat, going 'oh my god we all feel the same', but they don't. So they're all one voice, but also a million."

This was painfully highlighted when the actors gave out their phone numbers online to perform over the airwaves; in the absence of a body or even a physical playing space, the anonymous voices made the monologues' universality even more pronounced. "I don't know if that was necessarily our intention," Ali says, "we just thought it was a cool idea. What we did find is it became very intimate, and almost always turned into a dialogue. It's interesting how ready an audience feels to respond on the phone when they won't in the room."

For a writer, Lulu's remarkably un-precious about words on the page; the freedom she affords her actors when it comes to the script means the piece blurs the frontier of devised and text-based practice, and there's a dose of improv that makes each show unpredictably unique. "I don't feel responsible for the text at all," she says. "I just let the actors just get on with it and change what they want."

The process and form of *Nothing* is as politically conscious as its content. Its "lo-fi" production is as much "an act of dissent in a recession - saying fuck you and your budgets, I can do this with nothing" - as it is about examining "the basics of theatre", With no producer or funding to speak of, the group also each take on practical responsibilities.

So does *Nothing* have an end point, an eventual definitive version? "No", they both reply instantly, and they don't know where it's going either. *Nothing* is an idea in motion, a perpetual renegotiation. "It will never be a finished product," Lulu says, "and that's exciting." With a few more games and experiments up their sleeves (I'm sworn to secrecy), it'll be fascinating to see where Barrel Organ take this over NSDF.

Games and Exercises

Here is a selection of games and exercises which you might wish to use when creating your own work. They are intended to help you make discoveries in a rehearsal room and build a relationship as an ensemble, but feel free to edit as you wish for your own purposes. Barrel Organ also runs a programme of workshops for various age groups. Visit barrelorgantheatre.co.uk for more info.

CREATING A COMPANY EXERCISES

1. What would you call your theatre company? Why?
2. Try writing an outline document for your company. What sort of work will you make? Who will you be making your shows for? Try and condense these ideas into a paragraph.
3. Imagine you're going to create your first show, and want to tell your friend about it. Think about:
 - a. What is the show about?
 - b. How are you going to make it?
 - c. Who is going to be involved in making it?
 - d. Where are you going to perform it?
 - e. Who will watch your show?

RESPONDING TO TEXT

1. Find the nearest book/magazine/newspaper to you and open it on a random page. Find a passage of text and divide it up between the people in your group. Try speaking it aloud, and then create a scene which involves the passage you've found.
2. Print out your favourite poem, or a poem you have been studying. With a friend, perform the text to your class with the intention to *tell the story*. How clear can you make the narrative?

GAMES FOR BUILDING AN ENSEMBLE

Circles of Concentration

Stand in a circle. A sequence is created (i.e. people's names), and participants have to complete that sequence without breaking it. More sequences (i.e. walking, food) are added on top until the whole thing breaks down.

Mr Hit

Participants all stand in a close circle. The game begins with 1 person saying another person's name. The named person must then touch another person in the circle, that person must then say someone else's name. This pattern (name, touch, name, touch...) is repeated until someone fucks up. That person is disqualified but stays in the circle. If someone names a disqualified person in subsequent rounds they too are disqualified. You cannot touch the person that has just said your name, you cannot say the name of the person that has just touched you.

Numbers Game

Participants stand in a circle with their eyes closed. Without any form of communication, the group has to try counting without any two people speaking at the same time. If two people begin speaking at the same time, counting goes back to 1 and you start over.

