



## Storytelling as Sonic Conjuring: An Interview with Kieran Hurley

### [00:00:19] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello, welcome to the Gallery!

In 2012, Scottish writer and performer Kieran Hurley premiered *Beats*, a show about the 1994 Criminal Order and Public Justice Act that banned outdoor rave parties in the UK. Unusually at the time, this monologue was performed with a live accompaniment from a DJ, on a bare stage containing only a desk with a lamp. At a crucial moment, using a skilful manipulation of the beats, the DJ obtained our collective visceral synchronisation and sympathy with the protagonist momentarily on the wrong side of the law. This was a powerful example of a process known in biomusicology as entrainment. Although *Beats* ignited the imaginations of Steven Soderbergh and Brian Welsh and was made into a successful feature film in 2019, its core strength remains the fact it was conceived and originally realised as a piece of live performance.

In the conversation that follows, Kieran Hurley reveals the early origins of *Beats* at the multi-arts centre The Arches in Glasgow, and the significance of the material conditions of its conception. He places this work within a genealogy of a number of other projects that preceded and followed on from *Beats* and the way in which his specific way of working as a theatre-maker evolved in and outside of the institutional playwriting practices...

This conversation took place between Glasgow and London on Zoom, on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

### [00:02:00] FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

**Duška Radosavljević:** The purpose of this conversation is really just to try and understand where you come from as an artist, so to speak, because I'm interested to look at the relationship between the work, the makers' formative influences, the journey you've been on, training you've received, and I'd actually like to go back all the way back to Kieran discovering theatre and performance for the first time – how did that come about?

**Kieran Hurley:** So I didn't ever have any clear-headed aspirations to be a playwright, like when I was younger, like in my teens or early 20s or anything like that. I had a very engaged and dedicated drama teacher in the school that I went to. I didn't grow up in a house where we went to the theatre all the time necessarily. It wouldn't have been a mental idea, you know, my dad did when I was properly 'wee' like to take us on a wander up the Royal Mile during August, and it was fire-eaters and unicyclists about, just to get a sense of spectacle or something, you know. And I had a sense of live performance or something through all of that I guess. But the theatre thing is – I went to a school called Hollyrood High School in Edinburgh, which is just a fairly run-of-the-mill state school in Edinburgh, a Catholic school. And we just had an uncharacteristically strong drama department for the school that it was. And I think that it was partly because the teachers there were very good. So people were encouraged to do drama at my school.

**DR:** What were your formative influences? Not just in terms of theatre and performance, but more widely in terms of musical taste or–

**KH:** Like what kind of music did I like growing up or what?

**DR:** Especially if it is relevant, if it has then fed into your work.

**KH:** Yeah. Obviously some of the work, that's really clear like in *Beats* – that is a show that is born of a kind of dual interest at the time. I was young when I wrote that, it was my second – I'd written one monologue piece before that, it was called *Hitched*, and that was the second one that I'd done. At the time I was really interested in electronic music. I worked in the Arches [in Glasgow] and I was one of the front of house staff at the Arches. It was made up of, you know, you could almost split it down the middle between the people that kind of wound up in that job because they were interested in electronic



music and house music and techno, and the people that were in that kind of job because they were into like experimental performance and into the work of like Ann Liv Young and stuff, right? And so I was probably one of the few people that worked there that was sort of into both at that time of my life.

