



*Pursued by a Bear
Productions
present...*

Directing in Ordinary & Extraordinary Times

Rosamunde Hutt, Artistic Director of Pursued By A Bear
shares her rehearsal process

Created as part of Hertfordshire Year of Culture 2020

Hertfordshire
2020
Year of Culture





Rosamunde Hutt, Artistic Director (credit Tude Euba)

Context

When 2020 started I had exciting projects in drama schools under way and the hope of a cherished new play for Pursued By A Bear finally hitting the stage after a richly creative period of research and development.

From January to June I directed scenes from Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art; a workshop production of Romeo and Juliet at the Italia Conti Academy, which came to an abrupt end because of Covid-19; and a production of Caryl Churchill's Top Girls for East 15 School of Acting, which we completed.

That's a myriad of characters, relationships, and enormous themes, a multitude of historical and modern contexts, and an abundance of rich poetic text.

By the opening of the East 15 show, which we delivered via Zoom, the world had turned upside down and we had gone into lockdown.

The extraordinary times had begun.



Anna Reynolds, Writer



Helen Chadwick, Composer (credit Michael Mears)



Grant Watson, Editor & Director

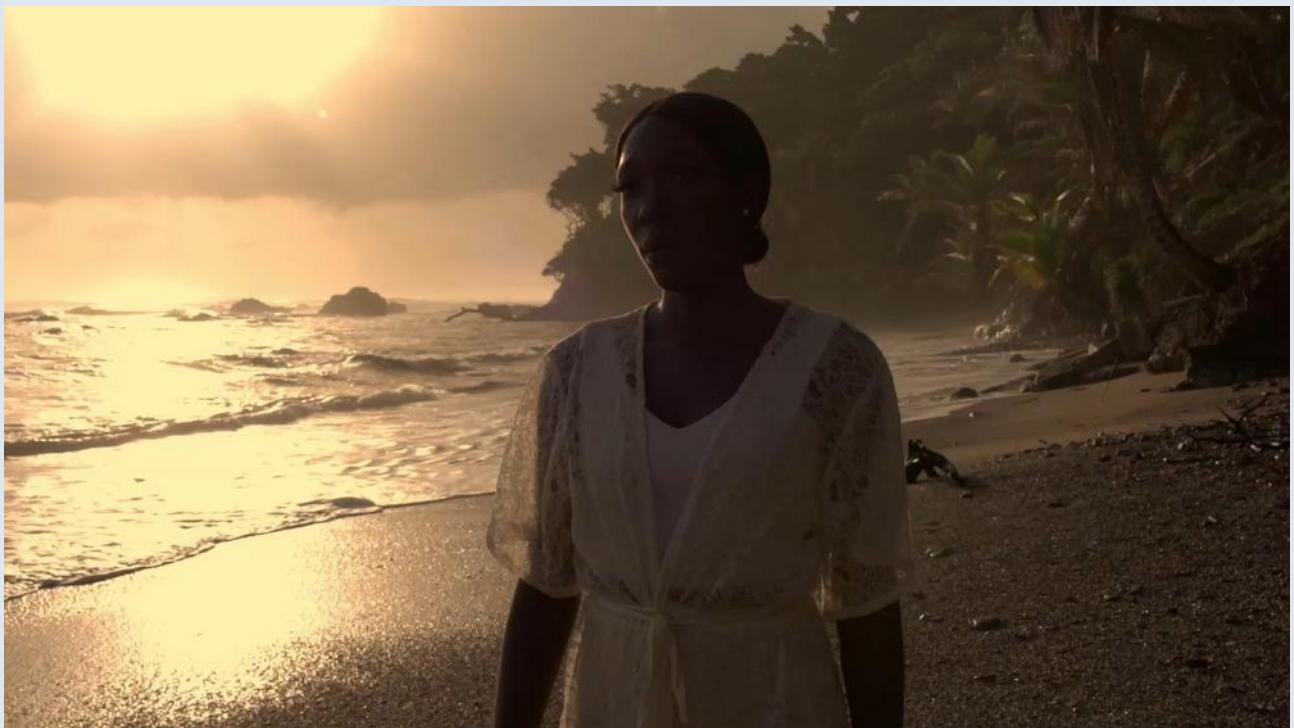
From Stage To Screen

All the normal rules of engagement went out of the window and, by early summer, with Pursued By A Bear Chair Thomas Kell, Project Manager Katy Silverton, and creative artists Helen Chadwick and Grant Watson, I found myself embarking on the creation of Nothing on Earth: Shorts, 6 brand new digital plays, ‘theatre on film’, written by St Albans based writer Anna Reynolds.

