



Forever at This Volume: An Interview with Christopher Brett Bailey

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, welcome to the Gallery!

I first saw Christopher Brett Bailey's piece of spoken word theatre *This Is How We Die* at the Royal Holloway, University of London, on insistence of the theatre blogger and writer Megan Vaughan. I then saw it again at London's Almeida Theatre some months later, and finally also as part of a triptych of Bailey's works at Battersea Arts Centre under the title *Are You Deaf Yet?*

Even though little happens in it in terms of physical action, each encounter with this piece was an awe-inspiring experience, each time in a slightly different way, and each time, I immediately wanted to experience it again. Somewhere along the line I also saw Christopher Brett Bailey perform with other companies, and on two occasions I collaborated with him and director Ilinca Radulian on developing new work.

Although conversation doesn't really do full justice to getting at the heart of Bailey's artistically complex performance idiom that fuses deep interests in literature, rock'n'roll and comedy, I have also had several unpublished conversations with Chris about *This is How We Die* and his other works. This conversation is another iteration of those previous exchanges, where we try to piece together the story of Chris's unusual journey towards making music and theatre as a North American/Canadian artist in the UK.

This conversation took place on Zoom on 28th May 2020.

[00:01:55] EARLY WORKS

Duška Radosavljević: So you describe yourself as a performer, writer and musician based in London, and what's really interesting about your work is the way in which it exists in this space between theatre-making and music-making. What we normally do in these conversations, is we try and piece together how an artist has arrived at that methodology of making theatre, making live performance – so, what the formative influences have been, what has determined your choices, both aesthetically and methodologically in your journey as an artist to this point. Just remind me, when was it that you graduated from East 15?

Christopher Brett Bailey: 2008.

DR: 2008, great. So, shall we go back to that year? Or maybe even further back and maybe acknowledge the fact that you were born in Canada, and you lived in Canada and the United States before you came to the UK.

CBB: That's right.

DR: To what extent does that cultural background, do you think, also plays a part in who you are as an artist?

CBB: I guess it's huge because I don't really feel English even though I've lived here for half of my life. I think that I overplay the 'American-ness' in my work. I think that a weird thing happened when I moved here, which is that I suddenly was viewing American culture from the perspective of a European, or specifically English person, I guess, because when you're not from a place everyone, kind of, does your voice and points out all the things that are different about you. One of the key ingredients in my work is always in amplifying things, whether it's through actual volume or in making a thing bigger than it actually is. That works on a conceptual level as well as in terms of the form of the work as well. I think my work would be entirely different if I hadn't grown up there. Also I have a certain interest in the past rather than the present or the future moment. I really fixated on my childhood and my early experiences as material, potential stimulation for material, and a lot of the things that I'm interested in are all from before I was born. Most of the stuff that I find really inspiring and which guides my work long before I



was creating anything, was just feeding my imagination. This stuff is from the '40s, '50s, '60s – you know, mid-century, and my interest in things ends around the time I was born.

DR: At what point did you come to the UK and what brought you over here?

CBB: My family relocated when I was in my late teens. I was in the UK just for a year or two before going to East 15 to study there. So I didn't relocate for the purposes of training at a British acting school, but I did relocate around the same time that a lot of people do for that reason, yeah.

DR: And you also did a music course I remember from previous conversations. Was that before or after your training as an actor?

CBB: Afterwards. I did a one-year music course because I ran into some visa issues. I had to switch over onto a student visa at very short notice. So, I found this course called Artist Development at a place called The British Academy of New Music, which sounds very legitimate, and it was technically a full time course even though you only had to be there one day a week, so it meant that I could still carry on with the rest of my life while also qualifying for this visa. And I went in with very low expectations because I had already been in higher education and so forth, but it ended up being one of the most formative experiences at that time.

DR: It seems important and significant to look at your training at East 15 – this was a three-year course so presumably there was a long period of time that you engaged with a particular way of thinking about theatre and performance that might have then informed your work later?

CBB: Yes, the course is Contemporary Theatre. You audition as an actor and you're brought in – those are the terms in which you are judged most of the time, but the emphasis of the course is really on making your own work and expressing yourself and not worrying too much about the history of theatre. There's a little bit of a foundation in that in the beginning but the emphasis is really on being a self-sufficient entity. So, companies form, solo artists come out of there, oftentimes people come in as an actor and they leave realising they'd rather design or direct or write, and you're encouraged to experiment with all those different disciplines and a lot of people find that the boundary between the different ways of creating becomes quite porous. In terms of genre, the course aims to expose you to many different ways of approaching things, often which are in direct conflict with the thing that you were learning last week, in as quick a period of time as possible. So, you don't get a really super deep expert knowledge on any one way of working but you get to try your hand at dozens and dozens of different ways. That suited me really well because I think I had quite a distorted sense of – like I think everybody does at that age – quite an inaccurate sense of what I could bring to the table. And I was, you know, really loaded up with no self-confidence and stuff, and through being forced repeatedly just to try something without fully understanding what it is you're aiming at and the emphasis being entirely on creative output and not about writing an essay to justify the work; just making it and to hell with the consequences. It was a fantastic experience for me and I really went in not knowing that I had any facility with writing at all, and over time that's ended up gradually being the thing that I do more and more and more of. I work there now mentoring the students through their writing strand.

DR: There was actually a piece you made, if I remember correctly, that was quite significant for your career later, even while you were at East 15, you made the piece that you took to Edinburgh.

CBB: Right. So, there's a writing class that the students do, which is the thing that I now mentor, which in my day was April de Angelis mentoring us. It's just an open remit to spend a year developing a script and submit it at the end and if the script is garbage there's no penalty for that at all, it just goes into the waste paper basket, it doesn't affect your grades. If it's something that shows some promise then the course stages it the following year as part of a festival called Debut Festival of new pieces, and I was in the first year group doing this, so it was still being defined what the aims of the project should be. I wrote a piece called *The Inconsiderate Aberrations of Billy the Kid*, which was a really absurdist, expressionistic comedy, and the course leader liked it so much that he took it out of that project and directed it himself, and it was his idea to put music into it. We had a number of people who could play guitars in the year group, and had been in teenage bands and he said: 'Why don't we put all the rockers together and we'll make this into, like, a sort of rock'n'roll opera?' And initially I was quite resistant to that idea because I felt like: 'Well, I've put a lot of hours into getting the words right, I don't really want them to be drowned out by guitars.' But once we started the process and you could see that with the



reinforcement of music the text actually worked even better and it forced the performances to become huge, and so the end result was something like a, sort of, John Waters movie on stage. It was like grotesque.