**DR:** Was this before or after uni, or during—?

**KH:** During, yeah, I worked at the Arches during uni, yeah. And then after uni as well. But in making *Beats*, I was interested in electronic music, I was interested in the histories and the sub-cultures of it all. I was interested in the rave scene from that point of view, but I was also more involved at the time, I guess, in communities around grassroots, anti-capitalist politics and direct action and stuff. And so I guess I was also conscious of a kind of a direct action protest history that went back to 1994 and the Criminal Justice Action Bill, you know, the things that were born out of that scene like Reclaim the Streets and party protest sort of culture and everything. And so I was just kind of interested in that political moment, from a number of angles. So on one level the music is an influence there as a way in. But it was also, almost any of my shows or plays, probably start with a specific social question, so *Beats* was no different really. It wasn't just like: 'I want to make a show about rave music.' And I suppose the musical influences thing. I had a conversation about it once. It sums something up where the two of us hit upon the fact that we probably got into theatre, into making devised theatre, which is sort of where I started, due to being the kind of people that maybe on some subconscious level wanted to be in a band but couldn't play an instrument or sing. Rather than being this specific musical influence like: 'I make theatre because of Aphex Twins' because of some obscure reason, right, it's more like: 'There is something of all that in why I make work', I suppose. Like in the first show that I made that was a solo show, which was called *Hitch*, I got my two mates Ben and Gav, who at the time were in a band called Over the Wall, to perform on stage live with me and play their music that I really liked. We got a band! it was just like putting myself in their band. It was a really weird thing to do! It worked, they were great. And there's another show called *Rantin* that's really music-driven. So obviously part of that is a trope among sort of male, contemporary performance makers. And obviously part of that is some garage band-like ego thing, right? But then the other part of it is, I guess, something about when a rehearsal room is structured like a band's practice room. There's something about the kind of work that happens in that space creatively that is really meaningful to me in terms of that space of shared collaboration and live encounter between... There might be even in a band practice room, and often is, someone leading that process. There might well be a lead artist who is responsible for the direction of the work, but there's still something about the openness of what could be created in that space. And there's something about this relationship with the audience as well that lacks a step of attention. I don't know. There's a whole bunch of stuff as to why I think a band's process is analogous for a bunch of theatre-makers in a room together can be really useful that isn't just like: 'I want to be in a band!' I mean, I do actually think it's a useful way of thinking through stuff. And to be honest it's one of the things that I find hard now that most of my work is bound up in, sort of, the structures of more traditional playwriting, and the commissioning model of more traditional playwriting as well as writing in other forms for other media like screen writing and stuff. Like I have less and less and less time for that kind of creative space now and I really miss it.

**DR:** So going back to the influence of the drama teachers from your school, what then took you into – I understand you studied Drama; was it called Drama?

**KH:** I did Theatre Studies at Glasgow Uni.

**DR:** To what extent was that, if we may call it 'training,' which was primarily academic but then also had other aspects to it, that you received at Glasgow University, formative or relevant to the way in which you then proceeded to make theatre?

**KH:** Completely formative – in a bunch of adjacent ways, but at the same time utterly formative. So the university experience provided a context in my life in which I could meet other people that were also interested in theatre and sometimes interested in it from similar angles to me, or were exploring things that I just found interesting or exciting. And we could make work together. The work that we were introduced to on our course could provide a stimulus for making that work. And then having made that work, we could make enough of a noise about ourself to forge some kind of social professional connections with organisations that no longer exist now. A bit like: 'Okay. Cool. Here are



the people who run the Arches', and they had us come and do a show at the scratch night. They had us come to do ten minutes of stuff. And now I work there and now I'm tearing tickets at Arches Live, so I know everyone... So all of that is the stuff that makes the first beginning building blocks of an artistic career I think. Or begins to first open the doors that are necessary to be opened for that career to be able to happen. It's all structural. It's so much more about that, about the relationships and about the structures of power that hold those relationships, and about the points at which you get permission to move through them, than it is about like: 'Do you know what, I read *The Crucible* and I just thought, wow!' Do you know what I mean? Like it's so much more about that, that's what they're training in. So of course there's all sorts of problematics that are connected with that but that's how it works. It's the kids that are doing theatre studies at Glasgow University that then have that access point. That's deeply, deeply fucked but that is how I had that access point. But in terms of more practice-based or ideas-based – we made a big gang and we called ourselves For We Are Many and there was about ten of us. And some of us – I was in first year when we did our first stuff, but it went right up to fourth year or recent graduates of that same course, which was cross-year group, like, band of weird theatre 'devisey' people. And we made little happenings and we made theatre shows, and we did a whole bunch of stuff without a director, using Climate Camp or Occupy-style, consensus-style decision making process, hand signals, around artistic decisions – it was fucking bananas. It was intensely like horizontal. And it was almost like theatre against the odds, like it really wasn't a sensible way to try and make a show. And some of the work was definitely, definitely questionable, but some of what came out of that was like all right, or there was something exciting enough about young people trying to figure this stuff out. And the course was important because it put those people together in the same place. And then the course was important because it also said to those people: 'Look, here's Forced Entertainment and here's The Wooster Group, go nuts.' And of course being 19, 20 and 21 we sort of behaved as if we were the first 20 year olds to ape the fucking Wooster Group. Do you know what I mean? Like of course, whatever! But it was still important – there was something about how intensely collaborative all that was in terms of where I first cut my teeth making theatre that has informed everything that I have ever done since. It has formed my understanding of how things work since. I think you have people that have really well established careers well into their 30s and 40s in theatre that still haven't properly – especially like writers, maybe – who still haven't properly grasped the idea that it's a team sport. And that's mad to me but that's because their way in has been completely different and because their value-shaping experiences have informed their own – do you know what I mean? So the course was completely fundamental but it wasn't because of this class or this class or this class that had brilliant teachers, and there's something from all of the – there's loads of different things that I could pull out that have informed what I have done but the course itself, if you're looking at just, not the stuff around it, but just the course, the course is a training in theatre scholarship rather than in theatre practice. That's useful. It gets you a bunch of stuff, but in terms of what it's setting you up for, the practice bit is the bit that you're doing on your own terms really. Dee [Deirdre] Heddon ran a course that was called 'Autobiography in Performance' that was quite formative because it gave me a bunch – it gave me a toolkit for making a solo show. When my big gang that I was making theatre with all just kind of disappeared one year, where it was like: 'Bye, we're going to Australia', or: 'Bye, we're off to London', or: 'I'm not doing any of this anymore, we're off somewhere to do a whole bunch of other much more important and useful and interesting social activism', I just made a solo show not out of any... Again that's not because I watched some kind of archive footage of Spalding Grey or whatever, do you know what I mean? It was much more material than that. Like I say, my life is a series of decisions made out of not knowing what I'm doing. So make stuff in a gang because: 'Hi, I'm here and I'm the youngest person in the group, so I'll do what you guys are doing because you seem cool', right? And then the gang disappears and it's like: 'Make something on my own I guess because I literally have no idea what else to do.' So I made a solo show and it was an autobiographical solo show based on a very immediate experience of a hitchhike to Italy in order to get to the G8 protests there, and told the story of that journey. So that show was called *Hitch*.