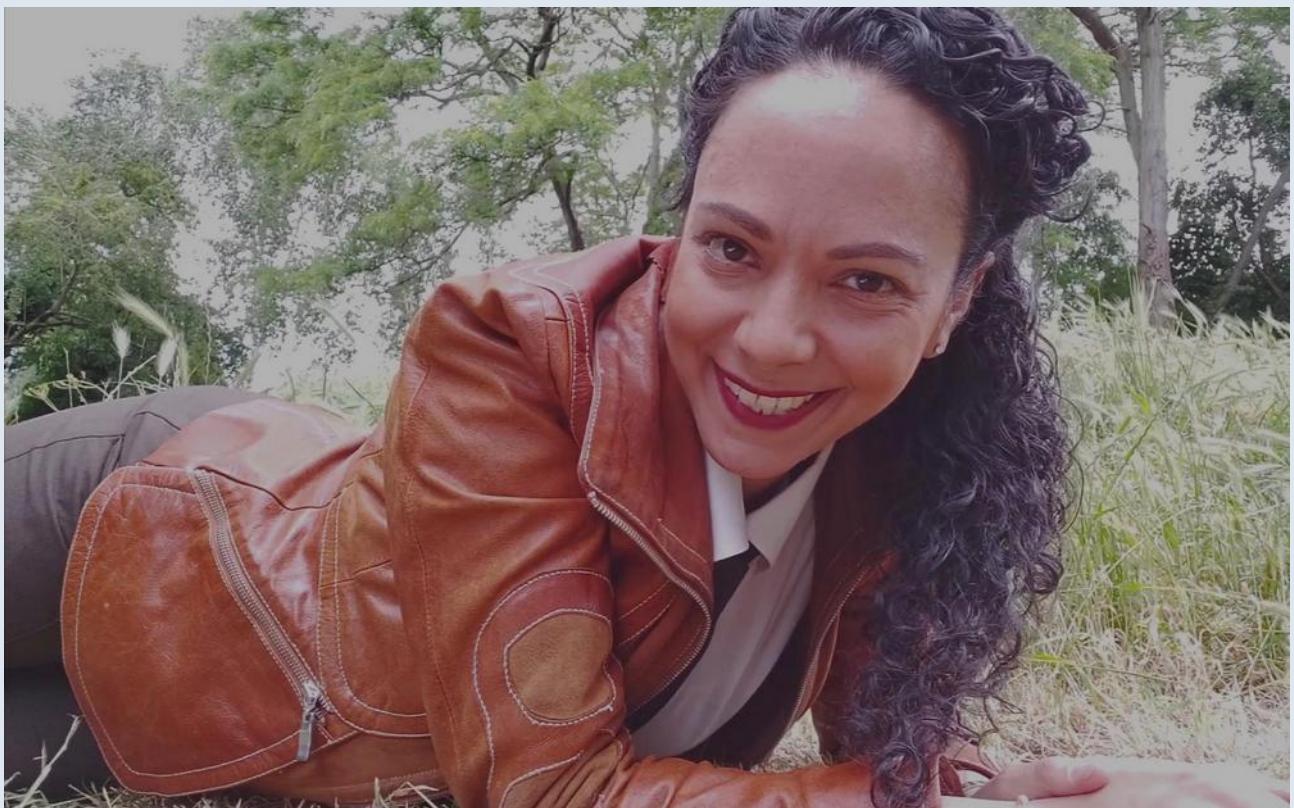
Before the start of lockdown, as part of the Hertfordshire Year of Culture 2020, we had planned an autumn tour of Anna’s new play Nothing on Earth, celebrating trail-blazing historical Hertfordshire Heroines who collide in time and space with a 21st century millennial who is in crisis, but, with all theatres closed, this was no longer possible.

Inspired by the content of Nothing on Earth – women taking risks, defying stereotypes, refusing to take no for an answer – Anna began to write a series of new plays with flight as the central theme.