DR: What was the name of this tutor?

CBB: Uri Roodner. He's really trying to do something different with allowing the students to lead with whatever they bring. He was really responsible for showing me that you could take something that had maybe a certain aesthetic and just push it further and that would make it better. And he diagnosed me as someone who should have probably been in a band instead of being, training to be an actor, and if I leaned into that, that was probably going to create the most interesting results.

[00:10:48] COLLABORATIONS: MEETING MADE IN CHINA

DR: What happened after that? What was the next step in the journey?

CBB: I loved doing that show and I wanted to carry on doing it, but it was costing everybody involved money to do it and it wasn't possible to carry on really. Around that time, in Edinburgh 2010, I went to see the Made in China show *Stationary Excess*, which was their first show. It was a little half-hour piece, and it really couldn't have been more different from what I was doing at the time. I was doing this thing with all of my friends in it that was this really wild late night rambunctious, in your face thing – it was a play, I mean, it had actors dressed up as characters and it was taking you into this fictional world that was a total distortion of the reality that we are in. And this Made in China show was just a breath of fresh air to me because it was one woman on stage for just 25 minutes, telling a story that was fiction but it was quite clearly infused with elements of her real life and it was a really humble piece by comparison and unbelievably charming, and it was built on intimacy with the audience rather than blowing them back into the chair and obliterating them. It was a gentle invitation and just beautifully performed and written, and–

DR: This is the one where she drinks a bottle of champagne in the course of 20 minutes?

CBB: Yeah. She drinks the champagne while riding an exercise bike, which is bolted to the stage. And I think there's a light bulb on a chain that flashes above her.

DR: And the name of the woman is Jessica Latowicki, right?

CBB: Yeah, that's right, and the company is her and her partner Tim Cowbury. I knew them before because after East 15 I was at Goldsmiths for one year and so were they, and that's where their company formed. I went to see them, sort of, out of politeness because I knew them, and then the show was amazing to me. And they had come and seen the show that I was doing and they really liked it, and so with their next show they wanted to expand, to get more people in to perform and to write it, and they wanted to do something that was more challenging to the audience – not like formally challenging, but maybe a little more confrontational or something. I guess they saw some of that in what I was doing at the time and they asked me to come and make that show with them and I did. And that show is *We Hope That You're Happy (Why Would We Lie?)*.

DR: You left East 15 in 2008 and then you did your Goldsmiths course before doing the music course, just to get the facts right?

CBB: I thought I only had to do one more year of it. By the time East 15 was finished I felt exhausted because they really, really work you long hours there, and energised and really just ready to go. I didn't want to be in education any longer but because of this visa hiccup I had to do another year, and then after that it turned out I needed to do another year. So, the first time I went to Goldsmiths thinking: 'Well, you know, I could definitely learn a little more about writing', so I went and did this Writing for Performance MA, and I had a horrible time. All the freedom and encouragement to do your own thing that the Contemporary Theatre course is about I felt that at that time that was the opposite of what the MA at Goldsmiths was about. It was all formula, it wasn't very much contact time, we were having to read ancient plays and then discuss their structure, and I just thought: 'This is not, you know, this is really – it's not that this isn't worthwhile but I'm a fish out of water, I don't belong here', and so I always used to say that I got an 'MA in Writer's Block'. And after that point I was quite happy to work on these



devised shows with other people where the burden to create the script was shared between everybody, because I really felt after that course, like: 'Well, that was a huge mistake, really', that I shouldn't be writing.

[00:14:49 to 00:16:08] Excerpt from the trailer for *This is How We Die* (2013)

[00:16:09] MAKING *THIS IS HOW WE DIE* (2013)

DR: How did you start writing again?

CBB: I made two or three shows in a row with Made in China. There was that one and there was *Gym Party*, which was a game show polling the audience for who they thought was the best person throughout the show, and then there was another one, which I didn't write but I performed in, which happened on the rooftop of the National Theatre, called *Get Stuff, Break Free*. Through each of these projects I would meet various people, the other collaborators that they worked with on their shows and all the venues we toured to, and the curators of those venues, and ended up befriending the people who worked at The Basement. You probably know it, there was a venue in Brighton that specialised in bringing contemporary performance, sort of, live art-type shows over from Europe, and they asked me if I would like to go on a residency and work on something. This was in 2013. I did that, just trapped in a room alone with nothing to do for a week, writing just started pouring out of me. I hadn't been doing it for a couple of years really and it was almost like in my subconscious, things were crystallising in there that I wasn't really aware of and then it came out, you know, just page after page after page after page, and that ended up being *This Is How We Die*. I'm just thinking about the title of this project is like, 'aural and oral,' right? And the last time we were talking I had a sort of revelation at that point, which is: the pressure that I was putting on myself to write was about me looking down at this blank page and having to fill it with things, and actually the writer's block sort of went away because I realised that the instrument for writing is not the pen, it's the ear for me. It's really just: things go in and then they come out and I decided not to exercise any judgement about what those things were in order to free myself of this blockage. So the experience for me is that like, I kind of have voices in my head, if I choose to, sort of, listen to them they're chattering all the time, like, there's a radio station in there that's just broadcasting. I know that it's memory and fantasy and regurgitation of virtually everything I've ever heard. I'm sure, like, lot's of people have this, I don't think it makes me, like, really, really unique and I'm not sure it's the most sane way to write, but my method that I discovered in that week alone at The Basement was simply just to write down the chatter that's going on inside my head. And then once I realised that that was a way of making material and that that material later on can be, you know, edited – you don't have to use the stuff that makes no sense, even to you, and I got comfortable with the idea of nonsense being a valid form of communication and that in any piece of writing there is a sort of battle between sense and nonsense. And I thought: 'Well, that's actually very true to my experience of what it is to read.' Whenever I'm reading something, there's elements of it that I do not understand and elements that I do understand, and I'm trying to parse everything and some of it is just going over my head, and I thought: 'Well, it's kind of a position of extreme ego to expect the writing that you create to be something that you fully understand as well.' And, so I thought: 'What if it's just about, you know, allowing your ear to suck in as much of life in as possible and your mouth to let it out, and that's kind of, the whole process?', you know. And then you can make some sort of judgement after the fact about how to sort of, frame and shape things – but to take your own conscious mind out of the equation as the source of the creativity.