**[00:14:54 to 00:16:05] Excerpt from *Hitch* (2009)**



## [00:16:06] ON BEING A PLAYWRIGHT

**DR:** Was that after you graduated?

**KH:** Yeah. That was the year after I graduated. So that was in 2009. I graduated in 2008.

**DR:** And at what point did you then start to think of yourself as a playwright?

**KH:** When I read the first reviews to that show.

[Laughter.]

**DR:** What did it say?

**KH:** I'm pretty sure Joyce Macmillan's review of that show refers to me as a 'playwriting actor'.

**DR:** Yes. Okay.

**KH:** Or a review of something earlier that was done at the Arches, I can't remember, but I remember seeing myself described as both a playwright and an actor in the same sentence by Scotland's chief theatre critic in *The Scotsman* and being like: 'I don't think that I'm either of those things. Or maybe I am then, I don't know.' Before then, I thought of myself as someone who made devised theatre and whose way into making devised theatre in a collaborative way, where roles were undefined, had emerged as being writing text and performing. Those were the two things that I sort of gave to a big collaborative non-defined-roles devising process, is I would always inevitably end up writing text. In fact the last show that we made as a group was like a weird bastardised take on the Pirandello play, *Right You Are (If You Think So)*, that we called *Rigmarole* and that one was co-written by just me and one other guy in the collective, a man called Phil Spenser. So that was like the first one that had a writing credit and it was me and one other guy. And so I began to establish a consciousness for myself as some kind of writer. The only thing I was doing before was making plays. A playwright wasn't something that really existed as an artistic identity in and around the Arches for those few years. They were live artists. I didn't really have it around me, the idea that I was a playwright. And then a theatre critic told me that I was one and I went: 'Well I guess alright then, maybe I'm a playwright.'

**DR:** Does that have advantages attached to it? I mean do you think of yourself now as a playwright because that gives you more of a currency, or do you really feel that something has changed in terms of how you consider your work and your process?

