



Taking Music Up a Level: An Interview with Little Bulb

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello and welcome to the Gallery!

Little Bulb Theatre is an award-winning national touring company based in the South East of England. The company is led by the Administrative Director Clare Beresford, Artistic Director Alexander Scott and Musical Director Dominic Conway, all of whom also regularly perform in their own shows, while Scott directs most of them. Little Bulb are a key example of the British tradition of multi-skilled ensembles of theatre-makers who graduate together from university drama courses rather than drama schools or conservatoires. Since their inception in 2008, their work has grown and developed thanks to the support of producing structures of small-to-mid scale festivals such as Lounge on the Farm in Kent and Forest Fringe in Edinburgh, as well as the producing companies such as Battersea Arts Centre in London and Farnham Maltings in Surrey.

I first came across Little Bulb at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2008 where they debuted with *Crocospia* and have followed their work quite closely ever since, partly through our mutual connection to the University of Kent. Their approach to theatre-making, as discussed in this interview, is deeply interconnected with their passion and talent for music-making, commitment to ensemble ethos and belief in constant learning and growth. Their artistic sensibility is informed by an interest in the quirkiness and complexity of the human nature, as well as the appeal of DIY, object manipulation and visual theatre. In addition to some of the key productions surveyed here, it is worth noting that Little Bulb have also made memorable contributions to children's theatre.

This interview took place on Zoom on 26th May 2020.

[00:02:10] MEETING GROUNDS

Duška Radosavljević: The way we normally do this is with a lot of companies whose work we are looking at we like to start by just retracing the steps a bit and looking at where you come from as artists. What your formative influences were, and what led to you choosing to work in this particularly way; how you developed your methodology of working and then how you ended up working in the way that you do. And it is a really interesting situation in relation to you guys because I kind of know where you come from! I was lucky enough to see your very first show and I think I've seen it more than once actually. I saw it in Edinburgh, *Crocospia*, and I saw it in Canterbury but I obviously don't know the processes of how you as individuals found each other, and how you found that shared sensibility. And how you specifically chose, even in that very first show, to work with found music as your stimulus because that was all about found records, wasn't it, in the second-hand shop. So maybe we can piece that together, that journey of how you originally met and how you discovered that you had things in common.

Alexander Scott: We all met doing that show. And as you know, at Kent in your final year you get to do a specialism. I was in the Contemporary Performance specialism but I really wanted to direct something and I'd never really done that before on a big scale. I just wanted to work with the people that I'd come to know through all the various theatre things happening at uni. So Clare was in my year, Dom was in the year below but I knew him through some of the things that he was doing like various 'do-it-yourself' sort of drama projects going on. And Shamira [Turner] was in the year below that, so it was strung out across all the different years and it was a dream really because I just sort of had little chats with everyone and just said: 'Really want to do a show', and didn't know what it would be.

DR: So this was the Contemporary Performance Practice specialism at the University of Kent where



the focus is on, let's say, devising and practices drawn from contemporary performance, performance art, live art and so on. So this was the year 2008 I think, if I remember correctly.

Claire Beresford: Yeah.

DR: But you'd already sort of developed it in the spring presumably, of that year, and then you took it to Edinburgh and then it became quite a success in Edinburgh as well. So I'm interested in you as individuals. Presumably you all had some sort of musical training before – tell me, how did you discover your interest in theatre and in music before you actually found each other?

CB: I was really basically torn between music and theatre. Like, I didn't – I actually applied for some courses to do either and funnily enough on music courses I was told: 'You're not really good enough, but your speech was good', and then on acting in drama school auditions it was like: 'Hmmm, but your song was great!' So I found like I was always really torn and I didn't know, really, what to do, and after applying for drama school and being terrible at it and not getting into music, I essentially thought: 'I do love academia but I really want to do it practically. I can't seem to get myself into the just performance courses but I do love academia, so I'll go to uni', and there was this year abroad. And then during that time I met other people who – I don't think there is a music course at Kent but, for example, I remember talking to Dom one night on a walk back, I can't remember where we were. But just talking about the fact that we both used to be in funk bands when we were teenagers, and working with Alex on projects because me and Alex were in the same year so we worked together one year on one of the earlier performance modules. And then just got really excited by – you know when you just meet somebody and you're like: 'Oh, yeah!', and you're just ping-pong off things and you have the same aims and you enjoy working together. But then for *Crocospia* I remember Alex, sort of had words that he was really interested in – correct me if I'm wrong Al – but it was kind of like 'families' and 'record players' and 'memories' through record players. And I hadn't listened to record players for yonks before that but I just loved it! I was quite new to devising when I came to Kent. I'd been more involved in bands and choirs but I hadn't really put that through a devising lens or I hadn't really done really any devising really, that's kind of where I came from. But I always loved music – I wouldn't call myself a musician, but I was always doing music so I was, but not in a way that was classically trained or anything.

DR: What about you, Dom?

