

SHOTPUT.

The Shotput Podcast

'Video Design (w/ Rob Willoughby)'

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Jim (J):

Hello and welcome to the Shotput Podcast. I'm Jim Manganello, one of the Artistic Directors of Shotput, which is a dance theatre company based in Glasgow, Scotland. In this podcast we have conversations with people from different practices, different to our own practice of dance and theatre. We're investigating some ideas that are currently feeding our work, our shows, our other artistic projects, and we hope that this podcast allows you to walk with us for a little while and look at some interesting things, or at least things that are interesting us at the moment. This first miniseries of three episodes is all about film, and that's because it's being released in tandem with the Scottish tour of Shotput's live show Ferguson and Barton, which is a show that is in love with the cinema. The show was very loosely inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo*, which I can't recommend enough, it's a true masterpiece. It's not completely uncontroversial, but for that reason alone I really recommend that you check it out. And whether or not you plan to watch Ferguson and Barton or *Vertigo*, I hope that these conversations are stimulating and that you find something of interest for yourself.

In this first episode, myself and Shotput's other Artistic Director, Lucy Ireland, sat down to speak to Rob Willoughby. Things that we discuss are video stores, and the importance of having a space for experimentation, and the varying demands of different media and different screens. Rob, I should say, is a video designer. We talk about socialism and utopias and many, many other things. Rob was really a natural first guest for this podcast, and that's because not only is he the Video Designer for Ferguson and Barton, as well as many other great productions that have recently played in Scotland, but he's a true polymath, which is something we enjoy a lot at Shotput; we're always shifting and always looking for different things to bring into the room, and Rob does that in spades. His brain and his energy capture everything that we want this podcast to be; curious, insatiable, insistent. Rob's recent work as a Video Designer includes *Exodus* with NTS, National Theatre of Scotland, *Me and My Sister Tell Each Other* Everything with the Tron Theatre here in Glasgow, Amy Conway's *Super Awesome World* also at the Tron and Summerhall, and Aby Watson's *This Is Not A Euphemism*, which was part of the fantastic Buzzcut Festival. Rob is also a filmmaker, stage director, sound designer, and since the lockdown of 2020 a live performance practitioner on Twitch, which we'll talk about in the podcast as well. He is an Associate Artist with Snap-Elastic and Brite Theatre, these are two brilliant Scottish performance companies, I really encourage you to check them out, as well as – I'm very happy to say – an Artistic Associate at Shotput. In fact, just this past week, we were in a studio with Rob making the very first, very early strokes on a new Shotput project, and I will say that we had a lot of fun with cassette tapes, and at one point Rob played Masha from Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, so, as I say, he is a man of many, many talents.

There is more information on how you can catch Ferguson and Barton on tour at the end of this episode. For now, here's our conversation with Rob Willoughby.

Hey, Rob, thanks for doing this, it's good to see you wearing one of your many hats.

Rob (R):
I'm actually wearing a hoodie.

Lucy (L):
A very nice hoodie, though.

J:
It is nice, yeah. Rob's already been here for like an hour, so we've gone through clothing, shows, I don't know what we're going to talk about now.

R:
Oh, god.

J:
Okay. So, Rob Willoughby is here with us and we're talking about video design broadly, but who knows what we'll get into. And something that Rob shared with us when we were working on another project, that will hopefully happen one day, is about a video store that played a massive part in your childhood.

R:
Oh, yes, Channel 22!

J:
Channel 22. Can you tell us about that?

R:
Yeah. Okay, well I say my childhood, it was my teenage years, or my early teenage years, which really is a kind of childhood, and I think maybe we don't see it as much... anyway, Channel 22 was an independent video store that used to be in Camden Town in London where I grew up, and I guess there aren't really any independent video stores anymore, which is a shame, because it was a magical place. It was a bit like a portal to adulthood to me, I think. And I made some friends at school, who are still great friends of mine, a pair of twins called Matt and Joe, and they used to frequent this video shop, and they introduced me to this video shop. We always used to go, as teenagers growing up in North London, Camden Town is kind of a Mecca for everything cool, it's where the goths hang out and the punks hang out, and it's where there are bars that you can get served in when you're clearly not eighteen, it's nightlife centre. It's changed a lot, it's not the place that it was, we're talking... I should probably give some indication of how old I am that indicates when this is, but this would have been in the late '90s and early '00s that we were hanging out in Camden Town and Channel 22. And it was a video shop, it had rows and rows, even by that time most of them were DVDs and not videos but we still called it a video shop. And it had independent films and foreign films and anime and horror movies, and all the kinds of things that you would not see on television generally. There were still some interesting late-night excursions into the programming of the Sci Fi Channel, Channel 5, Channel 4 that had a similar maturing effect upon a young man, a realisation of what exists in the world and how weird and wonderful those things can be. But, yeah, Channel 22 is where I remember that we would go there and it felt like a wonderland, because I suppose it was quite cool in a '90s way in that it had stainless steel stairs, a spiral staircase up to an attic area, mezzanine area, in the shop that had more and more racks of obscure DVDs. And you would go there and find things you couldn't find anywhere else, and

see things you couldn't see anywhere else. And, like I said, that for me was like one of those portals into the adult world.

L:

Did you always rent a particular genre of film?