DR: How did that material that you generated in The Basement then become a performance? What was the time lapse in between?

CBB: It was like at least a year, or a year and a half, in which I was going to The Basement for residencies of two or three days at a time whenever there was a gap in the touring that I was doing with Made in China. So I was in and out of there a ton. And also writing at home and writing on tour, and I was just really in the flow state, so whenever I wasn't doing something else a little idea would come, and maybe it would just be, like, a one-line thing, or maybe it would be three pages in one sitting, and I didn't have a lot of control over that, and I didn't ever look at it again, I didn't judge it, I just put it in a document until the document was several hundred pages long – I don't know, 250 to 300 pages



long and–

DR: Can I just actually make a little digression there before we revisit this journey, reconnecting this moment to your cultural background, because of the way in which *This Is How We Die* is often perceived as kind of a road movie and the ‘American-ness’ of that material that emerged out of it at that point?

CBB: Okay, well then maybe I’ll say that the shows we’ve already talked about had an ‘American-ness’ to them. I mean, the first one that we talked about that I developed while on the course at East 15, everybody was doing American accents in that.

DR: Why was that? Was that because of your presence or because of–?

CBB: I think so, yeah. And also because then it’s a unifying aesthetic. Scriptwriting is speech and I speak the way my parents speak and the way everyone I grew up with speaks, and my work is also built on the back of a lot of television and movies and time spent listening to the radio, and you know, I had gotten interested in like old humour, most of which is American, and old books, mid-century writing, a lot of which is American. And so I guess it’s just the centre point, it’s just the location of my – that’s what unifies a lot of the things – but specifically speech because I listen to loads of music that is English, of course, and also German music, and music from all around the world–

DR: Could you name some of those influences?

CBB: Well, I mean, I guess when I’m talking about British music I just mean, like anyone who’s got any passing interest in rock’n’roll, I mean, you owe a lot to... Obviously Elvis is the first wave of rock’n’roll [that] comes out of blues and country music and is an American invention, but by the ‘60s, the British were really doing the innovating on that front with the Beatles and other lesser British, so-called British invasion bands. I mean my entry point into a lot of it was Jimi Hendrix, who was American, but his contemporaries playing that sort of over-amplified sound were all British bands. I got really into the band Can when I was quite young, and they’re a German group and there’s a lot of other slightly lesser but really interesting German groups from around the same time – so anyone with an interest in rock music of the ‘60s and ‘70s. So that show – the script was set in the States but also the whole aesthetic universe of it was based in like John Waters and Russ Meyer and that place where like absurdist humour and exploitation movies, sort of, meet. There’s a similar, sort of, aesthetic thing happening with the more narrative parts of *This Is How We Die*, and the parts that are, like, not narrative, you could roughly divide them I think into things which are derivative of Burroughs specifically, and the idea of like Beat poetry and collage writing in general, and then things which are derivative of hokey old stand up. I’m really a big fan of Woody Allen’s stand up material and George Carlin and Richard Pryor and Lenny Bruce, and so there was quite a conscious decision at that time to try to take those influences and do right by them. Not just to do, like, a sort of karaoke impersonation, but to make contemporary material which would comfortably sit within the style that they were in, and to present that alongside the storytelling stuff, which puts you in a very filmic state of mind. But the thing with the way Jess Latowicki is, is that she’s on stage herself but slightly dialled up, you know, and that was really an eye-opener to me that you could just be yourself on stage. With *This Is How We Die* the flashbulb of inspiration was the ability to take the aesthetic universe of that first show I did, that was way more outrageous and outlandish and really borrowing heavily from a lot of the cultural things I grew up with, and Jess’s technique of playing herself. And so it was like: ‘I’ll be myself and the show will seem like it’s one of those shows where what you’re being sold is reality but it will actually take place in this other thing.’

DR: So to get back on track with that journey of text to performance – and you were talking about how the text emerged from that residency and then we were going to go on a journey about how that show happened.

CBB: Oh, right, right. So there was a woman working at The Basement at the time. She was actually trained as a dramaturg in Holland – a German woman called Anne Reiger. She said: ‘Are you going to do an Arts Council application and pay yourself for all this work you’re doing? What about turning it into a real show?’ And I sort of said: ‘Well, I don’t think I’m ever really going to figure out how to do an Arts Council application, I’m quite allergic to that kind of thing. I’d probably rather just keep doing this thing for free.’ And she was like: ‘Well, that’s pretty foolish.’ So the agreement that we made was that if she