Dominic Conway: I think that all throughout growing up I was really into acting, doing little shows for your parents and getting friends to do random scenes and whatnot. And I think round about when puberty hit, my interest in theatre started to really diminish and music was a much safer space because I think suddenly, you know, with all the acne and feeling really awkward, the things that had attracted me to theatre, I felt a bit uncomfortable and a bit shy, but in music you could explore these rougher textures and it was a bit – it was just a bit of an escape really. I played loads of music all throughout my teenage years – it was probably my real passion, but I always sensed that I couldn't study music because it was so much a kind of therapy for me as much as anything else, and I never got on well where you had to play a piece from start to finish without making any mistakes and I sensed that there'd be a lot of that studying music. I think I always just preferred using it in a very organic way. And so going to Kent – I don't think I applied to anywhere else! I think I was quite unsure as to what I wanted to do. Kent was certainly – I put all my eggs in that basket because I really liked the location because I love that whole east Kent coast. Coming to uni, as Clare said, because there wasn't a music course, there were loads of opportunities for a musician – there were different open mic nights or places to play gigs. There wasn't an astonishing music scene but I ended up doing a lot of shows that involved me being a musician and found playing music in a theatre context so rewarding because you have very unusual challenges to come up with a piece of music to serve a very specific function or to teach non-musicians how to play an instrument in a theatre context. And just to explore the presence of music and the presence of the musician felt a huge relief from the kind of pressure that had built up in my teenage years. There were some amazing musicians at my school so the competition was really high and it was wonderful coming to uni and exploring music in a completely different environment.



[00:10:01 to 00:11:51] 'Thank You for the Music' from *Wail* (2016)

DR: Whereabouts did you grow up?

DC: I grew up in Muswell Hill.

DR: Oh okay – a Londoner, basically.

DC: Yeah. Exactly. Yeah.

DR: What about you, Clare?

CB: I grew up in a place called Congleton in Cheshire – like, North West.

DR: Okay. North West. And you, Alex?

AS: In Cambridge. And a mixture of we used to live in a sort of suburb of Cambridge and then we moved to a village far out of Cambridge. I sort of had those two upbringings. Although I'm originally from London. So I grew up in – my early years was the East End of London, but it's a very distant memory.

DR: And what about your interests growing up and what led you to choose Kent as a place to go?

AS: I always loved music, I knew it was always something I loved to listen to, either classical music or music from the '60s, but I think I basically imbibed – one thing that was an inspiration for *Crocsmia* was just me listening to my dad's record collection a lot, and so I guess I inherited a lot of those things – I just loved listening to it. And I loved music in film, I was always a big fan of soundtracks and how music in cinema creates a sort of emotion in a way that it didn't often in plays that I was seeing. I was obviously addicted to theatre and I got really – I think the bit where I got really into devised theatre was that I saw *Spirit* by Improbable at a tiny theatre in Cambridge – I think it's since closed down now. I mean it was so small and I just didn't know theatre could be like that. From then on I was sort of hooked. I was getting into a lot of theatre stuff but theatre was always separate from music. I really fell in love with playing music when I just got into playing the piano and I just sort of taught myself a way of playing but a really idiosyncratic, you know, not trained at all. But like Dom was saying about therapy, I was working as a cleaner at the time and there was a room in the school that I was cleaning with a grand piano and I would go in there and I could bang like four hours at a time! Obviously not on shift but this was like when–

CB: Cleaning the keys again and again! [*Laughter.*]

AS: Yeah! You know, and it was so therapeutic but I never played with people until I went to university. I think I did a bit like Clare, I was applying for – like: 'I'm really into theatre so I'll apply for some drama courses', and I was doing those, sort of, monologues and it just didn't feel right and they could tell. And one of the guys did a really funny comment, he was like: 'Your monologues? No. But you did quite well in that physical bit', and it was just clear it just wasn't for me! But yeah, really into that academic side as well. So yeah, eventually I just chose Kent – it just sort of felt right for some reason. I feel like one of the times I started really playing music was us all in those early days because Dom and I were living together at uni, we were in a shared house, and Dom is just so good at going: 'Oh, here you go, here's a guitar, you play this chord and I'll do this.' And it was amazing, and I remember we did all sorts of random recordings and things like that. It was a very just sweet way of passing the time but with very low pressure and actually being a nice thing because I think music for a lot of people gets delivered in a pressurised way. So that was the formation of experimenting with things. And I think another thing that I said in those first chats when we were talking about doing *Crocsmia* was that I'd just seen – I think it was Arcade Fire, I'd just seen an amazing gig that they'd done – I didn't really know the band, I didn't know how big they were, but the energy in the audience just blew me away, and they were responding to the energy in the audience. So I just sort of felt like: 'I don't know how we are going to do it but I want to do a show where it matters so much to the audience what we're doing and we've got that much energy the audience feels compelled to give us the energy.' I just remember thinking: 'Oh gosh, if we could just tap into that way of being that would just be so exciting!' So much music that really resonates is theatrical – on stage they just had this amazing energy, they were running around



doing things, there were loads of really theatrical moments, it was just really inspiring. I remember when we were doing *Crocoscopia* one of the ways that we developed it was we did a gig in the student bar and it was like we were playing these kid characters, and we did a weird gig – I mean it was totally weird with the kids' band doing it, but it was so funny and exciting because of it being these characters doing it.

DR: Yeah.