**KH:** I think something's changed in how I consider my work. It's also important to notice, to mention, that prior to all that, so even just in school, my way of being interested in theatre was often about plays. I just didn't call myself a playwright because that would have been ridiculous. So it's not like I didn't have consciousness around playwriting. It's just that I hadn't clocked that that was what I'd been doing. So what were the advantages? I guess the advantages... I guess I think I touched on it earlier when I mentioned about a band-analogous rehearsal process, and touched on it earlier when I mentioned something about theatre being a team sport. But the disadvantage is easier to talk about, it makes more sense to me because I felt it really keenly around about that point when I first started getting playwriting commissions, or whatever. I didn't actually feel like I knew how to deliver. I didn't have the craft-based, hard-earned self-confidence to know how to deliver through that process. I had enough people around me telling me that I was good enough and that was validating, right? And a lot of people don't ever get that and I recognise that that is a privilege and I recognise there's a whole bunch of reasons why I was afforded that privilege at quite a young age in my 20s. But at the same time I didn't actually have hard-earned, bleeding-knuckled craft to be able to fall back on that could get me through that, and so I was flailing a lot. I felt like I was learning how to do that in full view – in full industry view, not in audience view. Still nobody knew who I was or whatever, and that's probably still mostly the case. But I felt like I was figuring a lot of stuff out at a point where I could have figured it out earlier before the work that I was doing. So that was a moment in my career where I felt inadequately prepared to do what I was being asked to do.

**DR:** What was your first commission?

**KH:** Yeah. You see the funny thing is it never really quite works like that. It's easy to look at things in hindsight and be like: 'This was the chronological order of the plays that happened because that's the chronological order in which they were produced or met an audience or published, or whatever.' The



first thing I was paid to write for theatre, was for a little event that the National Theatre of Scotland did when Angie Bual was an associate producer there that was kind of drawing inspiration from the Shunt Lounge events that used to be under London Bridge. It was kind of like a social event, party night club with performance interventions throughout it. But then the first time that I got a proper commission, like a playwright commission, with the full smells and bells and the contract and the minimum terms and all that, was actually a really open-ended commission that the NTS gave me that I never ever delivered on until a couple of years ago. And you know, the thing is, while at the time I experienced what felt like a shortcoming as a deep personal and professional and creative inadequacy, I would be keen latterly, for the sake of other writers coming through from similar places, not to present it simply as that because it was also the case that there is a strange power imbalance in the kind of work that the industry expects and wants to make. What am I trying to say? It was almost like I made a bunch of work and then people were like: 'We like this really exciting, cool stuff that you are doing. Now because this is the language that we have, can you do this slightly different thing instead?' That's not anyone specifically being that or doing that, that's just the industry doing what it does. It's like: 'You've done this cool interesting stuff where no one was telling you what to do. And so now that stuff, we love it, can it be this thing?' Rather than just like: 'Do a big one of those.' No one's ever paid me a full professional playwrighting commission to write a solo show. It was made on a bunch of pulled together small funds from artistic development funding from the Playwright's Studio and production money from the Made in Scotland production programme, all pulled together very last minute and I was quite frustrated because my work was all bound up in the commissioning model and I wanted to make a show the way that I knew how to make a show and I was going to do it under very, very intense circumstances in a really short space of time with very little money if that's what it had to take, and that is what it had to take. I didn't really know what show I was going to make when I set out on that process. I just had an idea about the apocalypse and I pulled together enough funds to be able to put some key collaborators in place. But I didn't have any other money and I couldn't properly pay myself as a writer. I got a bit of money but I didn't get a commission.

**DR:** Which was that one?

**KH:** *Heads Up*. Yeah.

### **[00:23:13] MAKING BEATS (2011)**

**DR:** And *Beats*. Shall we go back to *Beats* and how that came about because in the chronology at least appears to be the one that came before, and that was quite—

**KH:** Yeah. So I did *Hitch*. No that's true. Chronologically that is actually accurate as well in terms of my experience. I made *Hitch* and then people went: 'That was good', and that went better than I expected it to. And then I was like: 'Okay, I don't know what to do next. I guess I'll make another monologue and find out if I'm actually good at that or not.' I got a bit more money and resources this time because I successfully applied for and won The Arches Platform 18 Awards, which gave people a bursary of a few thousand pounds. I think £6,000 and that was your production budget – you're sort of paying everyone out of that to make a show. So I levelled up a bit with that and made another monologue and this time it wasn't autobiographical. I was going to tell a story. The Arches, after I'd done *Hitch* there, they asked me what I wanted to do next and I said: 'I've got this idea about a rave play.' I don't even know if I used the word 'play' then but I might have done. We're at a point now where I may have said 'play!' And I spoke about 1994 and the Criminal Justice Act and I spoke about that moment and I said: 'I don't know what I want to do with this but I want to spend some time to make a "kill the bill" piece but I don't know what it is yet.' And they said: 'Here's 500 quid, and spend a week in our basement rehearsal rooms.' They had this network of weird, no-windows basement rooms with neon strip lights, and: 'Present a work in progress at Arches Live', and I was like: 'I am literally going to just do a week and it's going to be 20 minutes and I'm going to have a script in my hands', and they were like 'That's fine, do that.' So that was cool because that was like a really – before Arches Live had been like 'A Festival of Graduate Work' and there was a big sense of pressure to do your show, you know? So to just be invited to do that and do that thing was like: 'Okay cool.' I felt really supported there. That was important. I can't stress enough how the show wouldn't have