R:

[LAUGHS] All kinds of things! Some of these films had boobs in them, and for teenage boys that was a big part of the attraction. So, there's a whole variety of stuff. I was a bit of a goth, and I don't know if anyone knows the band Cradle of Filth, I was into Cradle of Filth, and the lead singer of Cradle of Filth, who was called Dani Filth, I think – this is all quite vague now, please don't quote me on any of this... god, don't record it and put it in a podcast or anything!
[LAUGHS] The lead singer of Cradle of Filth also made a selection of very bad, very low budget, very rude B Movie horror films, they were available in Channel 22. Mostly a lot of anime and manga, so Akira, Ghost In The Shell, anything in that sort of area of geeky and slightly misfit. And I guess that's the other thing about it, when you feel like you don't really belong at school maybe, or you don't really fit in the mainstream because you're a bit of a sort of geeky loser who likes Cradle of Filth, then the place that is a haven for all of those odd things that welcomes them and seems to discover odd things of other parts of the world and offer them to you, it just felt like a brilliant place to be and I have very fond memories of it.

J:

I had the equivalent video store, not nearly as romantic because mine was Blockbuster, but it was like a ten minute walk from my house, and there were movies that I still haven't seen but I know their images so well that I feel like they were part of my formation as a human but also as a maker. And I remember one of them was Farewell My Concubine, and we just thought the title was so great.

L:

I've never heard of that.

J:

That's one that I now have watched – you have to watch Farewell My Concubine. I don't know if I would call it a masterpiece, but it was just really... there was like that frisson of a slightly risky word that I didn't necessarily know what it meant but I learned because of the title. I guess what I'm getting at is the artifactuality of the videos has become a part of me, even when I haven't seen...

R:

Yes! That was the thing about Channel 22 as well, there are so many movies that we would obsess over the box of. I suppose in retrospect they must have had a policy of letting us rent things that were 18s, because I'm sure we saw movies that must be 18s that we got from there. But there was an element to which you'd still have to go and take it to the counter, you know what I mean? So there were some things that you wouldn't even consider, but you would look at the back of that box and imagine what that film entails based on two really bad paragraphs of copy and four very bad stills from the film.

J:

I think that's a really good point. It feels very low risk, hanging out with your mates in a video store, but there's still this little element of risk and dipping your toe into... I don't know, dipping your toe into the slightly dangerous, but still very safe.

R:

Right, yes. And the other thing is I think was important, this was the age before Wikipedia. So, if you saw something that was interesting on the back of a video box, you couldn't then go home and do the research yourself, come back knowing exactly what it was you were getting and then responsibly go to the counter and ask for that thing. You would have to... I always remember being terrified and also excited to ask the guys who worked in the video shop anything because they were encyclopedias of knowledge and you didn't want to look like an idiot who didn't know what he was talking about, who didn't know his anime, who didn't know his sci-fi. But they knew it all, and you wanted to at the same time learn from them but also not look like you were not worthy of being there, some kind of idiot outsider or something.

J:

You're someone who strikes me as... I've seen the way you can get... I don't want to say 'obsessed' but you can get interested in gadgets and material objects and things, and maybe this is transitioning this into the world of theatre and design as well, that it seems to me that's a real motor for you.

R:

Oh, yeah, absolutely.

J:

Stuff.

R:

Yeah, stuff, and taking things apart and seeing how they work and looking them inside and out. And, yeah, obsessed is exactly the word I would use.

L:

Were you always like that?

R:

Yeah. [LAUGHS] I've always been someone who wanted to create intricate things, and create intricate worlds as well. The thing that I always have trouble talking about what I do as an artist because I like to do lots of different things and wear lots of different hats, as you said at the beginning. And so when I have had a think about what it is that pulls these things together, the thing I always say is that I like building worlds. And I like then going on to explore those worlds, with audiences often. And that possibility of discovery in a world that you've intricately created yourself is something that definitely comes from childhood and it comes from really enjoying... my father used to build model railways and I have really fond memories of being simultaneously incredibly intrigued but also completely forbidden from interacting with the model railways because they were not toys. And then I had Lego, I had a very intricate Lego spaceport that I spent years adding to the personal lore and stories of as you'd add new buildings and spaceships and characters that you've created. And it's that

thing of not just becoming obsessed with something but wanting to build it into your own little intricate world that you can then live in, maybe.

L:

What was the first world that you created?

R:

Oh, god, the first... I don't know. I remember early memories of sandpits being amazing, even before Lego was a fixation for years. But I would also love to go to the sandpit on the way home from school because in the sandpit I would build worlds, I would create lots of houses that are piles of sand and I would build the roads between them and make a little... and obviously you weren't allowed to do this in the sandpit at the park, but if you were on the beach you'd make a river going through it and try and run actual water through your little world and the castle and the side buildings and the church and whatever. Yeah, I think it's always been a thing.

J:

Okay, since we've mentioned it a couple times, maybe we shouldn't be so coy about it, we're saying Rob wears many different hats – do you want to tell us about some of the pathways you've gone down, the different stages of your career? But maybe that's not even the right question because I feel like you keep all these alive.

R:

Yeah, hopefully. Practical background, born and brought up in North London, and then I moved to Glasgow for university. When I went to university I studied theatre simply because I was getting the best grades in drama at school and I didn't know what else to do. And then it was only there making theatre that I decided that's what I wanted to do. But right from the start I would direct shows and I would lead shows, I also used to act – I have definitely stopped acting.

J:

Although we're working on it, watch this space. [LAUGHING] I'm joking, don't worry.