AS: So it had this sort of funny energy and we often do do that, or do almost gigs first – that's normally one of the first things that we do when we're making something.

DR: I see. That's interesting.

AS: Yeah, we just do a random gig. I can remember quite a few of our shows at an early point we do a gig and you see how the music is connecting to the audience.

DR: And that's very clear in your work that there's this sense of ensemble authorship. But it's also interesting, Alex, that you said at the beginning that you wanted to direct but you also didn't choose the Directing specialism. So was that a conscious choice in some way? Why did you choose CPP as opposed to Directing in your case when you said you really wanted to direct?

AS: I think I just could never imagine myself doing the directors pathway even though that was a director's thing and I did really want to direct. But I suppose what was so freeing about the CPP thing is that you can do anything. We do have a sort of hybrid model. It's different on different shows but sometimes if we do have a director it's very much still a thing of: 'Well, that also means being like a bit of the writer as well.' But we are sort of fluid with those roles and you don't know at the beginning where the project's going but you just know that you've started a project and I really like that, although I think it's an amazing skill to do it the other way where you're directing an existing amazing play – it just wasn't as exciting. What really excited me was that we started the project and just going: 'Oh it would be great to work together and have that fun energy together. It would be so interesting to see what we come up with', and then we get to do all these different roles within it. Because I loved devising just because it gives you that sense of if you didn't like something you could change it because it's very hard to find classic text that don't have some sort of thing that you don't like but in devising you just change it. It's not a problem! [Laughter.]

DR: *Crocoscopia* was about family, but mostly a story told from the point of view of the kids, and two of them are twins and one is a younger sister, and they're kind of remembering their parents who, we find out eventually, have died. With *Crocoscopia* then, from what I understand, the departure point was this record collection that you found in this second hand shop.

AS: I think it was just the idea of records, this family record collection, and I was just going around charity shops buying interesting looking records and then bringing those in. We bought a second-hand record player and then we would play the records and react to the records, and the records really were the jumping off point, but then everything else came from that. Did we always say it was the family record collection? So maybe that led us down this sort of [route where] children characters emerged and then we thought: 'Their parents don't seem to be around much.' So then we were sort of investigating that, and then we developed a story which sort of sees them as they're orphans telling their story. Pretty much everything came out of these records that we just found by chance. So we were finding different things, we were playing different things, and we were doing a lot of exercises to music. And I think a lot of the early exercises that we were doing were just things like playing the music and then reacting to the music and taking it turns to react to the music in different ways. So we really built in that idea of the music even though it's recorded music but it's sort of coming from the stage and the performers were manipulating it and putting on the records, which is actually quite hard to do! It really felt organic. It was quite a long time period as well – it was the longest time I've worked on a show. Because it was, I think, we worked out it was 12 weeks. Now that wasn't full time but it was a lot of gestation, you know? I think we were rehearsing two or three times a week at least and constantly towards the end.



CB: I think we also taught each other songs that maybe we'd known from childhood and so there was a sense of us getting to know each other not just as performers but as musicians but not with a score or anything. It was just like an oral: 'Oh, I'll sing that line and you sing it back', bouncing off each other in that way.

AS: And those songs went into the show, some of those songs.

CB: Yeah! Some of those songs did go into the show. Yeah. And because we're children, you could just be so free with it because when you're a kid and you're singing songs or you're learning sounds you're not thinking: 'Oh, that's not the way you're supposed to do it', you're just following your instincts. And actually it was really exciting because it really felt – I don't know actually, Alex, how much you directed before that – but it really felt like Alex had all this stuff he wanted to try and there was just so – it just felt really exciting to be like: 'Wow, okay let's be these half fish people today, let's do this thing, let's draw to music.' It was a really exciting process and I remember it so fondly.

[00:22:40] SOLO AND SIDE ENDEAVOURS

DR: The piece that you made on your own, Clare – sorry to make a slight digression – what was the actual form of it?

CB: It was an exploration of angels. I don't know, I was just really fascinated by the idea of it and all its aspects but not just in the religious sense. And so I started to develop a map, like a tour, where people would go around and some places there was like headphone bits, and a lot of people were just standing in famous poses or in a statue of, or referencing, or angels hidden in bedrooms or all around the city. And yeah, at the very end I really wanted people to kind of have what is associated with sort of an angelic sound experience, and so the very last bit after they've been on this big tour walking themselves round various stations in Canterbury was in Greyfriars Gardens. There's this tiny little outhouse where the monks lived, really tiny, and in the bottom floor there was this chamber choir that sang for us and then you went upstairs and this lovely guy – who I still speak to now actually! – called Alex, different Alex, played a Benjamin Britten song on the harp, and he'd written it all out so people knew what he was playing. And then all the angels that had been statues around Canterbury all came into the other side of the garden because there's like two gardens. And so when you walked out of the music experience – and Dom and Alex were also part of the angel exhibition, so they were all sat on the other side when you came out. It's called *The Art of Watching* because I was fascinated by the idea of people looking out for people, and how you could be angelic in that sense even if you obviously aren't a real angel. I think I was thinking about it initially quite visually, but definitely sound and how that makes you feel became a big part of it.

DR: Dom, you did CPP in the year after.