helped me write the Arts Council application, she could put in the budget money for herself to be the dramaturg on the show. She'd seen a scratch and really liked it, and said some things which were pretty insightful about it that gave me confidence that maybe there was a good show in there, and the scratch was really just me reading a few pages of what I was sure was fruitful out of this document of 300 pages or so, most of which I was sure was not fruitful. And that's precisely what happened, and I'm very lucky not only to have had someone swoop in at that time and show me how to do an Arts Council application, but also that she turned out to be a really, really good dramaturg, I think, and a very good friend. Together we sat and read the whole thing and we would appraise every page, and I would say: 'Well, this part isn't good', and she'd say: 'No, it's no good', and that part would go in the garbage and then we'd both agree this part was quite funny so it would go into the 'maybe' pile, and part of it just naturally structured itself. I mean, it was clear already what the first 15 pages needed to be, and then it was quite a bit of work to sculpt the rest of it into the right shape. And there was really no new writing done at that point. It was lots of and lots of trial and error in the editing and, you know, then there was a draft of it that was two hours, then there was a draft that was 90 minutes, then there was a draft that was 70 minutes, and eventually it got down to the right size. And somewhere along the line came the idea of music. I'd been performing extracts of this thing just upstairs at The Oval House – which, for anyone who hasn't been there it's a very, very small space of, like, 30 seats or something in a horseshoe around the stage, and so it's extremely intense. And those performances were maybe 20-30 minutes, to work out what worked with an audience and what didn't work with an audience, and that was really instructive for how to sequence the show in the end. And then they said: 'Oh, we really liked that, we'd like you to do it Downstairs', and I thought: 'Well, no, it's not going to work [in the] Downstairs [theatre] because the intensity is what seems to be making it work. I'd like to be able to really see the audience and play off them.' And they said: 'No, we really want you in the bigger one.' 'Well, that's really flattering, but we'll have to do something to make the show work on a bigger stage.' I had this idea about – I mean, there's a thread in the text which is about, like, that speech is just sound and that any power that language has over you, you can free yourself from that if you choose to see speech as sound. And this partly happened because the crying of babies used to really bother me until I realised that it sounds a lot like free jazz saxophone, so if I were to just pretend that it was an Ornette Coleman saxophone solo then I would really enjoy the sound of a baby crying. And then I got to thinking: 'Well, maybe that's the case with speech as well – if somebody says something that you don't like you just do a cut-up of it in your mind and move the words around until it's something that you do like.' I guess this was fermenting in my mind along with this quote, which said: 'All art aspires to the conditions of music.' But I think that the point of it is that the form of the music and the content of music are united as one and the audience experiences them as – there's no other meaning, the effect that they have on you where meaning is created and the note B-flat doesn't mean anything outside of the context of the thing in which it appears. And so thinking about that, like: 'Wouldn't it be interesting after this sort of tirade of very intense text that there was a whole other way of communicating with the audience, which would come and wash all of that away?' And I was always interested in performance, especially, but in all art which plays with time – so film and novels and anything that's linear with time – even though the work is not totally strictly narrative, I try to structure things as though they're narrative, so they stick in the mind and so that they're imbued with meaning in the way that narrative generates meaning. So the idea of a show in which – this spoils the show for people who haven't seen it – but, like, I'm sitting on stage at a desk yabbering at the audience for near enough an hour, at which point blinding light comes up behind me and the musicians sneak on silently unbeknownst to the audience, hopefully, and then I go and music starts, and it's a recording at first, and gradually as the blinding light gets more and more intense on the audience, one by one live musicians join the recording and then there's a little concert sequence which happens with this light fading out into a blackout and the music getting louder and louder and louder. The music was worth doing for its own sake, and then felt doubly worth doing if it meant that the show had this kind of magic trick baked into its structure. And I also felt like this information overload that I was interested in very much at the time, it's nice to give the audience a little breather so that you don't just fire, like 25,000 words at them and then let them out into the foyer where they discuss that. I mean, I can't imagine anything worse. So the idea of something that is a sensory overload of a different kind, which allows them space to reflect on what they've seen and whether they hated it or loved it or neither and why – that felt like, okay, as an audience member, that's



something that I would be really thankful for. It would take the pressure off having to comment on the illogical thing which I've just witnessed. So then the music was developed very, very quickly, very close to the deadline, by calling up two of my very best friends who are both extremely talented musicians and music writers. I said: 'You know, we gotta do this thing, gotta do it real fast', and I had quite a clear idea, of like roughly what it should be, and they have more facility with composing music than I do, and so everybody chipped in with what they're best at and then the thing came out really, really fast.

DR: Working with the musicians for the end of *This Is How We Die* links back to your experience of having trained as a musician as well because those were—

CBB: Right, because I met those two people – George Percy and Alicia Jane Turner – they were both on the same music course. And the music course was not dissimilar to the East 15 course – quite free, it was really, you come in and you've got this free time to use the studios and stuff to develop work and we judge the work you develop. There's not many guidelines about what it is so long as you can, kind of, justify the work you want to do. And the three of us really couldn't have been more different in what we were trying to do at the time musically, but we got along really good, so it was a really easy thought: 'Well, we'll just get these two really nice, talented people to come in and just see what happens.' And part of the initial notion with music was: 'What if it did what music often does in a film, which is to provide an emotional palette that is maybe not there otherwise?', you know, if you took the music out of a lot of films you wouldn't know how you were supposed to feel about it. And [we] thought: 'Wouldn't it be interesting, given that the show is quite, sort of, rough and tumble in its humour, if by the audience we could try to manipulate people into crying?' I mean, Dolly Parton's advice that you should 'make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, and scare the hell outta them' rings in my ears as being pretty truthful, that the audience is thankful if you can do one of those things and amazed if you can do all three. And, of course, like everything, both humour and sadness are subjective so I'm not foolish enough to think that me writing a joke that I think is good is going to make you laugh necessarily, but it would hopefully make some of the audience laugh. And so I was thinking about the end of the show: 'It's not going to get everyone to cry, that's impossible, but if we can try and get one person in every audience crying in a show – in which for the first 45 minutes, it didn't even seem like that was a conceivable possibility – that would be pretty neat.' And so my remit to Alicia was: 'We're going to use violin in this way, or we're going to amp it in the way that we amp electric guitar. We're going to start quite quiet and it's going to get very, very loud and it's going to become extremely dense.' And I lent her a loop, a sampler, a looping pedal, so she could learn how to use that, and was like: 'Try to make something that is really going to play against the tone of the piece and manipulate the audience into crying.' That's the first section of the music, and then the other parts had different musical ideas and references that we wanted to stack onto it, knowing that we would be getting to an improvised section at the end, which would be as loud as the equipment would go. And the idea of the music is that it is structured in the reverse order of the show, so it meets the show at its most tender moment where the music is tender, and then it becomes adventurous and, sort of, hopeful and then, sort of, violent and then there's a little refrain of something quite romantic towards the end, and then the final five minutes is just complete chaos in the way that the beginning of the show, the text, has been complete chaos.

[00:35:18 to 00:35:44] Excerpt from *Kissing the Shotgun Goodnight* (2016)

[00:35:45] STAGING CHOICES

DR: Maybe it's worth to, kind of, mention something about your choices around how you perform the text when you perform it, which seems to tie in with what you've just spoken about, but also the staging decisions around speaking at a desk and so on.