been touched by any other organisation in the world. The existence of the show is bound up in the story of the importance of having artist-led or artist-centred organisations with a commitment to unheard artists and new work and experimental work, right? It just is. And cross-artform spaces as well. So basically I said to them: 'Okay, so I'll get Johnny Whoop.' And Johnny Whoop was a guy who was a DJ and he also worked in the bar in the Arches but he was also the DJ at Death Disco and other stuff. So I just got Johnny in a room and asked him if he wanted to come and spend a week with me in a room to figure out some stuff to do with this show and we got chatting about music. I knew I wanted a DJ on stage. I just had some instincts around it. We got chatting about it all and we're playing records and talking and stuff in the basement of the Arches before I had written a word really. So that's part of how it comes about. The musical journey of the show is evolving in a really informal, conversational way with the story between me and Johnny. But also because he was a techie – he worked in the bar but he was also a techie and a noise boy in the club – he would be a sound technician in the theatre and he was also the sound tech in the night club. He's sound technician for Carl Cox and stuff, so he knows what he's doing. That meant that even though I was like: 'It's just a script in hand reading, it's a script in hand reading, you're going to essentially just play some tunes and just sit there and I'm going to read – it will be like two tunes, right, and I'm going to read for like 15-20 minutes and that is it.' But he knows everyone in the technical department in the night club above our heads so he's like: 'Well, we'll just borrow a bunch of shit because we can, right?' You've got to understand Johnny's personality to understand how that happens as well. His unbridled enthusiasm for the idea of making a show about the techno, right. So we ended up in the Arches practice room, which is this tiny little room, with these – I cannot describe these speaker stacks to you – these utterly insane speaker stacks that are like halfway to the ceiling on either side of me and these moving lights, I'll send you a video of it. He just filled the room with smoke and light and noise and it was the most fucking, throbbing, intense environment and I was sat at a desk because I needed somewhere to sit to just read this wee sliver: 'Hiya, this is a script in hand reading of this wee story.' And that was how the form of the show was hit upon.

**[00:28:00 to 00:30:48] Excerpt from work in progress for *Beats* (2011)**

After that we got the Platform 18 Award and we got to develop the show and we played around a little bit very early on with the idea that I would be in the space in a different way, that I wouldn't be at this desk because I was literally at this desk because I needed somewhere to put the script. In the show I don't have a script. I put the script on stage in *Heads Up*, but in *Beats* I didn't but I still had the desk. And it's because we realised how we're in this multi-artform space, it's also a night club, the guy who's a sound technician and DJ in that night club is the guy that is the music consultant and co-performer in the show. So we end up by chance, again, hitting upon this form where I'm like: 'The reason this is exciting is we are pushing upon the boundaries of what we expect to happen in a studio theatre. We're equipping the studio theatre as if it's a nightclub and that feels exciting so we're definitely going to do that. So now we've decided to do that, what's Kieran doing in the space?' And this is working with my co-director, Julia Taudevin, who's also my wife and frequent collaborator on loads of things. And we're figuring out how I move in this space and this space is such a sea of light and smoke and sound, particularly when we later brought in the work of VJ and visual artist, Jamie Wardrop, who's live mixing visuals behind me. There's a sea of light and smoke and sound and having this body move around the space – I was completely lost in it. So actually we just brought the desk back, because we were like: 'That and the desk lamp, the weird domesticity of the desk lamp that is constantly on in all of this, just provides an anchor.' It's not like we didn't think about it, we arrived back at that point after quite a rigorous rehearsal and making process. Stumbled upon all that stuff through the chance possibilities that were allowed to happen by having a multi-artform space in a city centre that was also a night club that had a remit to support young artists who didn't know what the hell they were doing and was staffed by people willing to go: 'Here's some resources, I don't care that you don't know what you're doing.' And that is how that was able to happen. The form of that show wouldn't and couldn't have been hit upon without those very specific conditions that were made possible in that building.