DC: Yeah, so by the time it got to me the intake of students had swelled so much that they stopped doing individual options for the CPP students – and I think we were a group of nine because we were a group of friends and there was no easy way to divide us, and we wanted to try working as a big group. And it was called *Big Love or The Dark and Violent World of Mr Fightalot*. Because there were so many people I think it took the structure that everyone had a bit of a character and that was all threaded together. And I think one of the main things that I ended up doing was basically borrowing Camille O'Sullivan's interpretation of a Tom Waits song called *Misery Is the River of the World*. It is a shameless bit of theft really, although I suppose she herself had stolen it, but I definitely took her version and did it – I made my own backing track and did it I think in a dress, not exactly in drag. That was my contribution! [*Laughter.*]

CB: I remember it being very impassioned, your performance. I remember you standing on a chair. I saw it at Lounge on the Farm so I don't know–

DC: Yeah. Well it's an all-or-nothing song!

DR: So then eventually you all graduated – Shamira included eventually, after you Dom – and then I



saw a few of your gigs. You did a gig for Forest Fringe one year in Edinburgh. What I'm getting at is *Operation Greenfield* came in my memory as the next show, theatre show, right? *Sporadical* was kind of theatrical but I saw it more as a gig than as a theatre piece.

CB: That's interesting that you would see that as a gig more than theatre because it had a narrative, but definitely it was mainly songs just strung together by a narrative. We called it a sort of 'cardboard folk opera', a sort of epic cardboard folk opera. But when you mentioned gig theatre earlier I was thinking: 'I guess I'd put, if I had to put our own shows in that camp, which ones are clearly gig theatre?' And I think I'd put a show called *Wail* in that camp, which was about whale song, but definitely there are loads of other shows that I guess you could say: 'Well, that was—' Like the recent one we did at BAC called *The Future* – that was like a TED Talk meets a sort of prog-rocky kind of gig. But yeah, where's the line between 'is that a theatre show with songs in it?' I guess with other things I see I'm like: 'Oh, yeah, that's clearly gig theatre', but I'm not very good at, maybe, working out when I would apply it to us. Even though I'm sure we – have we described our work as that before?

AS: I don't think we ever have—

CB: No, we haven't.

AS: I think of that as a bit of a newer phrase – I mean, I don't think that was swimming around when we were just starting out. I think we had done a lot more gigs, theatrical gigs at the Shunt Lounge. They're more what I think of as gig theatre. But then a lot of our shows do just have gigs in them randomly, like *Operation Greenfield* ends with a gig.

[00:26:37 to 00:28:58] 'I Am the True Vine' from *Operation Greenfield* (2010)

[00:28:58] TOWARDS 'GIG THEATRE': *OPERATION GREENFIELD* (2010)

DR: That was quite spectacular actually. Was that 2010, *Operation Greenfield*?

AS: Yeah. Yeah, that's right.

DR: I think that that's probably – maybe not that year but soon after – I heard the term 'gig theatre' being retrospectively applied to that show. Somehow – I mean, obviously 'gig theatre' as a term came from journalists primarily, didn't it? It wasn't necessarily introduced by artists but it kind of became attached to a number of works using live music the way you do.

AS: Yeah. It's fascinating, isn't it? Because I think there's more of a conscious thing now about it. I definitely think you can retrospectively say that some of our stuff has really been gig theatre if I understand it right, but yeah, we weren't applying that at the time. And it felt quite fun and it felt like we were doing something a bit – fairly new to us as well. It was a new thing that we were doing and really fun to just have music be so prominent. But I was really excited about how we were using songs, recorded songs as well, and being to reference them and start singing along to them. And whereas *Crocospia* there'd definitely been lots of music, *Operation Greenfield* felt like it was completely about music and about teenagers getting obsessed with music. Music was just happening non-stop and then either being created or listened to and then sung along to, and all that.

DC: I mean, there's a whole other project that we did that was very much a gig which was called *Goose Party*. The idea was to go to Edinburgh not as *Little Bulb* but we developed a show, it was like three sets: there was a folky set and then an angsty rock set and then a crazy party set, and we did costume changes between each one. I think we were very much thinking of that as being like a band project but it was definitely read as a show.

AS: That was gig theatre!

CB: You can't say that wasn't gig theatre!

DC: There were a lot of theatrics but I think maybe it read as a bit more performance art than we had imagined when we were working on it?



AS: Yeah, in the way some rock bands bleed over into performance art. I think it was more like in that space.

CB: I think we do perform as a band but pretty much always, unless it's a wedding or a friend's party, it's normally always in a theatrical context. So if we were performing it at a festival we'd be the theatre tent most likely. Or we performed on the Riverside Stage at the National but again as a band of ourselves that we call The Hot Club that came out of the *Orpheus* project. If you saw us as you walked past you wouldn't think: 'That's a theatre company!', necessarily, but it's definitely on stages associated with theatre.

DR: Then the story of *Operation Greenfield* is kind of a rite of passage in a way, isn't it? It's set in a village – in fact earlier when Dom was talking about his teenage years, the reason I asked where you were from is because I remember that show and obviously it's a very different setting that you grew up in Muswell Hill. What was the story of *Operation Greenfield*? Just very briefly.