Very grateful to be supported by a grant from Arts Council England’s Emergency Response Fund and a commission from the University of Hertfordshire Creative Arts we took off into the unknown.



Chanel Glasgow, 'How To Space'



Géhane Strehler, 'Learning To Fly'

Starting Rehearsals in Ordinary Times

It might seem that the sale of the beloved Cherry Orchard is a million miles away from the dinner party which descends into chaos in Top Girls or the fatal fights on the hot and dusty streets of Verona in Romeo and Juliet but essentially my process with the actors on each project remains the same.

We just start.

In a circle. Share names. Then, all shake hands with as many people as you can; look each other in the eye and say 'Hello my name is Chanel' or 'Suzanne' or 'Safiyya'; meet everyone. Back to the circle.

Then, all shake hands as quick as you can, with as many people as you can; look each other in the eye and say 'Hello Shalini' or 'Nia' or 'Géhane'; greet everyone. Back to the circle.

Quick as you can; keep it safe; touch everywhere you see the colour blue – on jeans, tracksuits, trainers; white – jackets, T shirts, socks; yellow – a pattern on a scarf or a shirt; engage with everyone. Back to the circle.



Nia Davies, 'How To Build A Plane'



Shalini Peiris, 'How To Live, or The Trouble With Women...'

Getting To Know Each Other

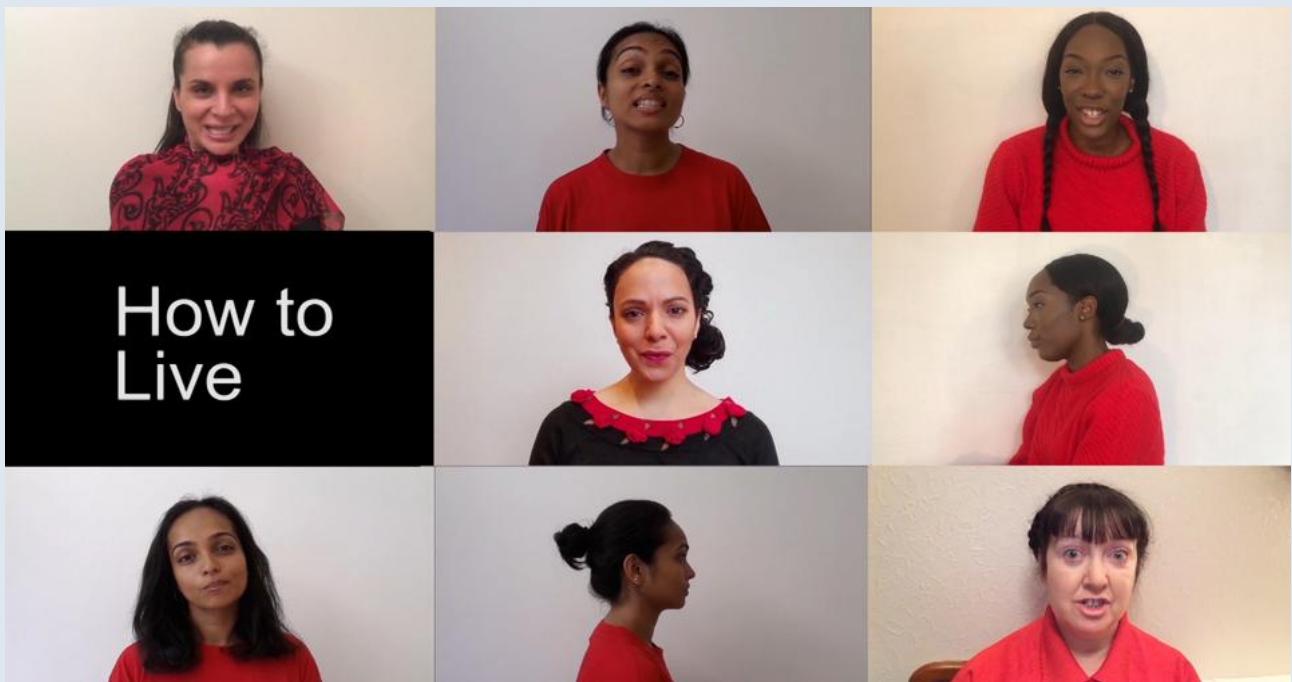
Everyone is slightly out of breath, a little more connected.
We keep playing the ice breaking games.