R:

No, please, never again. Because I have so much respect for the people who get out on a stage, that really is a whole other discipline of performance. And whilst obviously never say never, it's definitely something that I really enjoy working with people who know how to do that in a very refined way. Yeah, so I used to direct, used to act, and I also right from the start at university started doing sound design for friends and really enjoyed the process. We had a wonderful situation at Glasgow Uni, which was that we had a theatre, the Gilmorehill G12, which is still there but the university, just after I finished at university, wound down the company that ran it and now it's completely internal. It used to be that companies, professional companies, and student societies, and the theatre department were all sharing the same theatre which had an incredible technician called Tony Sweeten, who was just one of the most generous and brilliant men I've met, because he would answer any question and he wouldn't just answer it, he would take you and show you exactly how this thing worked. And it was a fully equipped, fully operational theatre that was only put there in the '90s so we had access to an incredible resource that allowed us to experiment. And the sound operator's booth at the G12 – this feels like talking about the Stone Age and we're only talking about

2005 to 2010, but we didn't run sound on computers then, they had a bank of Minidisc players and recorders, and students would bring in their sources of sound which would generally be CDs, or towards the end of that time it was just getting to the point where you might download songs or sounds from the internet, that was becoming a thing. But the professional system there ran on Minidiscs and you would prepare your sound cues by dubbing the sounds from whatever source you had onto a Minidisc because a Minidisc was a completely reliable way to replay it, and there was a bank of them so you could play several sounds at once over one another and patch things together with whatever was happening live. So, it was a lot more hands-on, I think, than what sound design is now, which is almost entirely done inside QLab. And that was the source of that curiosity in sound, was definitely the idea of collage and not just putting this song on in the show, I'm putting this song on but I am also going to put this other song over it. I did a production of Doctor Faustus which was directed by Katherine Nesbitt, and her student production of Doctor Faustus I did the sound for, and I put together... you can cut all this if this gets boring [LAUGHS] I put together Zoe Keating, who is an experimental cellist who does this quite minimal layers of cello with a loop pedal, and... are we allowed to swear?

J:
Yeah.

R:
Fuck Buttons, who are like a noise metal act who did like endlessly relentless thing... because it's set in Hell, right? So I was like "how do I make the sound of Hell?" and my sound of Hell was repeating endless noise metal with this elegant but minimal cello over the top. So that was definitely the start of that. And then that moved into, at university, I did a course by a brilliant lecturer called Greg Eastcome, who is retired now, and I'm not sure what he's doing – I think he retired to Australia, I hope he's got a brilliant life because he was one of the best lecturers I'd had at university. He wrote a book called Staging The Screen, and he taught a course in Honours Theatre Studies, it was all about staging the screen and where videos happen on stages and films happen on stages, and the history of companies who have used film and video and what interesting ways they used them. So, that was the start. He did a course that had a practical element to it, and that was my very first video design, and brought in the idea of manipulating video as a part of a live performance. Since then, all three of those things; directing, sound, and video, have been a part of my practice in one way or another. Then after I graduated, I wouldn't be the artist I am today without the things I did at The Arches, a lot of shows at The Arches, often with Michael John O'Neill, we had a little collaboration, we called ourselves Enormous Yes, and we made a few plays going up through the levels at The Arches, eventually won the Platform 18 award, which was huge for us at the time. And that show had a lot of video in it, it was designed by a friend of mine, obviously I was directing it, and acting in it – which, as I say, never again. And then the National Theatre of Scotland took me on in their Emerging Artists program in 2012, and was an Assistant with them.

J:
Assistant Director?

R:
Yes, Assistant Director. At the start I definitely thought that's what I wanted to be. I enjoyed designing, and I enjoyed the community, that's the thing I've always loved about theatre more than anything else, that community, it's inherently collaborative and it's always great to work

with people, and I love being a part of something and doing that common exploration thing where you can try something out and you can get feedback on it immediately. It's like helping someone, I like helping people. So, a lot of my early sound design work and video design was because people needed someone to do sound for their show and I had that technical mind where I could take things apart and put them back together and I could program a computer to do what the decks did in the G12 when we weren't in the G12 and we were just doing it in the back room of a pub. So, I liked helping people with those skills, and I thought that's what the design part of it was, really. I think I slept on it, as the kids say. Having worked with some amazing peers who are directors, I realised that's not what I want to do.

J:

Something that I've noticed when you're in the rehearsal room with us, for example, something that's really handy and I suspect partly comes through your directing work is that you are unafraid to just offer, offer, offer and get on with it. Which is actually my least favourite phrase in the world, "just get on with it", because actually sometimes it's good to stop and not get on with it. But I've definitely noticed you'll be tinkering with something and we won't really know what you're tinkering with and then you offer it and it's this whole world which actually feels quite directorial in a really good way.

R:

Yeah.

J:

It feels like you haven't thrown out that.

R:

Absolutely. I still want to make things where I'm the lead artist. I have, like I'm sure every artist does, a whole sketchbook full of ideas, of things that I would love to bring into the world and take out of my head. But I've also realised that when I do that, I'm going to do it in quite a specialist way and quite a focused way. And what I think a really good director has to be is much more general than that, and you have to be a leader of people in that creative way. People take a lot of risks when they create, so the leader has to hold a lot. And I have a huge respect for people who I've worked with who do that very well, like Kolbrun Sigfusdottir and Debbie Hannan, two directors I've worked with recently, and just a huge realisation that "wow, that's not my job. I'm glad you guys do that job that well", because I see how I could never do it.

J:

Since you've mentioned the two shows, Exodus and Me And My Sister...