DC: There's a few stories playing out. Each character's kind of got their journey through it, but there's some teenagers starting a band and entering their local village talent competition, and at the same time there's someone new to the village who's come from France who's joined their friendship group. And yeah, it's definitely about the band forming with this new person being a bit of a cat among the pigeons.

AS: And it's about, I guess, those classic things of being young, or teenage, that they're expressing themselves through music and they're coming together and they're dealing with the ups and downs of friendship and tentatively displaying their sexuality in the world, and about how they negotiate that. The village life is sort of – it's safe, it's somewhere in middle England but we don't know where and – yeah, it's sort of about them all trying to express themselves, I think. It's that sort of painful teenage thing of it's not always coming out right, and they're falling in love with each other and not being able to fully express it properly. But it's all coming out in the music, so the passion's all there in the music.

DC: And if that's the story I think the theme in a nutshell – I always remember Alex, you saying that you wanted to make a show that explored Christianity without alienating either Christians or atheists. So there was definitely an ambition to try and make a meeting ground because increasingly I think it felt like Christianity was an easy target in culture, especially in subversive culture, and that that might feel alienating and definitely wanted to explore that fertile ground, but without really picking either side of the argument. Would you say that's kind of right, AI?

AS: It definitely was because I sort of felt like I grew up in a village and I did hang around at churches a lot and was part of that culture despite not being religious myself. Sometimes you do get immersed with it culturally and just thinking Christians and Christianity they get – like it's sort of an easy target sometimes, especially in comedy, and that doesn't speak to the complexity of it and the life and the culture of it. It is also the case that if you're gay and Christian it's very challenging, you've got these other set of challenges. So Shamira's character, Alice, is in love with Eugénie's character and it's a hard thing to process because I wanted to draw in both sets of... It wasn't like a political piece or an argument piece. It was just about the characters but I think we did hopefully get the line right and I think maybe some people felt it was a bit strange the line that we were taking. Because I think some people were desperate to know if we were all Christians, and then other people were not sure if we were being disrespectful, which we absolutely weren't. I felt like we weren't and we'd got the right side of that line but we were basically in that sort of area, which is a complex area.

DR: Dom just summarised it in terms of this outsider coming in and it's kind of also about belonging and community in a way, isn't it? And the way in which communities are built in those village environments is very different to how it works in cities and so on. But also it gave you a broader repertoire musically, presumably, that you were able to draw on different kinds of music in making this show.

AS: Yeah.



[00:36:45] INSTRUMENTS AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

DC: *Sporadical* and *Operation Greenfield* we started at a similar time and that was definitely a time of musical training. For Clare and I it was about reengaging with instruments that we played a lot in childhood as well as taking on new musical challenges. Yeah, and the same for Eugénie [Pastor]. I think she'd played a lot of flute and little bit of bass before so she was on a big learning challenge for the bass guitar.

AS: And that was sort of autobiographical: those things came about autobiographically. We were just zoning into the story. I mean that was basically the plot, wasn't it? Sorry Dom, I interrupted.

DC: No, not at all. But with Shamira, she played a bit of harmonica, a tiny bit of keyboard, I don't know, maybe a chord of guitar, but really hadn't fully embraced an instrument as in, like: 'Ah this is my main instrument.' Perhaps you'd say harmonica, but I remember going to a music shop with her, we were all there, and it was a bit like in *Harry Potter* where they are choosing their wands, you know? We were in that amazing music shop, I think it's called Ray Man in Camden, and it was really like: 'Wow! Our friend's going to choose her instrument!', and we were all picking different ones up and saying: 'Maybe you'd be good at this!?' What she ended up gravitating towards was – I don't think anything was purchased that day at the shop but there was an accordion – Alex, that you'd found it on eBay?

AS: I think I found it, yeah. I just thought it would be good for *Sporadical*, maybe as a folk opera.

DC: Yeah, and she just fell in love with it. Right from early days of the company we established a thing of – on in nearly every show someone is learning an instrument or sometimes we are all learning instruments. And I think definitely coming out of university there was a sense that our actual contact hours had been quite slim in terms of training and we were very keen to develop what skills we did have. And so a large part of a lot of our rehearsals are just doing rudimentary instrument practice or more advanced studies. But yeah, after that show we had a bunch of songs that we could play as a band that were all really related to that show. And then people would often say: 'Oh, you do a lot of music in your shows, could you do a gig in our theatre foyer?' And we'd always end up putting together these really odd set lists – quite a lot of our early years every set would have included some really random songs that we'd learnt specifically for that occasion because we wanted to do the gig but we didn't necessarily have the repertoire. The skills that we did have were kind of newly learnt and specific to a show.

DR: That's really interesting, so actually that journey in relation to *Crocospia* where I don't remember you playing any instruments in the show, I just remember the records. And then you obviously as a company made the conscious decision that you wanted to commit to live musical performance in your shows.

DC: Instruments were in the room in *Crocospia*. I often had a guitar in, Shamira had her harmonica but I think we just started to feel as soon as we played the instruments we didn't look credible as kids anymore, it kind of shattered that – so they were on the verge on inclusion.