**DR:** That's really interesting.

**KH:** I hope so because I spoke about that for fucking ages!

**DR:** No, no, that's great!



## [00:30:52] MAKING HEADS UP (2016)

**DR:** What about *Heads Up* and why you then made the decision to have the script and to do it at a desk again?

**KH:** So *Heads Up*, desk again – it's that thing where you hit upon something. *Hitch*, I did a monologue because all my friends had disappeared and a year prior Dee had sort of helped me figure out how to tell an autobiographical story on the stage as a monologue, right? Then *Beats* I did a monologue because I was like: 'Well now I have an active working relationship with this form and I want interrogate it further', which is a fancy way of saying I was going to find out if I booked it or not. And then *Heads Up* I had a relationship with the desk, do you know what I mean? And I was like: 'What else can this thing do?' So on one level I just wanted to get back because the impulse creatively to make the show was about getting back to something that was a different way in, to have a relationship with the audience and a different way into the work than screenwriting and commissioning-led playwriting was allowing me. It felt like I wanted to get back to a desk and do that. That was like an instinct and I think artistic instincts and impulses, before we rationalise them and see where they are coming from, are just kind of important to trust sometimes. So I kind of wanted to get back to the desk and do another thing. Then within that something about how a desk – I said that it provided an anchor in *Beats* – in *Heads Up* it provides a kind of frame where it's this getting to explore a little bit more about my body and what I could do there.

**DR:** You also mix music in that. You have music on the desk, don't you?

**KH:** Yeah. So this is the other thing. So now I've gone: 'Okay. So that's what the desk allows me to do as a performer, that's been what's fun about a desk, what else does it allow me to do on a practical level? Well, let's leave my script there!' Yeah. So music has been a big thing in a lot of these shows that I've made. In *Beats*, in *Rantin*, in *Hitch*. In *Hitch* I had a live band on stage, *Rantin*, we were all kind of a band doing a piece of gig ceildh theatre, *Beats* there was a DJ. So with this one I was thinking about how I could push further the ways in which music could interact with what I was doing as a storyteller. I worked with MJ McCarthy, who's a composer, a musician and sound designer in theatre, and I was interested in something where I conjured all the sounds on the stage. That was the starting point. I was interested in that idea of conjuring through sound this living city that I as storyteller kill because it's the apocalypse. That's not quite what happens in the show. Its relationship with sound becomes something quite different but that was the beginning of like: 'How can we do this?' So we played around with me having these samplers on stage, these 16-pad samplers. So there's 32 pads all in all, each one of them with a different sound programmed into it and each one with different functions. So sometimes they're a 'stab', like a one-shot 'zzz', right? Or sometimes it's like a 'press and hold' thing where it will rise in pitch the longer I hold it and then it'll stop when I pull my finger away. Or sometimes I hit it and it loops like drum beat and I have to hit it again for it to stop. So it does do something about these sounds all being conjured by the storyteller in one thing. But it also then created this other more interesting gestural relationship with the storyteller or something. 'Bang, dshh, dzz, dzz, dzz', do you know? These gestures become not just sound cues but they become gestures.

**DR:** Choreography in some ways. A physicality that works on a completely different level in a completely different way where it's very minimal.

**KH:** But I'm working much more from a place that is impulsive to start with. So it's much more: 'Will I sit at the desk again? I guess so. Cool. What can the desk do? It does this.' But that said, I think it is also important and significant to note that the co-director is a guy called Alex Swift, who is amazing, and Alex's influence in the development of that show is absolutely formative and I don't think that it would have been the show that it was without his involvement.

**DR:** So that's really interesting – even though you're making a solo show and you're now a playwright and an actor according to the critics, you are still nonetheless working in a very deeply collaborative way.

**KH:** Oh totally! It's a team sport. I don't know what else to say. It just absolutely is.

**DR:** But all of those elements that you describe, the sound elements and the physical elements, were



they developed at the same time as you were writing the text?