CBB: The answer to your question is actually, kind of, mundane, which is that my memory isn't very good, I don't like memorising lines, I'm lazy at that and it doesn't come as easy as it does for other people. I've got a pretty, I think, a good memory in some sense but I'm not a details person, and that's true across the board in everything that I do – I always need the details to be either a collaboration with other people or to give them to a machine in the way that the printed word on the page is, is memorised. And I realised also that I perform out of a state of nervous energy and so when it came time to design a solo I thought: 'Okay, the thing I'm not going to do is be bothered memorising any words', and that



was quite compatible with this huge volume of material. This material is: a) more than anybody could memorise accurately, and b) a lot of it feels written, it's got one foot in literature, and if I perform it, it's like: 'What, I'm a character who's been through these things?' It's a much more accurate frame to say: 'I'm a person who's written this thing and then my ability to inhabit the characters within it is flexible.' In some of the more narrative sections, I do have them memorised and I'll sit up and really perform them for the audience, and for that couple of minutes they can imagine that I am in a little movie, and then when there's parts that are just a stream of images that you're supposed to picture and I'm supposed to fade into the background where the words are what's in focus but I'm not the person saying them then I can look down at the page, has the double focus of severing the contact between you and me and it means that if I'm looking at the page I'll say it right. And also early on there was this idea that the text should maybe change every night and that didn't end up happening in any significant way but it did end up happening in a future project called *Suicide Notes*, which is a 90-minute performance in which I read a script and is genuinely no repetition across different performances. You might get the same story two nights in a row but it'll be combined with different stories that it wasn't with last night, and things drop out of the set list that don't come back in until five shows later, and so memorising that was actually impossible. What that means is like a musician with sheet music you can really focus on the particular specifics and the detail and how every word comes out, rather than: 'Have I said that sentence correct?' There's more speed in the text and there's more detail in the performance than anything I've done up to that point because of having the sheet music there.

DR: But also what was interesting watching the performance, which I've seen a few times actually, was the way in which improvisation was also part of it, in the way in which you interacted with the audience.

CBB: Yeah, because there's a safety net. I mean, maybe if it was a different show and there was less words and I'd memorised it, and someone's phone goes off I would still make a comment about it, that's just, kind of, who I am and how I am. I think that part of what's great about live performance is that it is live. I mean, it's the ultimate cliché, but you know, it needs to be a real, authentic connection – not every performance, obviously some of them are amazing because they're mechanical and that's a great feat too, but especially because of the formality of this setting, of it's like – I speak and you listen. It's like: 'Well, it needs to be performed as impolitely as possible because of the formality of that setting.' It's like the desk is like some sort of cage that is holding me back from running into the audience. Similarly, the script being printed, some nights it feels like a straitjacket, it's like: 'I really don't want to do this again', but then you start doing it and you get into it and it's fine, and then something'll happen in the room that needs to be addressed and then it's like: 'Phew, thank god!'

[00:40:03] AN ANARCHIC DIGRESSION ON GIG THEATRE AND HUMOUR

DR: Before we move on to talk about the other works that then eventually formed the trilogy *Are You Deaf Yet?*, or at least that's what it was titled when I saw it at the Battersea Arts Centre, I just want to quickly check something with you. Because I have not seen those works you had referred to that were made by Made in China – other than *Stationary Excess*, which I did see – they keep coming up in conversation as being relevant to this project. Am I right in thinking they have also made gig theatre, and have they done it when you were working with them, or before or after, or was there an element of that in their work?

CBB: I guess I would like to take this opportunity to say that I don't think I really know entirely what you mean by gig theatre.

DR: Ah, good. Okay.

CBB: I mean, I first heard this term quite late. I heard this term in 2018 I think, when the Camden People's Theatre did a week-long festival of shows that were supposedly gig theatre. Live music being present within theatre is nothing new and it's part of the devising work that we did at East 15, as I say. I mean, we were always encouraged if anyone had a skill, whether it was music or design or puppetry or impersonation or dance, you know, any other thing that you could possibly add to the dimensions of a show, that was worthwhile material. I would say actually of all the things we've talked about, Made in China's possibly the least gig theatre because, from what I understand, because there's no gig to it. There's music often playing an important role because it sets the mood and it will often interrupt the



action and the tech box is kind of the god in their shows – it will cut performers off, the bells will go off which are triggering you to do certain things on stage. In the first one I did we had this David Bowie song which played really earsplittingly loud, and so in that sense it was a gig, but it was a recording, no one was playing it live, it was just recorded music and the music in their shows is not usually, neither one's a musician really, so I don't think they've ever used their music. I think they always take music from the world and the shows have, like, a mixtape that's peppered across them in the same way that you might have in a movie or something. Maybe in a very broad sense, like, their shows sometimes maybe have a lot of energy, which makes them feel like they're quite rock'n'roll or something – in attitude but not in content.

DR: Yeah, that's really interesting. I share your, kind of, reservation around the term 'gig theatre' but it has entered the vocabulary and I have used it as forming part of the title of my project because it seems like a useful shortcut to just denote something that's taking place, but that something can often be very complex. So, yeah, I agree, it's a term that we need to probably address how we talk about it and what we mean by it. That reminds me to maybe just also think about that a little bit, you know, the way in which stagecraft might be seen as being of a certain kind that then renders it as maybe being 'gig theatre' or being DIY or being 'post-punk' or whatever term we might apply to it. I don't know whether you feel that applies to your choices and your work in any way.

CBB: What, like having a deconstructed stage image or something?

DR: Yeah, possibly.

CBB: Or performing in a way that the boundary between the performer and the audience is dissolved a little bit? It doesn't obey the same polite rules that most time at the theatre does, but I mean, I really, I just don't really know. I feel like that sort of thing must have been the case going back – I mean, what about the shows that were done by Andy Warhol in the '60s? You know, *Pork* by Andy Warhol is probably the grandparent show of gig theatre. A major influence on me was Ken Campbell who I was very fortunate enough to be taught by and work with a little bit right before he died.

DR: At East 15?

CBB: Yeah. Yeah, he used to come in and do a unit on improvisation there. A lot of his projects back in the '70s, you know, the *Ken Campbell Road Show*, I mean they would be putting ferrets down their trousers and running, and all the stuff would be happening in a bar and everybody was drunk the whole time. The whole idea of it was – I guess you'd kind of call it 'punk', but before and alongside punk, but it wasn't even a musical idea, it was an anarchy idea because it came out of humour really, so I don't know.

DR: And humour is quite important in your work, in terms of at least how it comes across, there seems to be, I think I've mentioned this to you before, there is a sense of clown that, kind of, accompanies your stage persona.