AS: There was a cappella singing, and there was quite a few a cappella songs. We had to reduce it to the ones that felt right but then, well *Operation Greenfield* is all about being a teenage band so it just made sense to have the instruments. And I think because we denied ourselves that in *Crocospia* we were really up for it and there's like the evolution of instruments as well – there's that fun moment where Eugénie gets her bass. They get presents for Christmas, there's a scene where they get their new instruments, they all plug in and stuff. Another fun thing about *Operation Greenfield*, it was the first time that I can remember us was working on an ambitious cover because we had Gorecki, the symphony cover at the end – and also it was our first or what I think of it as our more complicated harmony work looking at the Taizé song.

CB: Yeah, that's true.

AS: That was a real delight and I just loved having the technical challenge of you doing those harder pieces. It always gives you something to do. There's always the musical well to get water from. And



then that can make you think about – I think it just gives you longer to think about the characters and about what the sequencing should be and what the narrative should be. I think that feels like it emerges after lots of just drilling and not just music.

DR: And you said earlier, Alex, that there was a sense of autobiographical decision-making going on there in terms of the instruments. Was *Operation Greenfield* in any way consciously working with any of your autobiographies in terms of generating material?

AS: I think there is a bit of that in there but it's quite subtle. We have a bit of a company mantra that whatever's going on in our lives is basically what the show is about. I think *Crocoshmia* was about a family coming together moment and that was sort of like us coming together. And the plot of *Operation Greenfield* is someone new comes along and that's when Eugénie joined – we'd known Eugénie from, she was on an exchange year at Kent. That all went into the narrative. On those shows that I direct I sometimes think there is definitely an autobiographical lens of viewing it. I think it's quite hard to tell that that's what is going on some of the times. I just like that it feels very personal when I see the shows. A lot of it feels really personal or autobiographical in some ways, just because I think of some of the pathways the narrative goes down. But we're not in that genre of: 'This is my life and I'm going to tell you about it!'

DC: But Duška, to answer that question another way and to go back to what you were saying about when you were asking if I grew up in a village, I think I see it similar as AI – there's autobiography hanging around the show but you're not always drawing just from your own autobiography and your autobiographies become a shared pool to draw from. So I had very little experience with Christianity and I didn't grow up in a village, but I did have an experience of being in a lot of teenage bands and the awkwardness of those rehearsals. It felt like I was mining that seam of autobiography alongside a world that felt very unfamiliar to me. And I think sometimes the things that I was unfamiliar with I'd say: 'Really? You know, was it like this at Christian clubs?', and sometimes Clare and Alex would be like: 'Oh, yeah, no that's very credible!' [*Laughter.*] And so yeah, you could kind of help each other, as long as somebody's had a lived experience they can lend that authenticity to the others who don't have it.

AS: Yeah and I think it's sort of nice weaving it in as like subliminal code because I think we wanted to create a new fiction. We wanted it to feel like it was a new thing but we fed it with a lot of real things. It does blur a line, but I don't know, it just felt like the correct way of creating it.

DR: And okay, this is not such a central issue, I was just curious about it because you mentioned autobiographical references there.

CB: What is autobiographical, Duška, in some ways is the instruments that Dom, Eugénie and I played as teenagers, were what we played. Alex basically said: 'What did you play as teenagers?' I said: 'Oh, I started to learn the drums and I've always loved singing', and Dom was like: 'Well, I have been playing the guitar forever.' We were so like: 'We hope Eugénie plays bass', and when she said we were like: 'Yeah, amazing! We've got a bassist!' And bonusly she'd done a bit of flute. So actually it really helped to get into your teenage self by playing the instrument that your teenage self had a bash at. So that was – in that sense it was.

AS: We did do some hilarious exercises where it was like: 'Be yourself as a teenager talking about various things.' It all sort of fed into it and actually was quite sort of fun doing it. The other thing was we had this weird sort of texture of mathematics and precision and at first that felt like: 'Gosh, it's so stylised', but then weirdly it felt like it found its way organically to being like an analogy for just how awkward teenagers can be. And there was moving around the stage very regimentedly. That was another weird thing, I don't fully know where that came from although we were using that Philip Glass *Einstein on the Beach*. There's that classic counting, you know: 'One, two... three, four', you know, that sort of thing and that's sort of heavily in the sound track, isn't it?

CB: Maybe what I should quickly say, Duška, and I'm not sure if this will be helpful or not, is that – and I hope you don't mind me saying this AI, but sometimes Alex – what I find amazing is how personal things become in a way things that maybe are autobiographical come out of the process, but the



process is sometimes Alex giving us a box of things or an exercise or an invitation and out of that we fill it with ourselves, with the character that we've created. And then altogether that fuses to become something that feels really personal and really truthful but is invented at the same time – and Alex, there's no way he could have known what we could have put into that task, and yet always feel like in retrospect I'm like: 'Alex how did you know!?' But it's just random.

[00:47:52] MAKING ORPHEUS (2013)

DR: Great. I want to also then go forward a little bit to *Orpheus*. I know I'm probably skipping some important works here but I was thinking of *Orpheus* earlier when Dom mentioned at the beginning of this conversation about how little precision mattered to you. I don't know, that wasn't the word you used, you used something else but, when you were talking about –

DC: Yeah, just that I found that a very daunting approach to music.