**KH:** Yeah and actually in some cases really informing the text itself. There's this passage that's easiest to demonstrate what I mean by this, maybe a couple of bits actually, in *Heads Up*. There's one bit where the character point of view is the character Mercy. The prophet. And obviously it's all written in second person, right, the 'you'. And there's a bit of text written around her that says: 'You step into the station, a station full people.' I can't remember the rest of it now, but the bit where she steps into the fucking train station, and it's written in such a way that I don't think that I'd've written it in the same way if I hadn't been doing the kind of work that I'd been doing with Alex looking at the performance style and performance attitude and performance energy of some spoken word poets, right? And hip hop artists actually. I'm not going to claim that I was rapping in that show because I'm not, but a kind of aggressive musicality to the delivery of the text was flying around that informed how I wrote the text. And that was also informed by beginning to play with MJ with these samplers and how they work. So: 'How does this work with this storytelling or with this punctuation?' Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding! 'You step into the station.' Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding! 'The station full of people.' Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding! So it's written down on the page like: 'Yeah, I wrote that', but I didn't write that and then soundtrack it with that music. I developed this gestural-like staccato punctuation of sound with a composer, and a kind of attitude around the delivery of text with the director – and that totally informed how the text was written, do you know what I mean? The music isn't coming as wallpaper later – is essentially what I'm saying.

**DR:** And how did the two directors complement each other?

**KH:** Really brilliantly because the way the process ended up working – and this was all kind of pulled together in the ad hoc way in which that show was pulled together, with not quite enough money to pay anyone properly, and not enough time for anything and just doing whatever we could on people's availability, right? I did a lot of the development with Alex – a lot of the work with the post-its and the early stuff and the figuring out the language of the piece and who am I in the space and all that kind of stuff. And then the rehearsal director – once we know what the show is and we're in the rehearsal process, seeing it through to performance – was majority Julia.

## **[00:38:11] THE POLITICAL IMPULSE**

**DR:** So whereas you said earlier *Beats* was very much prompted by your political concerns, would you say that there was a political impulse for *Heads Up* as well?

**KH:** Yeah. Not like in a newspaper headline way. It premiered at the Fringe in 2016, which meant that a lot of people read it like a Brexit kind of thing – the idea of the world ending or something. It's got nothing to do with Brexit really, at all. The apocalypse in the show as a starting point, and doesn't have to be this for anyone encountering the show or encountering the play, but I guess the interest in telling us the apocalypse narrative comes from a sense, a feeling that we are living [an] existential crisis in ourselves every day, then sometimes we allow ourselves the space to really notice that. The apocalypse is analogous for lots of things in that show. On one level, it's analogous for an existential crisis, for deep anxiety and social catastrophe that each one of those characters in their own way is living out, right, like an absolute alienation from ourselves and each other and the complete disaster of that. In that sense it's analogous for just how it feels to be in the world I suppose. But also – it's a bit of a weird thing to do as a writer to say there's dual and contradictory analogies in that story – but there's also something, and maybe it always feels like this for folk wherever you are, but there's also a great feeling right now, I think, that the Coronavirus actually accentuates as well, of feeling like we are at the end of something. The impulse to tell an apocalypse narrative comes from both of those places. Comes from it feeling necessary to tell a story about the crisis of now in terms of what it feels like on an existential level to be alive in ourselves, and to tell a story about what it might feel like to be at the end of something huge and therefore on the precipice of something completely unknown. It's that k-punk quote that is alluded to actually in the text somewhere about it being easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.

**DR:** So Mark Fisher was a formative influence in some ways too.



**KH:** Yes okay. So while we are looking for formative influences, there's a really direct one from that one observation.

**DR:** To what extent were you conscious of it also as an exploration of authority?

**KH:** I guess not that conscious. I have authority as a writer there in that moment and as me and my collaborators and my team are setting up the terms of the engagement that really depend on a whole bunch of prior assumptions that are learned about how this relationship is going to work between spectator and performer and the theatre space. That's all there but that's always there, right? There's a bit in the show that's a 'turning the gun on myself' moment, and I guess that – interested to hear what other people read of that – but I guess for me it becomes less about wanting to expose the inherent authority in the relationship between maker and audience. The bit where I mention myself as storyteller in the piece is about bringing the moment into now. For me it's about – it could be about lots of other things for other people – but for me it's about bringing the moment into the now of the shared space of the theatre. It's about being able to sit with the crisis that has been reached or made manifest in the story being not separate from where we all are sat in the room. It being now. And it's also about a kind of admission that each of these characters and their own anxieties that they carry are vehicles for my own anxieties. That's it.

**[00:42:23 to 00:43:48] Excerpt from the trailer for *Heads Up* (2016)**

**[00:43:49] MAKING MOUTHPIECE (2018)**

**DR:** And then, I'm probably going to skip a few steps now, but then *Mouthpiece* is a completely different kettle of fish. It is a play now in the Traverse sense of the word. What was the impulse for you there and how did that piece come about?