CBB: Absolutely, yeah. For me, humour is just, it's right down at the very – it's in my toes, I mean, it's right down in the very bottom of who I am, and it's not to say that I'm the funniest person that you've ever met, like, in a bar or even that my work is particularly funny, or aimed at being funny all the time, but for me humour is laced into absolutely everything that I do and everything that I'm interested in. It's the life force, as far as I'm concerned, it's the difference between humour and pleasure and happiness, it's impossible for me to separate those things. It's like if I'm not laughing I'm crying, you know, and there's a fair amount of crying in my work too, but it would mean nothing if it wasn't for the laughter.

[00:45:54] ARE YOU DEAF YET? (2011-2018)

DR: What about the other works that came after *This Is How We Die* that then formed the trilogy (but also there are other works outside of the trilogy)? What was the journey then after *This Is How We Die*?

CBB: *This Is How We Die* took on a life of its own. It was a great gift and a great curse because people really loved the show in a way that nobody was prepared for, people would come to see it multiple nights in a row, and on one hand that's absolutely the response that you want of course, and you're



like: 'Wow, yeah, I'm glad that—' and we are all, everybody that made the show... It was made very quickly, it was made very cheaply, it was made very harmoniously, everybody's getting along and we all had a good time and as far as I know everybody thought the show was really a cool thing, and I was very proud of it, and that ended up being a sort of kiss of death because what it meant was that we toured it loads and loads and loads and never really got sick of doing it, and then there was the opportunity to make another show and didn't really didn't have a very clear idea. So, I went back in vain to do the same procedure again, which was I would write as much as is possible without really judging it, just thinking: 'Well, once I've got 200 or 300 pages there'll be something in there worthwhile.' And we went into music studios, and at sound checks on tour we would improvise and start making music, and the musicians were integrated into the project from the beginning. The other one, it was, like, I worked on *This Is How We Die* for ages alone and then dramaturg Anne and producer Beckie [Darlington] came in and we really made it a real, professional project. And Anne helped me to sculpt the thing, then the music was added at the end and that was a collaborative thing but it was a button on the end of the show which completed it. And then it was like: 'Well, what if the music was running all the way through the show?' And so we all started composing things and we started improvising and we built up this huge library catalogue of music demos and meanwhile constantly doing more and more tour dates, so any immersion in this, whatever this new project was going to be was constantly being interrupted by going to tour the old one. It became really, really clear that the stuff we were doing with music and sound was really cool and really exciting to all of us but it wasn't going to work with a text being performed live on top of it. So, then I started making voice recordings and that didn't feel quite right, so then in the end what the second show, which was called *Kissing the Shotgun Goodnight* is essentially a concert with this really overbearing and wild and cool lighting design by Lee Curran, and it has lots of haze and stuff, and so there's all these elements but I just ended up taking all the text out of it except just the bare minimum to frame the show and that text was heavily cut up so that it sort of sets up an atmosphere and puts images in your mind but it doesn't really tell a logical story. And so, all of the text went into the project *Suicide Notes*, that I mentioned before, which I ended up doing two years later. Really it was just a cobbling together of all these different ingredients we made later, and without much time left at the end to think about trying to sculpt it more, or what it communicated. And truth of the thing is that I was really at the end of my tether at that time, I was having a sort of nervous breakdown or something, like my brain just wasn't functioning properly, I wasn't happy, I was feeling the pressure a lot in a way that now seems absurd, but it is the truth. And I realised like: 'Maybe the way that I work best is over a longer period of time than that, and without so many eyes on me.' And so, the piece is something which everybody has quite mixed feelings about because a lot of the ingredients in the piece are absolutely beautiful, and an audience who comes with a really open mind I think, really, really loves it. And when we performed it as part of the marathon trilogy, we put these three pieces together, I think that it was the one that really was the centrepiece, and it was a very logical connective with these other two pieces, which were much more intentional in their effect.

[00:50:08 to 00:54:47] Excerpt from *THIS MACHINE WON'T KILL FASCISTS BUT IT MIGHT GET YOU LAID* (2011)

DR: And this is where we start to see the instruments being used in ways that are not [conventional], which then grows and gets developed in the next piece, right?

CBB: There's pianos on stage – they're not the full piano, they're just the guts of the piano. Yeah, and we're drumming on them and stuff. Again, that's not like an innovation, I mean, people have been doing that, I mean – John Cage, obviously, the most famous example, but ever since then people have been integrating that into – there's this wonderful musician called Kaboom Karavan and that seems to be the basis of most of what he does is, is affixing pieces of metal onto the sound board of a piano and using it as a resonant body to strike and what not. We were really just – everybody putting ingredients into the pot and everyone agreed that this is, like, a really cool backdrop for the show. I mean, as a piece of set they are good and then we had developed a piece of music to play on them, but it's not the most visual thing because it happens facing away from the audience, which I guess now when I look back on the work, that feels like it was the shyness of how I was feeling at the time coming out. The idea that we could just immerse ourselves in sound, and sort of, float away on that and that would be enough of a show. I didn't actually think about the connection there between that and what happens



with the hanging guitars in the next piece but the answer to this question is actually sort of, just musical in nature. If you kept the front board on the piano it would sound like a piano and by taking it off it doesn't sound like a piano anymore. And then in the next piece you've got guitars that are hanging from chains that swing over the audience's heads, and that—

DR: And the next piece is called?

CBB: It's called *THIS MACHINE WON'T KILL FASCISTS BUT IT MIGHT GET YOU LAID*, which perhaps, confusingly has been the name for about half a dozen different projects over the years stretching back to 2011. Anytime I do anything with an ensemble of just guitar players, working with unusual approaches to tuning then that's what the project is called. The best of those pieces is the one that you saw, I think – or the most complete of those pieces is the one that you saw at the Battersea Arts Centre. The musicians are dotted around the stage because part of the thing with *Kissing the Shotgun Goodnight* was that we felt: 'Okay, if this piece was just allowed to be its own thing it wouldn't really happen in a seated venue. I mean, the fact that you're, sort of, strapped into it for 75 minutes is maybe not the best way to experience it. Maybe if it was something where you could move around and get as close to it as you wanted or as much distance as you wanted from it, it would be better. So with the next one it was like: 'Let's do something where the audience is free to roam', and so the musicians are on plinths. It's four of us and we're all playing exactly the same thing on roughly the same equipment. It creates a sort of three dimensional sound that swirls around the audience and if you hear something you like you can move towards it and it gets louder, or if you don't like it or that's heavy, you move away, and you can't see it all, you have to choose which musician to focus on, which tune to focus on, but you can't take it all in. So the audience is constantly swirling around, it means that everybody gets a chance to be front row, in a sense, and so that piece was really, like, more directly trying to take the rock concert as its subject and to break it down into its component parts. It's like: 'Essentially a rock concert is just an electric guitar player. What if everybody was an electric guitar player and that's the only ingredient that was in the music, and what if there was more freedom in the space to respond to it, however you want it?'