All those who are wearing something new into the centre of the circle and out again; all those into the centre of circle and out who are wearing a watch, earrings, contact lenses, who love singing, was born outside the UK, is an only child, has been to Romania, speaks Hindi, has performed in Ibsen's 'A Doll's House', can play the accordion, can dance the fandango, likes curry, pizza, fish and chips.

Gradually the questions become more personal: in twos:
When's your Birthday? What's your Birthplace? What does your first name mean?

Why were you given that name? Tell your partner – 'My name means Rose of the World and my mother liked the piece of music Rosamunde'. Tell us all the story of your partner's name.

Make links to the play being rehearsed - Romeo means Pilgrim, Lyuba means Love. Why did Shakespeare and Chekhov choose those names?



Suzanne Ahmet, Nia Davies, Chanel Glasgow, Géhane Strehler & Shalini Peiris, 'How To Live or The Trouble With Women Is...'



Suzanne Ahmet, 'How To Land'

Mapping The World

And, with thanks to theatre and education expert Cath Greenwood for passing this on to me;

Imagine the room is the world map; London or wherever you may be, is at the centre, Australia is to the right, the States to the left.

Where were you born? Place yourself on the map. Your parents? Move to where they were born. Your grandparents? Move to where they were born. So, you are placing yourself on the map in answer to each question.

Actors and artists often traverse the whole room, their families having travelled worldwide through the generations; others stay in one place ‘my grandparents were born in a village in Pakistan, my parents were born in that village in Pakistan’ but then find themselves on the move, ‘but I was born in Bradford, my son in London’.

Emotional connections start to kick in and a deeper conversation begins especially pertinent if the play is dealing with questions of identity or intra-cultural themes. An experience of ensemble practice and making connections is building up, which we will draw on throughout rehearsal.



Suzanne Ahmet, 'How To Land'



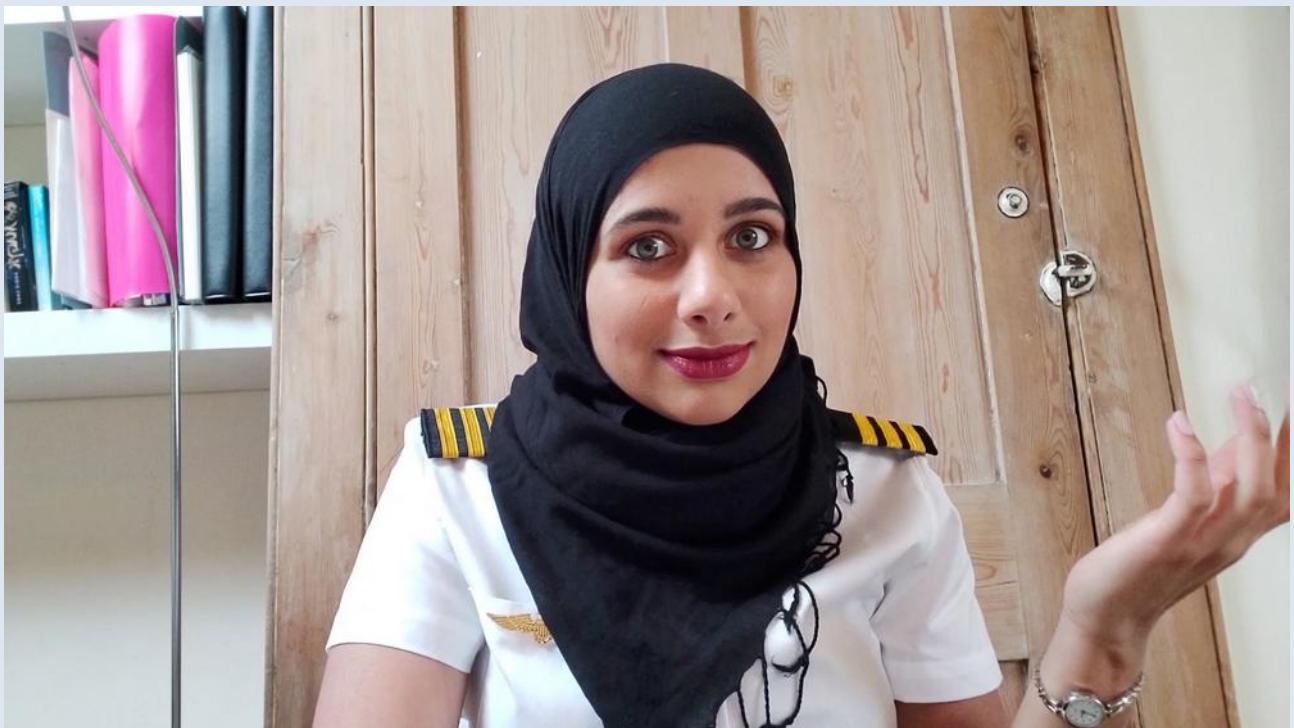
Nia Davies, 'How To Build A Plane'