**KH:** I guess it comes about – you'll see a pattern in a lot of these shows and plays – some of the earliest impulses being a reaction against something I'd just recently done or I return to, or something. It's just me figuring out my own class baggage. That's the first starting point in relation to what I do. I mean it's set in Edinburgh, which is where I'm from. It's about a writer, which is what I am. I'd been conscious that I had written a bunch of characters a little like Declan. I grew up in a part of town where I went to school with a lot of guys who were like Declan but I wasn't, I had the social capital or privilege that allowed me to go to university as the second generation in my family. So I'm not Libby – I didn't have the upbringing she had, but I'm middle class. So I'm in a position where I can write, I think, with truth around people that have been huge part of my value-shaping experiences in my formative years, who make it into my plays. There's a tension there, isn't there, right? So that tension was something that I wanted to explore a wee bit. Now I really, really hope – and I think it's something that maybe does do this in a way that I'm uncomfortable with – but I really, really hope that the majority of people that engage with *Mouthpiece* don't take from it the idea that people can and should only write about directly their own experiences, because that's bollocks and I think that's dangerous actually, and I think that's absolutely not a writer's job. I think the writer's job is to imagine experiences beyond their own and that the way to do that ethically is also the way to do that well artistically, and that is a commitment to empathy and research.

**DR:** And at what point did you know that it was going to be about the Traverse Theatre itself as well?

**KH:** You can see in work prior to that, that that's something that I want to do. I want us to notice the here and now of where we are in the room and for our relationship to the work not just to be strictly representational.

**DR:** So it's kind of still holding on in some ways to that legacy of your work that's been rooted in the performance and live art if you like?

**KH:** I guess so. Yes, I guess you could say that. And that's not any more complicated than just I have my impulses as a writer and a maker, and they are what they are, and they're formed by that, they're informed by that space and still exist in that space. It's not like me going: 'I will make a claim for the legacy of this work!' It's just what I wanted to do because that's who I am. It's not any more complicated than that.



## [00:46:44] THE BALANCE

**DR:** How has your work moved on since? What is the balance between works you are writing or developing in response to particular commissions to works you're making because you want to, and the balance between work that still might honour that interest in music composition in theatre-making as opposed to playwriting itself?

**KH:** So this is informed by a whole bunch of factors. One of the factors is the incredibly fucking volatile nature of the theatre industry. And then you add that on and multiply it by the fact of having two kids, and it's hard-going. As I say, no one has ever paid me a full theatre commission to make a solo show. I co-wrote a film adaptation of *Beats* and that has provided me with a different strand to my practice as a writer, in screenwriting. So there's less room for a whole bunch of this stuff that we've spoken about. Me and my partner Julia, who I mentioned I work with a lot together, have just this year launched a company calling ourselves Disaster Plan. And it's just a name and a website. It's just an identity. We realised ten years ago that we should have done that. So when she makes a show we don't have to be like: 'From the makers of *Beats*'. But part of the impulse for doing it now as well at this point in our lives is just for us really. It names it and so therefore we have to maintain it. It's not just going to disappear in a bunch of season outline pitch documents for TV drama. So our first *Disaster Plan* show opened at the start of this year and it's a show that was a 'Julia' show. It was her show but I was involved as a dramaturg and I was involved on a kind of administrative level as well. But that was very, very much driven by the relationship between story and music, where song and music is instrumental to the dramaturgy and to the form. It was going to be on at the Fringe this year and it will of course not be. So that was one of our Covid artistic casualties unfortunately but, you know, next year hopefully. That's a 'Julia' show that I've been involved in. We don't have a 'Kieran' show lined up yet but there's a commitment to that happening. We've made a commitment to making some work, and who knows what will come of it because everything feels so fucking unknown right now in terms of where we are as a sector, like month on month, do you know what I mean? So, who knows?

**DR:** Of course. Great. That's fantastic, thank you.

**KH:** Thank you for inviting me to have a wee chat.

Transcript by Tom Colley

## Clips Summary

[00:14:54 to 00:16:05] *Hitch* (2009)

[00:28:00 to 00:30:48] Work in progress for *Beats* (2011)

[00:42:23 to 00:43:48] The trailer for *Heads Up* (2016)

## Works Cited

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