R:

Yes.

J:

Those were the shows you were referring to.

R:

Sorry, yeah, those were the two most recent things I've worked on, yeah.

J:
As a video designer.

R:
As a video designer, yes.

J:
Okay. Since we've just seen Exodus and that's the thing that's freshest on your mind, it seemed to me like that really was about world building, in terms of the video itself, because there are campaign videos in there, and music videos. There are things that exist in the world.

R:
Yes.

J:
And I guess my question is just around how you built those into a language that was specific to the show. You and Debbie...

R:
Yeah, collaboratively, is the short answer. And the long answer is it was a really exciting brief because the play as written is, in many ways more than just the video design, one of those great plays that's great because it's a provocation. Like everything written on the page, it's almost like "well, then, what about this? And well, then, what about that?" And it's constantly upping itself and pushing itself.

J:
It escalates.

R:
Yeah, it escalates, exactly. Like all good farces. But then it has that dynamic that, like I say, a lot of great writers have where the stage directions are almost a dare sometimes to the performance, and it's one of the great things about Uma, the writer, is that she really dares us to go beyond our comfort zone, and to some very dark places. But when we're examining very dark things I think it's important to do that and not to do it in a way that is comfortable generally, because I think if you're comfortable when you're discussing things like this, you're probably not really cutting them open and looking at them inside. So, the script – spoiler alert – calls for a baby to be thrown out of a window. The script doesn't say what the baby is, and Debbie's response to that is the baby is very much not a human figure, it's a stuffed pillow shape.

J:
Oh, I see, physically it's not a human figure.

R:
Yeah. Because there's definitely a version of this with a photorealistic baby doll that would just be awful. And other things like that. And in the video design, it opens with a dreamscape, and at several times in the play it explicitly states that we enter a dream world, and it describes very strange images that happen. Debbie's response to that as a director was that she felt a lot of that was rooted in the sort of visual world of artificiality that we actually all live in quite a lot

these days. The sort of shorthand we were using, although it's wider than this, is a sort of Instagram dreamscape, or the hyper-real artificial visual world of the internet, I guess was her main visual touchstone for that. So, that was our starting point for what those moments would look like theatrically. And the other thing was visually Debbie and Alisa, the stage designer, had decided the set would have the feel of a photography studio or a video studio, so there would be very much this sense of artificiality but then also seeing the back side of the artificiality, because, for people who haven't seen it, the set rotates and it becomes all about what do we see behind that set. And at first we're only seeing the perfect signs of it but gradually it stops ending up in the right positions and we see more and more of the world behind it. And then my response to Alisa's set design – which was really exciting – was that there's a train... the majority of the show is set on a train, so there was always a thought that a main part of the video would be creating some sort of fake train effect that feels fake. Also another thing in the initial script that we wanted to stage and didn't quite manage to make happen was there should be a rooftop chase along the top of the train.

J:

Oh! That makes so much sense.

R:

Yeah, it would have been joyous, but unfortunately would have required far more resources.

J:

There was a really brilliant rooftop moment.

R:

Yes, yes, we have a rooftop moment but unfortunately we weren't allowed to let the actors run full-blown along the top of the set like they were encouraged to in the script. So, apart from all of that, my response to Alisa's design was that we should back-project the train window, so that's when originally the train window in the set was just going to be projected onto but I thought we would have much more fun if we cut the train window out so that it's a gap in the flat and then we put a blind behind it, which feels like one of those blinds you're always pulling up and down on trains because they're annoying, but then it also becomes the way we signify to the audience that we've sort of left the fake world of the train because the actors eventually open the blind to throw the baby out, and then they open the blind to climb through, and they open the blind, it ceases to matter and it becomes a tool that we use for the storytelling. And then we back-project the train window view, and back-projection has a brilliant tradition in old Hollywood and the classic... before chroma keying there was back-projecting. So, when you see actors with the background cut out nowadays we would chroma key it and have a colour, green or blue, behind someone and then cut that out using electronic... There was an analogue form of chroma keying before digital chroma keying. But before that even happened they would just set up a screen behind a car and fire one film at the back of the screen behind the car so that when you film inside the car it looks like there's a city behind the car, but it's just two actors on a set – it's the classic. So, that was the kind of old Hollywood fakery that I enjoyed.

J:

Yeah, this is so interesting because you can see how that would absolutely contribute to the language of farce, and also the language of really scary farce that we live through in our daily

political daily lives. And it's interesting to see how language around film is built into that as well.

R:

Yeah, absolutely. And that's what Exodus is all about, that political farce that we're all having to live through, and how do you cope with that? And I suppose the answer of the production is the only way to cope with that is to be as ridiculous as possible, is to push it all away to the edge of the vision. And then we had a lot of fun with what appears on that back-projection on the train window. It's captured from a train simulator video game, which was then... it's doctored, but the route of it is... because you can download train simulator video games and then you can download all sorts of routes and places for them.

L:

Of course you can!