DR: I want to talk a little bit more about how you play the instruments in that piece, how you take things to an extreme in various ways.

CBB: Well, it's loud, that's one extreme. And it's very minimal – is the other extreme. So the pieces are all – they're structured but I wouldn't call them composed. The music of *This Is How We Die* and *Kissing The Shotgun Goodnight* is a collaboration between George and Alicia and I, and then, and we had another violin player called Nick, who was working with us at the time of *This Is How We Die*. And so those things are really quite democratic in the way that they're created, and often my role in the midst is to pull it all together at the end trying to consider everybody's contributions. Those guys have loads of ownership over that work and it would be entirely different and probably nowhere near as good if it were done with other people. And *This Machine* is actually a project which stretches back – the seeds of it stretch back to before knowing any of the musicians I'm currently working with, and the idea is to explore the sound of the electric guitar but also what happens when you've got these open tunings – so rather than having to fret the notes, which sort of deadens their ringing capacity, you tune it to, so it's a chord and then it will sustain just forever at those volumes, it just goes and goes and goes. So it's a way of creating a much more infinite and abstract, sort of shimmering sound. And so I usually come up with just a very, very basic thing, which sounds like absolutely nothing at the kitchen table when one person's doing it, but if it's happening across all six strings of four players at 115 decibels then suddenly it sounds sort of profound. We keep it really, really live by not rehearsing very much. We rehearse maybe twice before premiering a new composition, and so everybody's having to look at each other all the time. That puts a performativity to it where there are mistakes and there's a lot of correction of those mistakes happening live in front of the audience, and people are keeping their eye on George because he's, kind of, conducting the tempo, and they're keeping an eye on me for when the next changes are happening. And then I control dynamics with the other hand by telling people 'louder' or 'quieter' that way, and there's a part which is led by one of the others and we watch over for them for their signal, and so the whole thing is a sort of a dance or something that is happening. I don't know, it's not even – I think of it more in terms of its architecture rather than its – you're transporting the audience between different moods and different themes, rather than it being something that is really led by – like there's



no melody, for one thing, there's no topline focal point. You hear melodies in it because of the big wash of sounds, your brain hears different clashing tones in the air and will infer melodies and in a way it's like Jackson Pollock or something, you hear something in it that's different from what you would hear next time you heard it.

DR: But not dissimilar from how you hear narrative *In This Is How We Die*?

CBB: Yeah, because of the overload, different little parts of it speak to you. And then I guess that's one thing that I'm always really keen on in other people's work is stuff where if you see it again you have a different experience. The idea that you are creating stuff which can be experienced more and more, and will give more and more juice every time you squeeze it, which is obviously in direct conflict with the temporariness of performance. I mean, most people aren't going to come twice, so maybe it's foolish to believe in that as a procedure – but I'm a fool and I do.

DR: But also what I was referring to earlier, in terms of *THIS MACHINE WON'T KILL FASCISTS* was that there was this approach to playing the guitars with other tools, right?

CBB: At the beginning and the end of the performance the guitars are strung off of chains from the ceiling and this obviously puts the electric guitar as a subject present – just for the way it looks, but also through doing that you discover that when you're not holding it, it resonates. If you hold the guitar, you're dampening the resonance through your body's contact with it, where if it's free to wiggle around on this chain, then it sounds entirely different and you can strike it like a percussion object. So we do one piece that's entirely that, where I've got a metal rod which I'm putting in under the resonant frets, which makes a gonging-like noise and then the piece ends with dismantling some of the guitars – everyone's got a different tool: two power tools and a handsaw and a sledgehammer. And this is obviously an exaggeration of the way this piece is meant to be the ideal concert, it's meant to be the rock concert boiled down to its essentials. And it's meant to be – this is like what The Who did and what Jimi Hendrix did, and what you always hope will happen is that – it will topple over into the destruction of the equipment as the ultimate release and climax to the show. And the fact that the music is quite abstract and academic, albeit as loud as rock'n'roll, means that you don't really expect this kind of a whimsical, humorous thing that happens at the end of the piece, hopefully. And then we're doing it in the way that is beyond what anybody did before, like – we've gone to buy a drill bit specifically that will chew through wood, you know, it's not a spontaneous action, it's, I don't know, clinical or something.

[01:00:05] MAKING *SUICIDE NOTES* (2018)

DR: And then the *Suicide Notes* was the next piece after this, right? Or have I missed something?

CBB: That year that we did those three pieces together – *Suicide Notes*, and those three and a project called *Rated X*, which is a collaboration with a visual artist, those three things all happened within a few months of each other. They were all being developed alongside each other.

DR: You mentioned earlier this piece, *Suicide Notes*, which was in a way an offshoot from *Kiss The Shotgun*, that had begun its life as part of this other work you just described, and you've mentioned how it is performed in such a way when not every performance is the same. Unfortunately, I haven't seen this live. What's interesting to me here is this journey that you have described, which has been: starting your journey as writer, discovering that you are a writer, working with an ensemble, then working with an ensemble just as a performer, then rediscovering yourself as a writer again and, kind of, working with a band, and then all along presumably you're still working as a performer with other people as well, and then you have a piece that is just text, *Suicide Notes*, that you perform on your own. Is it at a desk again?

CBB: Yeah, bigger desk to show some scaling up, some growth!

DR: Right, okay. [Laughter.] How does it sit within this journey, how is it different from the work, from *This Is How We Die*, for example, and how is it still within the continuity of what you have done previously?