The Read Through

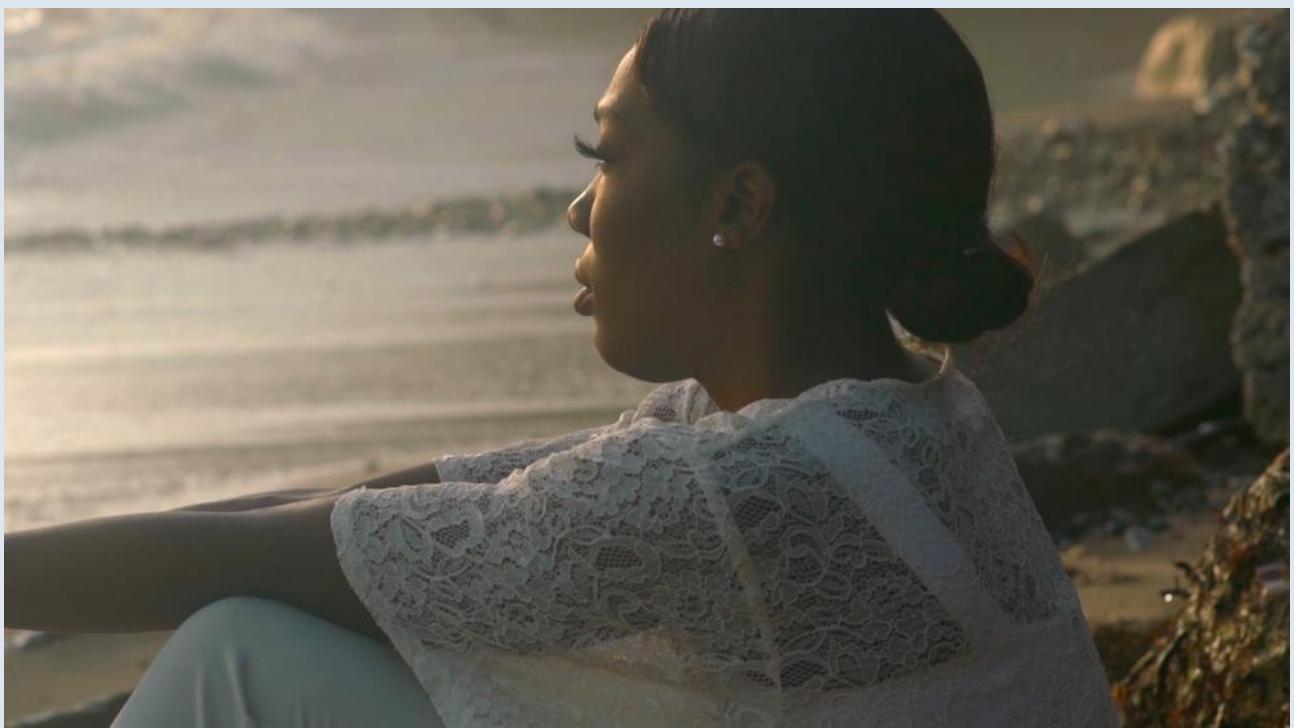
Before we start the read through I often ask the cast to physicalise the most powerful moments they have noted having read the script prior to rehearsal, like a sculpture or a photograph. What touched you? Made you laugh? Disturbed you?