R:

Of course you can. So, anyway, it was Cornwall 1973 is what the train backdrops mostly are because they looked like the perfect dream England of the Tories that the play is skewering. And then those were taken and I've made them even more intensely bucolic and colourful and strange. And then those videos go wrong throughout the play, they sort of glitch and get worse, and sometimes they speed up absurdly and sometimes they slow down absurdly, and they just become sort of less reliable. And then at the very end of the play – again spoiler alert – the lead Machiavellian SpAd character, Phoebe Burney, is played incredibly by Sophie Steer, murders the journalist character and she tries to reassert after all the chaos that has happened her own will on the world, and she clearly brings us back to reality. And at that point she pulls the blind back down, and from that point onwards it's just real footage. And then that footage is all from the actual journey that the train is supposedly going on in the play which is the journey from Dover to London St Pancras. So, when I was in London recently, we were working on the show, I went on the train journey to get that footage and then ended up only using five minutes of it which is the final actual approach to St Pancras at the end of the show, but it was very satisfying in the way that worked out. And that was the great thing about working on it, like I say, I love going on the journey of a theatrical process and finding out the answers to these questions and trying different things out. The way it worked out, having that journey from that hyper-real fake computer version of the past into the naked and unvarnished reality of today was a really nice arc I think we found in it. And then after that is when the other video you're talking about where we see her campaign videos and we see a live video of her doing a press conference, and we were working on it – Rishi Sunak announced his candidacy, this was the whole weird thing...

J:

That's exactly what I was thinking of.

R:

When we were working on Exodus, it was chilling how often things that happened in the play would happen in real life while we were trying to make a play about them, and it was like "stop happening so we can make the play about the way things were last month!"

L:

Do you ever change ideas because of the real world situation?

R:

No, there's nothing in it, it's as it was written by Uma, and it's ironic because I think a lot of people were like... the lead character is a South Asian female Home Secretary, so I think a lot of people at first, in a quite surface level way were like "oh, it's Priti Patel. Is it about Priti Patel?" And she actually started writing it before Priti Patel was Home Secretary, the character was invented before Priti Patel actually became Home Secretary for one thing. And for another thing, it was never that direct portrayal, so when people were like "Priti Patel isn't standing for the leadership, does this ruin your play?" because the character in the play does want to be leader of the Tory party, it was like "no, I think it almost makes it a lot better", because really Asiya Reo who is the character, she could be any Tory. She's not Priti Patel, she's an archetype, she's a figure. And I think in a lot of ways when you look at... this is getting really into the weeds, but when you look at the character on stage as portrayed brilliantly by Aryana is not at all like Priti Patel, I think. Priti Patel, when you see her, is quite like a chilling and cold person. Asiya Reo is much more bumbling sort of classic clown character. And I think if the play really was about a character who was like Priti Patel, it would be over much faster.

J:

There's also this thing going on where – certainly this was the case with Trump and also with Johnson – when art tried to directly represent it in a sort of overblown way, the real person always outdid it. Like you cannot beat the lunacy of the actual person. Whereas if what you're doing is creating something new, that, yes, is clearly related to this world and aware of these figures but has a language of its own, then you can make real farce. Then you can make real bouffon-ery and stuff like that.

R:

Absolutely.

J:

You're also making me think, as I'm listening to you speak, I'm learning about why we love working with you so much, and I think part of it is that Shotput – Lucy is going to say that I sound like a broken record, because I do – but one of the things I think we're always searching for, and what we should say is that Rob is also the video designer on the next Shotput show, which is one reason why he's here, is allowing the audience to be active in the making of the final image.

R:

Yeah, absolutely.

J:

And with Ferguson and Barton that is definitely a core theme of it, it's about the construction of a relationship and also masculinity and femininity but also the construction of a film which is a Hitchcock film.

R:

Yeah, I think that's exactly true. Yeah, I do love to make something that involves the audience in itself.

L:

With Exodus you came in right in the beginning, whereas Ferguson and Barton, the show that you're video designing for us, we had made it in 2019 and many years have gone by, there was projection and video in it but we didn't have a video designer at the time, so how did you find a way in?

R:

Well, the thing about Ferguson and Barton, I feel very privileged to work on it because I love it, I love the show. It was the first thing I saw that you guys had made. I think I had met Jim at that point, and we knew of each other, I think we'd gone for a coffee or something. And I was in London when it was on at the Camden...

J:

And also the designer stayed with you.

R:

Oh, yes, yeah.

J:

So, the designer of Ferguson and Barton, lives in London, came to Glasgow and stayed with Rob.

R:

Yes, yeah. I met Anna, and it was one of those things where you were acquaintances if not yet friends, and I was in London, and it was on at the Camden People's Theatre, and I thought "oh, I have to go and see Jim and Lucy's show." And I went there and I loved it, I thought it was just a brilliant piece of theatre. And there was a part of me, the classic thing where whenever one is a doer of something and you see a really good version of the thing that you do, I was like "oh, who's their video designer?" Looking it up like "who did the video for that?" and I was like "they don't have one, maybe I can be their video designer one day."

L:

Yeah. And we should say that on that version our wonderful designer Anna Yates took a lot of the video.

R:

She did do the video design, obviously someone did it, because video design is just what happens with a video on the stage, so someone's done it even if there isn't a named designer, so obviously Anna did do it, but I was excited there wasn't a different named person.

J:

There's an opening. Yeah, totally.

R:

[LAUGHING] Yeah. So, yeah, I deal with that a lot. And a really helpful question for me has been to actually sit down when I feel those irrational feelings of jealousy rising up in me and ask yourself the question, which is "do you want to be doing what they are doing?" and I think 90% of the time the answer is no. If you're really being honest with yourself as an artist. Like a lot of people, I've been a big listener of the Blind Boy podcast, and one of the things about mental health that he talks about a lot is about having an internal locus of evaluation, which just means judging your own work and your own deeds and your own life by your own

standards, and not comparing yourself to other people, because if you compare yourself to other people you've already lost the game, you're already done. If you have an external locus of evaluation and you let other people's opinions of you be the decider of your own self-esteem, then you're not in control straight away. And I think artistically that's been really useful to me to focus on having an internal locus of evaluation and make work that I like, that I want to see.