Reviews and Press

Dan & Lulu talk to theatre-maker Chris Goode on his *Thompson's Live* podcast:
<http://chrisgoodeandco.podbean.com/e/thompson%E2%80%99s-live-s3-ep03-24th-january-2016-barrel-organ/>

What is it about Warwick? How one university is dominating Edinburgh's political theatre:
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/aug/16/what-is-it-about-warwick-edinburgh-festival-walrus-theatre-breach-barrel-organ>

Catherine Love's thoughts on Nothing: <https://catherinelove.co.uk/2014/04/22/nothing-nsdf/>

"Barrel Organ create work from a collision of these ideas; a process Dan describes as 'really tricky, messy and complex' and one that's more grounded in improvisation, experimentation and trial-and-error - rather than any singular, concrete methodology" - Lee Anderson, for Exeunt, on Barrel Organ at Camden People's Theatre. Read here - <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/barrel-organ-the-space-to-be-better/>

Some People Talk About Violence - Edinburgh & London 2015

"An example of a young company with a clear-eyed idea of what they want to say and how they want to say it - and that in itself is incredibly exciting". The Stage. Read here - <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2015/people-talk-violence/>

"Some People Talk About Violence is a properly brilliant piece of theatre.. [an] astute, searching, honest, raw artwork." Andrew Haydon. Read here - <http://postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08/some-people-talk-about-violence.html>

"New Writing meets Forced Entertainment". Exeunt Magazine. Read here - <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/some-people-talk-about-violence/>

"Some People Talk About Violence, is one of the most exciting and relevant pieces of theatre we've seen in a while". Read here - <http://postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08/some-people-talk-about-violence.html>

Nothing - Edinburgh & NSDF 2014

"A snapshot of a generation who feels that the future has very little to offer them, and who are appalled and fascinated by the violence they encounter in everyday life". The Guardian. Read here - <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/aug/09/nothing-edinburgh-2014-review-barrel-organ-raczka>

"Not since 2010 - Anya Reiss's *Spur of the Moment* at the Royal Court, London - has a first-time play felt so certain in both voice and intent". Financial Times. Read here - <http://matttrueman.co.uk/2014/08/review-nothing-edinburgh-fringe.html>

"A fiercely confrontational and intelligent piece, with a disarming truthfulness about the way we live today". Time Out. Read here - <http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/nothing>

"This is a dizzyingly confident and assured debut, both in terms of content and form, by a company worth watching out for." The Stage. Read here - <https://www.thestage.co.uk/edinburgh-reviews/73276/nothing/>

FAQ

Why are you called Barrel Organ?

When casting about for a name, we were reading some essays by the theatre practitioner Edward Gordon-Craig, and came across the following quote: *“I once knew a man whose life was so occupied, he never heard music other than than of the street organ. It was to him the ideal of what music should be [...] - in fact, barrel-organ music is very bad music; and if you were for once to see an actual piece of theatrical art, you would never never again tolerate what is today being thrust upon you in place of theatrical art.”* Though we hope we don’t make the “bad” art Gordon-Craig references, the quote felt apt in light of our thoughts about contemporary theatre, and we liked the idea of trundling into towns to present them with theatre.

What do you all do when you’re not working on a Barrel Organ show?

There are two answers to this question. At times, we might each be working on other shows: in the company, we have directors, writers, dramaturgs, actors, designers and technicians, and when we’re not all in a room together we make our own work and help others to make theirs.

And, at other times, we do jobs that make us money. When we can get paid to make theatre, we do. But you’ll be more likely to find us tending gardens, cooking meals, tearing tickets, transcribing interviews, tutoring kids, performing in tourist attractions, cleaning houses, painting rooms, invigilating exams, answering calls on reception, and some company members are still studying or training.

What are your future plans?

We have a number of events coming up in the next year, which divide broadly into two strands: curation and creation.

Our LIVE scratch nights, which began at Camden People’s Theatre, showcase the work of theatre-makers making bold, inventive work. LIVE will continue with events all around the country as well as at CPT. Alongside this, Barrel Organ is curating the Emerge Festival at Warwick Arts Centre, which programmes the work of artists who attended Warwick University. We want to support the work of other companies, and we hope to continue this idea over the next few years.

A nationwide tour of *Some People Talk About Violence* will happen in the latter part of the year, allowing us to reach more audiences than ever before. We’re also working on some new ideas for shows at the Edinburgh Fringe 2017 and beyond, but we don’t want to give too much away about them quite yet.