I then ask the cast to bring the play to life as much as they can when they read, strike sparks off each other, find the wit and the pace. Sometimes I ask the actors to change places at the end of each scene so we can start to experience the ebb and flow of the play's rhythm. Or to change places when a character enters or leaves the space so we catch sight of the arrivals and departures in this world.

It's only a few hours since we all first met over coffee and croissants, or more often than not nowadays, fruit and large swigs of water. We share instinctive reflections after the reading; swiftly discussing the following topics. What were the most striking images in the play? What is at its heart, what is it about? Have you any questions about the text?



Safiyya Ingar, 'How To Take Off'



Chanel Glasgow, 'How To Space'

Creating The Mood

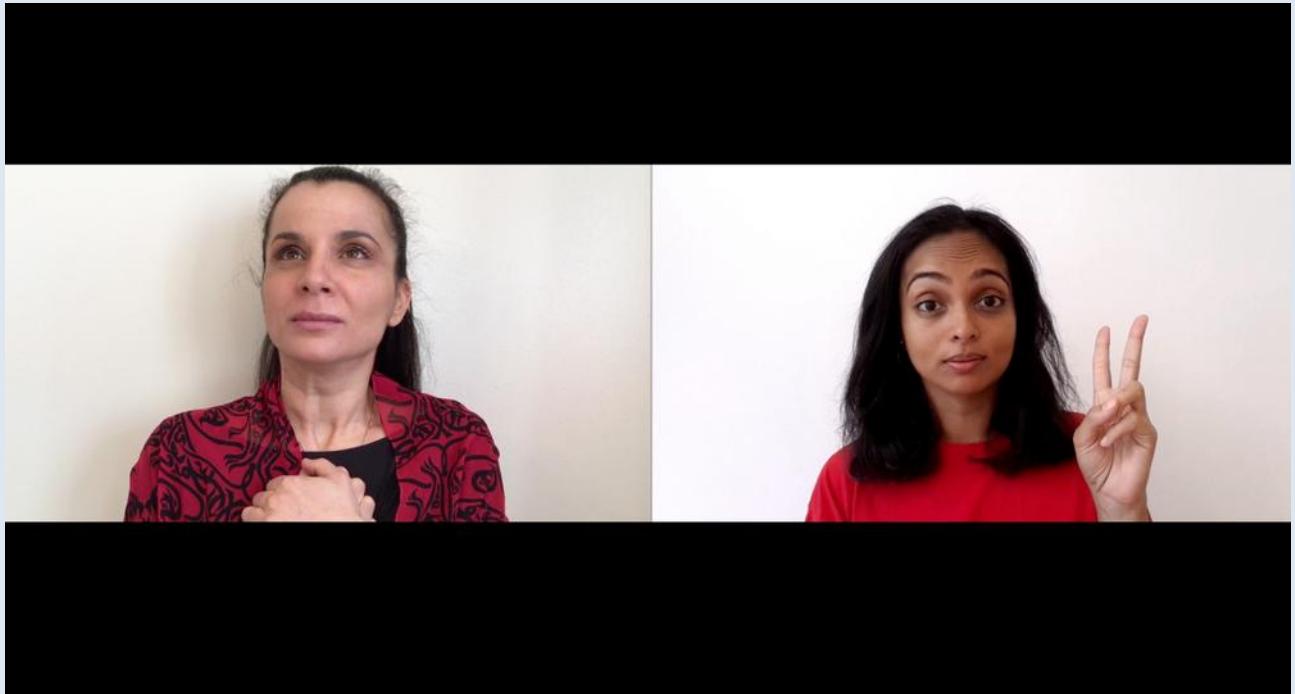
If there is very little time, e.g. for a rehearsed reading, we try as a team to create the mood straightaway, e.g. setting up the necessary sound pictures such as the chanting of a crowd as Mercutio mocks Tybalt, or the laughter offstage as the party of travellers arrive home to the estate in The Cherry Orchard.

During the first read through of the Nothing On Earth Research & Development process in 2019 composer Helen Chadwick sang her beautiful songs which were eventually going to be sung in close harmony by the cast of five, so words and music were already enfolding one another on day 1.

Or when I directed the first read through of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Simon Reade for Polka Theatre, composer Martin Ward played his original music, giving a sense of the drama, the wit and the poignant melodies that would be the engine for the fast moving adventure through time and space.