J:
Definitely.

L:
So, we just talked about making video for performance, but now it's just making films from a performance or something around that, and we're thinking about Eat Me that you made, a feature film by Snap-Elastic.

J:
Snap-Elastic is an amazing theatre company here in Glasgow, and Edinburgh, Scotland.

R:
Well, Eat Me was a brilliant project that was sadly one of the casualties of the pandemic. They had been developing it as a show for years and then they finally got the funding and support to do the full scale version of the show that they wanted, and then global pandemic, nobody's doing any shows. So it went onto the back burner for a while and they struggled to get it out, and then in the end they decided to do a really interesting and brilliant thing which is they made the finished version of the show so that it was ready for future touring and future opportunities even though audiences at that point – because we actually did this in May of 2021 was when it ended up happening – they made a finished version of the show in Perth Theatre. Perth really kindly gave over the auditorium for two weeks so they could tech and finish the show that they'd finished already in the rehearsal room just a few months before that but then had the performances cancelled because of the lockdowns of Christmas 2020 when everything went back in. So, they decided to make that finished version of the show so it was ready and then also tape it and just make a recording of it, so I've done... it's been a sort of side hustle of mine for a while to do videography of the stage, partly because I realised that there's a lot of companies in Scotland who need and would benefit from good videography who can't afford the higher level of production services, so I position myself as a sort of service in that regard. But what Snap-Elastic wanted to do, which is Eszter Marsalko, Claire Willoughby, my partner, and Isy Sharman, what they wanted to do was make a film that was more ambitious rather than just being a taping of the show from a few angles as it happens on stage. They wanted to explore the extra storytelling possibilities that film can offer. So, on one level we shot the show as if it were a film with a single camera but with multiple takes and from multiple angles, and going through the same things in different ways so that it could edit together as a story of the film that wouldn't be possible if you were just shooting the live show. But then also at another level on top of that, I collaborated with Eszter so we were co-directors of the film, Eszter was director of the show, to add new layers of filmic manipulation, so there are visual effects in different scenes and there are parts that drift away from the strict reality of the stage, and there's scenes that play with time in a way you can't on the stage, and there are scenes that play with other images and overlays and things. And, yeah, to create a sort of concert film, a sort of performance film of huge inspiration for me and for all of us was there's a David Byrne film called Contemporary Colour which is a

concert film, and that film mixes recordings of a live performance that actually happened in New York with documentary footage of the companies involved in the performance who are all various colour guard companies from high schools all across America who won a competition to be involved with David Byrne. And all of them create a colour guard performance to a brand new song composed by an incredible pop star who's a friend of David Byrne's, and then the final concert is the high schoolers who have created these amazing dances performing their colour guard dances with the band who wrote the song who are doing it live with them in front of an arena audience of all of their friends and family. So, it's one of the most uplifting and lovely things that David Byrne has created this whole... it's a performative experience, not just the final concert but the process all the kids went on where they got to work with incredible pop artists to brand new music. But then the film of that takes all of those things and smashes them together in a way that a film only can. So, sometimes you'll have a dance solo will be as it was shot in the auditorium, in the arena at the time, and then they'll cut that in with the same kid doing the dance solo in a different location in her hometown. Or they'll cut that in with the interview with the kid's mother in their house where they grew up talking about why it means something to them. And all of this stuff is overlaid and collaged in a way that only film can to tell these brilliant stories. So, Eat Me is a very different story, Eat Me is a dark chilling tale of cannibalism. But the performance has a voiceover narrative for a lot of it on stage and it tells a story whilst also the stage picture often explores a more dreamlike version of what's happening in the story, it's not straightly depicting it.

J:

Yes, even in the live performance I feel like they're playing with that disassociation and the difference between what you're seeing and what you're hearing a lot.

R:

Exactly, yeah.

J:

I hadn't quite put that together until you just said that.

R:

Yeah. So, with the film of it we wanted to do something, and I really enjoyed that. I really would love to make more projects like that. The other big hat that I don't yet have that I am fighting in the dirt for is the film maker hat. But the frustrating thing to me about that is in Scotland it feels like there's quite a firm line in between the theatre world and the film world, and I've been trying to push through that for a while. I think eventually I'm sure we'll get there. And there's lots of other things as well, there's the Untitled Discotheque Project films that we made.

J:

Yes. Another pandemic...

R:

It's the gift of lockdown.

J:

It was. It was a – I'm putting air quotes – "victim" of the pandemic but actually I think we made something...

L:

Right, and that was different because we haven't made the performance yet.

R:

There's no show to film.

L:

There's no show to film. So, really we made three films before we did anything else.

J:

Yeah, that week was, besides being one of the maddest weeks of my life because we made three films in a week – and really Rob made three films in a week and then spent weeks more editing them. So, the Discotheque Project is a project that centres around teenagers and sex, and we think – we think – it's going to unfold sort of at a school disco, that's the setting of it. But then what happens at this school disco is weird and strange and flows from the characters who are on stage. So, what we did when we couldn't make the show – again because of lockdown – we decided with some really great encouragement from Imagine, where we were accelerator artists, they encouraged us to make these films, and the films kind of became prototypes for what might be in the show, or like mood board pieces for what might be in the show. And obviously we've never worked in that way before, in that order, but it was really fun.

R:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's not something that normally gets done, like you say, to invest that much in making a film that's an inspiration for a performance so it was really nice to work on something weird in that sense. And in a sense, they're three short music videos which each feature one of the dancers you're working with and go to three different places that sort of represent, as you say, three of the different vibes that we're wanting to be part of it. And it was great fun to collaborate on, and I hope one day still to make the stage version of Untitled Discotheque Project.

J:

We must. It's the most expensive thing known to Shotput...

L:

We are trying very hard.

J:

There was a moment when we were making those films that has really stuck with me, and I think I've said this to Rob but I'm not actually even sure, there's one with the dancer Tess Letham, and we really went strong on the music video angle on this, so there's a Dolly Parton song and we basically made a music video to that song.

R:

Yeah, she lip syncs.

J:

And there was a moment because there were very few people around, or comparatively few when you're thinking about a film set, so there was a moment where Rob was holding the camera filming Tess and the designer Anna Yates was holding a disco ball – glitter ball – because we wanted those glittery lights, and I was standing holding a flashlight aimed at the glitter ball, and there were a few other people like holding the sheet over Tessa's head.

R:

Yes, Emma was operating the light, turning the lights on and off, and we had the smoke machine going.

J:

That's right, Helen was holding the...

R:

... smoke machine pulling it out.

J:

What was brilliant was I sort of mentally zoomed out and I thought "this could be the live show."

L:

Great scene, it's all built up at the one time and then just stops.

R:

But also it's like a nice microcosm of the company, right? When everybody is actually physically there holding a part of the picture to make it work and pull it together, it's nice.

J:

So, in a more indirect way as well I think making those films will influence what the live performance is, not just what's on film but what went into making the films.

The last thing, and this is a bit of a wildcard and also will expose my own age and Luddite status, but there are other things that you do, and I'm thinking of Twitch.

R:

Yeah, in lockdown I started projects where I would play video game on Twitch, which is not uncommon, Twitch is a live-streaming platform for people playing video games – people play games, people watch other people play games. But there are lots of people who are opening that up in really interesting ways and going beyond just playing a game. There are lots of streamers who talk, just talk, to their audience for protracted periods of time, with all kinds of different context. Sometimes that's more like comedy, a lot of comedians turned to Twitch at that time in lockdown in order to do their thing because they couldn't have a room with an audience so they would do it on Twitch instead, and sometimes it's less like comedy and more like therapy for a community or someone who holds the issues of people and speaks to stuff. And there's a whole political side to Twitch, there are political speakers, some of whom have followings of millions of people, it's polemic, a soapbox, where they talk about the news from that day. So it's almost anything that you can imagine, but it comes from watching other people play video games. I remember the first time I heard about it and my flatmate used to watch Twitch, watch Let's Plays as well, and I was like "why would you want to watch someone else playing a video game when you own your own video games? No one watching Twitch

doesn't also have a games console of some kind or some kind of computer there. Play it yourself, why are you watching someone else play it? What's the point in that?" but there is a whole other level to it that comes in when you're watching someone else play it which is incredibly performative, you invest in them, you want them to succeed, or sometimes in the clown-like reverse of that, a lot of Twitch streamers you want to watch them fail because it's funny when they fall off for the thousandth time in a really hard video game. So, that's that whole world of the performance of video games and people watching them get performed, and then there are people, like I say, on the artistic edge of that. Blind Boy I mentioned earlier does a Twitch stream where he writes music and songs, and his stimulus is he just uses Red Dead Redemption 2 because he just wanders around in the fake Wild West and there's so much content there and it's such a rich experience of wandering and walking as an inspiration source that that's how he writes his songs. And there's a lot of them based in Scotland as well, there's James Houston, 10JH, who is an inspirational maker and creator of things who does all kinds of different tinkering projects but he does them on stream and collaboratively, he'll talk about what he's trying to do and he will take suggestions for how it's going to develop, and he'll explain what he's doing and just make all kinds of odd little things, like he made a video – he's obsessed with professional wrestling and he made a video that placed himself into a famous moment from professional wrestling in the early '00s, using AI to replace Shaun Michaels' face with his face. So, I love all that content. And then my thing in lockdown, which I didn't really pursue fully enough to get a big following on, I enjoyed doing it but I also found it incredibly stressful because I don't like acting and it felt a lot like going on stage every time I turned the camera on – but I really got a lot out of it and I do have another project that has come out of that – but what I was doing was playing Grand Theft Auto, so it's quite similar to what Blind Boy does, and it's exploring a digital world and using that as a stimulus for creating something. But my big geek hole that I spend a lot of time in on my own is composite video and composite video synthesis. Composite video is the old standard of video before we had HD, and I have some very geeky machines that can let you generate and manipulate composite video signals in interesting trippy visual ways. And so what I did was I would wander around in Grand Theft Auto but I was playing a modded version of Grand Theft Auto on an actual PS2, so I had an authentic composite video signal. Because you could emulate it, and you can buy it for the iPhone still, but...

J:

Interesting. Almost like a filter, but a...