DR: And yet then you find yourself in a situation where you have to play Django Reinhart and actually be convincing as him! How did that come about?

DC: I always say that I think at some point I remember saying to Alex: 'Oh, you know what would be fun, like in ten years' time we should, you know, just practise loads and do a biopic of Django.' Maybe we were both saying that because we were both big Django fans, and then–

AS: No, I think that's you who said that, Dom, because you – I mean I'd sort of listened to Django when I was younger. That was sort of another thing that I used to love. But you would – you actually knew the songs and you'd written lyrics to them, you were heavily invested and you'd done that, sort of – hadn't you done that sort of training in Cuba?

DC: Yeah, I did study music in Cuba in my gap year, and I did have a kind of Django Reinhardt band out there for a few months with a wonderful Haitian violinist. I was obsessed with Django but playing with very bad technique! And when this BAC commission came through and they really said we could do anything and it was on Alex to come up with the idea and then, well AI, perhaps at some point you could say more about the rest of the idea and how that came to you, but basically AI said: 'Yeah, I think we should do the story of Orpheus and I think we should use, you know, the music of Django and, Dom, I think you should play Django.' And I had one of my characteristic actor fits. I was like: 'No! Wait! What are you talking about!? We'll never be ready! It will take far too long!' I was terrified! I think I went home and immediately began begrudgingly practicing, like: 'Well, if we're going to do this then I'm not going to waste a moment, but I think it's a terrible idea but I'll start practising anyway!' And for ages–

AS: Poor us! We had so much further more to go, because Dom already knew quite a lot of the songs and could play I think through osmosis fairly well. When we started Dom was musically directing the show, and we had these very sweet jazz circles and we were going round and Dom was helping us to do jazz improv – I've never done that and I think quite a lot people had never played jazz. So poor us, Dom! You already knew quite a lot.

DC: Yeah, it's true. I mean Clare learnt double bass for the show and Alex learnt clarinet for the show, everyone had huge musical challenges and I would say in terms of the guitar – yeah, I end up playing guitar in most Little Bulb shows but that felt a bit like learning a new instrument because it was a completely different technique. There was a lot of learning to undo habits. There was a lot of moments that felt really like the basics of an instrument like, how do you hold a plectrum, how do you strike the strings? And it's an ongoing journey because people in that genre dedicate their life to it, and there's a lot of incredibly good, essentially amateur players. They don't gig, you know, they might gig but it's not how they earn their living basically, but they just are so into the music and it's so codified that their level of playing is astonishing, and any jazz player, or gypsy jazz player, will always say that they're on the first rung of the ladder. Even from the first show, like when we opened the show I was approaching the songs in a very different way from five years later. Because I did as much as I could in terms of approaching this technique and then we opened, and I fell back to my teenage guitar technique



because you sometimes have that in shows – when you perform it a different instinct kicks in, and it took me ages to execute the right technique in performance and it's very tricky!

[00:52:50 to 00:55:22] 'La Valse d'Orphée' from *Orpheus* (2013)

CB: What I think is amazing about music is that it must be a bit like how Shakespearean actors feel about Shakespeare. There's no point in which you're like: 'Yeah, I get it, I know what it means.' Every age you are it means something new, it means something different, you can perform something a hundred times and suddenly in the hundred and one-th you find this new colour in the language or this new meaning in it. And I personally really wrestle – and I've been thinking about this a lot actually, often me and Dom have debates about this – but I really struggle with discipline because I feel music feels like it comes from my hips and my heart and my mouth and it's very organic. And I tried as a teenager to do that. I can read music and I did have lessons but I didn't find that that was like a natural outlet. My family aren't musical but my mum and my dad love dancing but they couldn't read a musical note. So I feel it in a certain way and I often think I fight against the – but I also know that to get anywhere better than you do, it takes hours and hours and hours of practice. So I end up in this sort of halfway house thing. Another interesting thing about doing *Orpheus* was that we did a lot of training at a place called the [Le] QuecumBar in Latchmere in London, which is just down the road from Battersea Arts Centre, in this place which was like seemingly–

AS: Which by fortune was, it's like the only–

CB: The only gypsy jazz bar right down the road from the BAC!

AS: That happened to be next door.

DR: Amazing!

CB: But speaking about technique versus performance what I found fascinating about there is that every Tuesday they would have this open mic night. We basically spent ages training trying to be a legitimate gypsy jazz band as the thing that we were working on first and foremost, and then, alongside, the story. But there there'd be, like Dom was saying, these musicians that were unbelievable, but they're playing for free and you would never have heard of them and you'll probably never hear of them unless you go there because it's this very intimate, isolated but incredibly talented. But what I love about theatre is that sometimes a not so technically perfect musician can be elevated to this amazing feeling. I think we're interested in this kind of like battle between: 'Why is it that some musicians or performers are technically amazing but they make you feel nothing, and some people who maybe are not the best but you just have this thing where theatre can take music up a level?' And it's really opened me up to being more playful when Alex is like: 'Oh, can you give this a go?' Past me would be like: 'I'm not a musician, I can't play, I'm not allowed', but it's very much like take anything, get a pencil, anyone can draw. There're obviously 'righter' ways if you want to learn that way but there's also a billion other ways and yeah, I need to be more disciplined. I'm fascinated by using your passions and where your 'organicness' takes you with music in that respect.