CBB: Well, I don't know if it is. Potentially a big mistake was to also situate it at a desk because it photographs exactly the same as *This Is How We Die* as a result of that, and I think a lot of people



didn't realise it was a different show. And also I was pretty transparent with everybody about using, recycling a lot of material that had begun in a previous project, and so I think it's really connected to those other two shows because it's staged exactly the same as *This Is How We Die* except without a lighting design really. The idea is just to share writing in its more raw state and to not worry about finishing it into a complete whole, but rather to be more responsive to what the situation is. So, like, going to an environment where it's, like, a gig on a university campus I'm going to put together a different selection of material depending on how, what the crowd's going to be like, whether or not I'm feeling particularly funny that day. Living inside *This Is How We Die* for so long, I mean, I had all this other writing that I wanted to use, I wanted to be able to be more improvisatory. There's also a pretty mundane answer to your question, which is that the idea with *Shotgun* and *THIS MACHINE* was very much to work with an ensemble and the wonderful thing about that is that you've got other people around you and it's a lot more fun in that you can create things that are the result of a lot of people putting ideas in and it's a beautiful thing. But for me, whatever I've just been doing is not the thing that I'm craving to do because I've just been doing it. So I needed to do something where I was just really alone for a while and this is something that I can do totally alone, and then you add to that the fact that those pieces with four or five people on the road are really expensive to tour, and it's funny to talk about this in terms of your idea of gig theatre because I think those two pieces are more gig than they are theatre and the audience for that, at least the audience for those two pieces, is a lot smaller than if it's 90% theatre and 10% gig, I'll tell you that. So, they didn't tour nearly as much as we wanted them to. I mean, even though the first one had a complicated birthing procedure it's still something that I think there's a potential audience out there for that's way larger than the audience who got to see it. And, so it was like, 'Well next time we're going to do something, I'll just get on a train and come to you and you can pay me whatever you think is fair to do it.' And so that's what I needed to do at that time, and I had all this writing which was otherwise just going to sit in a drawer and rot, a lot of which I think is really good and so the way that it relates to *This Is How We Die* is that it expands off of that style of that show in every possible way.

DR: This is to do with analogue versus the digital in your work. To me it comes across as quite analogue – I can imagine you writing at a typewriter, you know – but to what extent does the digital actually feature in how you conceive of your work?

CBB: Well, I hate the internet. I always tell people that. It's the first thing you see on my website, it says there: 'I'm allergic to the internet, and so are you.' And that's about as much as I need to say about that, I think it's the truth, I think it's really, really bad for us. And I think that photography is really, really bad for us. I think that too much knowledge of what you look like and how you come across to other people is really damaging. I'm sorry to dispel your image of me, I don't write at the typewriter, although I wish I could show it to you, I have another laptop that's old, it's from 2002/3 on which I do most of my writing on Microsoft Word and there's a picture of a typewriter taped to it. [Laughter.] It's sort of to remind – it's because so many people assume that I would write on a typewriter with the style that I work in, but also it's to remind me to write with the economy that I would if I were writing on a typewriter.

DR: Great.

CBB: But for me I need to have Microsoft Word because I need to have multiple – well, first of all the thing is I have to type at the speed at which I think, which is faster than I could type on a typewriter. And the second thing is that almost everything is in this huge document, which just grows and grows and grows and grows and grows, and then I copy things out of it into another smaller document, and so that procedure would just be – what? – a filing cabinet and a Xerox Machine? It would just be messy but there is a point, when I'm structuring ideas, where I print them off and then I cut them up with scissors and glue them back together again and then retype all that into the computer. There is more analogue in the writing process than I'm sure there is for other people. But I don't know, I mean, I just feel like whatever tool you're using the idea is for it to be effortless. The idea is to not – although in music I feel different. I feel that you almost need a tool to wrestle with, that's what makes a performance sound interesting I think, is when the musician is figuring out how to work with whatever tool it is that they're working with. But, with writing, for me it just needs to be as accurately what's going on in my head as possible.



[01:07:08] WORK IN DEVELOPMENT

DR: And what are you working on at the moment? Were you stopped in your tracks as part of the lockdown? What was being lined up in terms of new work that you were creating?

CBB: So far nothing has been derailed entirely. Things have been delayed into next year and things have been delayed into later this year. There's another piece which we didn't speak about called *Rated X*, which is a kind of improvising collaboration with visual artist Tomas Jefanovas. He is a video artist and synthesiser musician. He invited me to work on a project of his, which he initially wanted to be maybe in a gallery or something, and then it only became a theatre show out of circumstance because I ran into one of the producers from The Yard and she said: 'Oh, we're looking for people to contribute to the Now Festival next year and do you have an idea?' And they've got a wonderful, big wall there for projecting on, it's like as big as a movie theatre and so it was like: 'Wow, that could be really beautiful in there.' And so it's a sort of improvised thing where he's got old video machines that are processing a live camera and again it's really – it's not maybe as much gig as those other two shows that we were just talking about, but it's at least 50% gig. Anyway we're doing a video version of that – it was supposed to be a live show at the Cambridge Junction at the Disrupt Festival so instead it's going to be a video version of that that goes out over Vimeo or something. And then *This Is How We Die* was going to perform at the FIND Festival in Berlin and we don't know 100% if it's going to go ahead for next year but we're very hopeful that it will. Other than that just working on new things. One thing is a project with the Sleepwalk Collective that we are creating together right now. That has been delayed but not derailed entirely. And the other things I have are top secret, I can't tell you! It would ruin them. It would ruin them if I told you!

DR: [Laughter.] Okay, fair enough. Alright, well, that's great. Thank you, Chris. Your work seems inexhaustibly interesting, you know, so there are lots of things that–

CBB: To you maybe! We should switch seats, I would love to feel that way about it again! But, I appreciate you for your interest and this is a very interesting project that you are doing and I'm very flattered that you would want to talk again and have me involved in it.

Transcription by Tom Colley and Samantha McAtear

Clips Summary

[00:14:49 to 00:16:08] Trailer for *This is How We Die* (2013)

[00:35:18 to 00:35:44] *Kissing the Shotgun Goodnight* (2016)

[00:50:08 to 00:54:47] *THIS MACHINE WON'T KILL FASCISTS BUT IT MIGHT GET YOU LAID* (2011)

Audio available at <https://www.auralia.space/galley4-christopherbrettbailey/>.

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