R:

Yeah, the modern version of it, but this is not the film, this is what it was, and kind of there's an element to the whole project that's about nostalgia and it's about walking through. Grand Theft Auto is really interesting because it's a 2002 game by a Scottish games studio that is set in a fictional version of California in 1992, it was a big part of my teenage years, sitting around and playing Grand Theft Auto with friends, so exploring those worlds again, walking those lonely digital forests of the fictional California, was a really rich visual that you can then layer things on top of and sounds on top of and soundscapes and dreamscapes. And I tried a few other games as well, I was interested in what other games can I find where you can play them in ways that they're not intended to be played, and find edges and interesting places in them that are worth spending some time in. I always wanted to feel quite gentle and welcoming and never harshly strange, but the difficult thing when you're improvising is it often ends up getting harshly strange and you're like "no, no, no, I want to pull it back and make it nice!" Anyway, that was the start of the project, and now I've been working with a composer, Neil

Simpson, who was the composer on a show Drone that I made with Harry Josephine Giles just before lockdown, which is a fantastic thing and hopefully might come back one day if we can get the support around it. But, anyway, Neil was the composer on that show which is how I met him and I was looking for someone – he's got a lot of experience in that sort of improvised sound world, and so we've been having period jam sessions where we do it privately and haven't yet had the bravery to go back online with that, but we've just put in some applications actually to try and do it live again as a live form of video art that people can participate in.

J:

It's interesting, we didn't mean to do this but that full circle connection to... you said 'nostalgia' and I totally know what you mean, but also I feel sometimes nostalgia has a bad connotation, it's also reconnection and finding those bits of you and how they...

R:

Yes.

J:

Nobody's asking me, but I feel like we have a problem with disconnecting with our past and disassociating with our past, and sometimes to be able to use that but productively and modernly and with today feels like a really healthy thing to do. We had a question, because your name – is it Abbenay? Is it your Twitch handle?

R:

Yeah, I decided to make it my new online handle, Abbenay2300.

L:

And it was in your description about what your Twitch is, you were saying that this is your happy place.

R:

Yes, yeah.

L:

And we just wanted you to tell us about your happy place and what that means.

R:

Yeah, sorry, I should have explained this at the beginning. So, Abbenay is a city on the anarchist moon of Anarres, which is a location in a book by Ursula K Le Guin, The Dispossessed. I said that backwards – which is a location in the book The Dispossessed by Ursula K Le Guin. And in The Dispossessed there are two societies of this planet – well, there was a planet and then there was an anarchist revolution on the planet, and there was a war between the capitalist societies and the anarchists, and the resolution of that war in this society was that all the anarchists decided to leave the planet and go and live on the moon, which is not, like our moon, completely uninhabitable, it's somewhat habitable but it's a much tougher place to live than the lush home planet that it's near by. And these societies separated themselves off from one another, and then the story of The Dispossessed is about an anarchist scientist who has a brilliant idea and who has grown up for generations living in a completely utopian anarchist society, and he has to go back to a university on the capitalist planet because they realised the

scientists have been communicating in limited ways. It's kind of an allegory for the Cold War, but it's also more about imagining... because any real leftist I think has to acknowledge that for all the good that happened in Russia in the revolution, the society that emerged out of that was hugely compromised and really not the kind of society that anyone would really want in a lot of ways. So, Ursula Le Guin imagines what if there was a perfect society from an explicitly leftist anarchist perspective? What if we really implemented these political ideals in a real place? What would that place be like? And what would it be like if someone born and brought up there then went back to a world that looks very much like our own? And it's a great story that explores all those political ideals but also has a brilliant human thread through it. Lovely, great science fiction, absolutely Ursula Le Guin for me is the queen, she's the god, she's the greatest writer, in my opinion. But anyway Abbenay is the capital city of the anarchist moon, but I made it Abbenay2300 because the book is set in the year 2300, even though it's set in a group of people who have never heard of Earth on the other side of the galaxy but it's part of a wider series of books that eventually interact with our world. It's happening in the year, 2300, so Abbenay in the year 2300 is my happy place, a fictional anarchist moon.

J:

Well, it sounds like we should all go there. Thanks so much, Rob, for talking to us. It's been great.

L:

Yeah, thanks.

J:

And since you've listened right to the end of this podcast, I trust that you have fallen for Rob as much as we have at Shotput. What a guy. I should say that maybe some of you, especially if you are real Scottish theatre aficionados, some of you might be thinking "for someone that has such extensive experience, why have I not heard of this Mr Willoughby?" And that might be because until quite recently Rob Willoughby was Rob Jones – Rob took his wife's surname, they were married this summer at a beautiful ceremony that was appropriately theatrical and completely joyous, so congratulations to the Willoughbys, Rob and Claire. You can find some links in the description of this podcast, including Rob's own website as well as his Twitch and Twitter feeds, which as we discussed in the podcast are to be found at Abbenay2300. Thank you so much for listening to this podcast, the very first of the inaugural miniseries of the Shotput podcast, and we hope it'll have a very long life, we shall see. This podcast was made with the generous support of Creative Scotland, it was hosted by myself, Jim Manganello, and Lucy Ireland, Shotput's other Artistic Director, edited by Sonia Killmann. Sonia also composed the podcast music. If you would like to engage with Shotput further, we would love to catch you on tour, on the tour of our show Ferguson and Barton. You can find all of our tour dates on our website, which is www.shotput.org – we are touring from the 17th of September to the 15th of October in this year, 2022. And some theatres where we are performing will also be screening Hitchcock's movie Vertigo either before or after, like a day before or a day after the show. You can find more details about that on our website as well. So if you can't get enough of us, if you're all-in, you can listen to the podcast, watch the film, see the live show, and also catch us after the show, we'd love to talk to you in the bar. Till then, take care, goodbye.

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