DR: That was amazing, Clare! That was a kind of bravura performance in itself! [*Laughter.*] Thank you! You said so many interesting things in what you've just said, and kind of anticipated some of my questions – I was going to ask you about what music means to you in terms of theatre-making, and that theatre takes music up a level was quite an interesting insight. Maybe to just bring this to a conclusion somehow and to maybe reflect a little bit on how you as a company and as a band have now existed for over ten years, it's nearly 12 years. And I'm interested in what you feel has contributed to that longevity and also you now have very specific roles in the running of the company. I've seen that division of labour has happened in some very grown-up ways now as part of having to just maintain the company. And then of course certain life decisions have had to be made about where you live and how you live and so on. And I'm interested in how that's a factor in keeping the company going and what your work has become now, and how you work as a band and as a company, under current circumstances?

AS: Well, we're definitely in a different moment from when we started. I have a child, that's crazy! Yeah,



it feels like we are in a different chapter but I just got a sense that you know – you just know nothing when you're beginning, you're just doing everything off instinct. All the decisions, like when I think back to those early shows and just think: 'It was all instinct'. It wasn't planned. None of it was planned and I think it feels like you're just constantly on a bit of tidal wave and I don't think our university training was about the practicalities of how you run a company. I mean obviously it has to be about other stuff, but I feel like we've learnt a lot in the last ten years or 12 years and made loads of mistakes and therefore learned from all the mistakes and there's just been loads of fun moments along the way as well. So I feel like we've had a lot of fun, we've made a lot of mistakes, we've made a lot of shows, you know! We've done a lot. But I think if we're in the beginning of a new chapter it feels like we're a bit more in control of that process, you know? Just slightly more.

DR: Do you still keep learning new instruments as part of the new phase, or are you just settling into the skills that you have already?

DC: Oh no, always learning! In 2015, which is now a while ago, for *Extravaganza Macabre* we all decided to try and learn brass instruments. I still aspire to continue that challenge.

AS: I'm learning the trumpet, Duška!

DR: Oh, great! [*Laughter.*]

CB: I've recently acquired a cello and I know Alex has always wanted to learn the cello as well so hopefully we can share that.

AS: Can you give me lessons, please?

CB: Yeah, I mean, yeah...

AS: You learn it and then give me the lessons! I adore the cello. So what I think we may do a lot of is we tend to do genre-hopping quite a lot. The last show we did was a rural tour around village halls. It's folk music but inspired by the Scots/Irish migration to America and then country music – and we'd never touched that genre, the country music genre. That was just a real joy just to try and – you only have the given time so I think our mission is to try and get as good technically as we can in the time and then to use theatre to hopefully get that effort across to the audience, you know? And obviously it is, you know, like Dom was saying, you could just do the one genre all your life and still be a learner. Who said that thing about it being like a bottomless well? I feel like there's – or the well is eternally deep, whoever you are there'll always be something more to learn. That is very offputting – I mean that is very daunting, but theatre is a magical way of pretending that isn't a barrier. So I think we try and go in saying: 'What if that sort of wasn't a barrier or what if we can pretend it wasn't a barrier?' And it's fascinating how an audience will receive that. It can get you to or nearer to the place than you would without the theatre. I think we come at it from a theatre angle but we love music and we love playing it. I just feel like the best and most captivating musicians have an innate sense of – they have something to communicate to you and you're glad that they're doing it and you're glad that they're talking to you in a way that feels really necessary. The technique is very useful if the technique is what helps the communication. But where it doesn't help, it isn't really important. I do also find it amazing that anyone who's really pushing themselves technically, there is something really captivating in that, in the same way you see people do extreme sports. The spirit goes: 'Ah, this is important!', because someone is risking something and they're doing something amazing. So, I think virtuosity has that element to it, that sort of it's someone really doing something so you can get caught up in that. But I don't think in of itself the technique is that important. It could be the most important but it doesn't have to be – I don't know, that's how I think about it.

DR: Great. Thank you so much. It does feel like we went into detail with some of those things and then we had to zoom out a bit and see the bigger picture, but it's extremely useful! It's just been really, really helpful to get a completely different perspective on this and to hear all your beautiful articulations of what it is that you do – so thank you so much for that.

AS: Thank you, Duška.



CB: Yeah. Thank you Duška, it's been really lovely!

AS: Good luck with this project. I mean it does sound really fascinating!

Transcription by Tom Colley

Clips Summary

[00:10:01 to 00:11:51] 'Thank You for the Music' from *Wail* (2016)

[00:26:37 to 00:28:58] 'I Am the True Vine' from *Operation Greenfield* (2010)

[00:52:50 to 00:55:22] 'La Valse D'Orphée' from *Orpheus* (2013)

Audio available at <https://www.auralia.space/gallery4-littlebulb/>.

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