Chanel Glasgow, 'How To Space'



Suzanne Ahmet & Shalini Peiris, 'How To Live or, The Trouble With Women...'

Rehearsals Begin

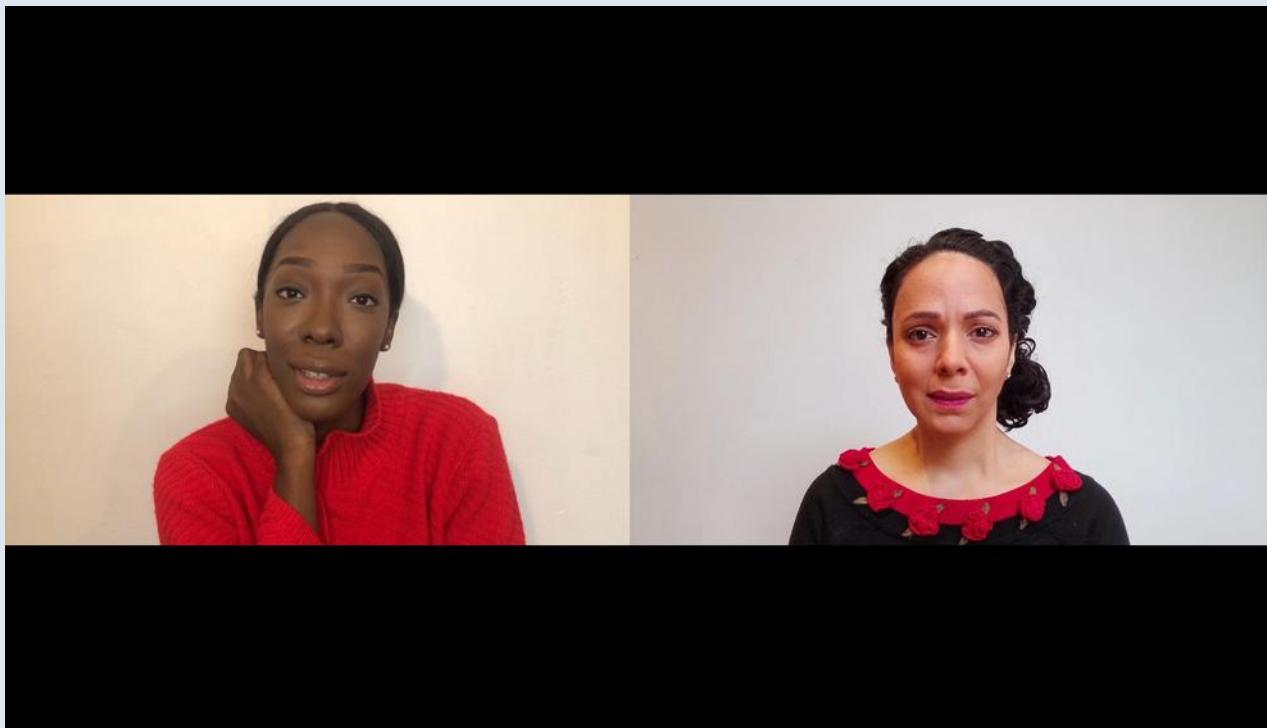
And once the read through is done, then we start rehearsals. Director Peter Brook recommends working every day on three approaches to the text: the cerebral, the emotional, and the playful.

Some directors work on the staging straightaway in the process with skill and artistry. Some, like myself, tend to allow the staging to evolve organically, growing from the relationships. Who do you want to be near? Who do you want to be far away from?

We explore the impact of place and of objects.

What does this room or this garden mean to you? What is it like being in the orchard late at night when the party goers have stumbled home and you are reflecting on the feeling of suddenly falling in love – like Juliet in the Balcony scene. Or what does the scent of an expensive perfume your very successful sister has brought for you as a gift make you feel when you are Joyce, a single mum with four cleaning jobs in Caryl Churchill's Top Girls?

And so step by step, the play is realised.



Chanel Glasgow & Géhane Strehler, 'How To Live or The Trouble With Women Is...'



Safiyya Ingar, 'How To Take Off'

Depth And Detail

On each scene we look at:

Character.

Relationships.

Time, season, weather.

The historical context.

The social context.

Mood, atmosphere.

Class, status.

Themes.

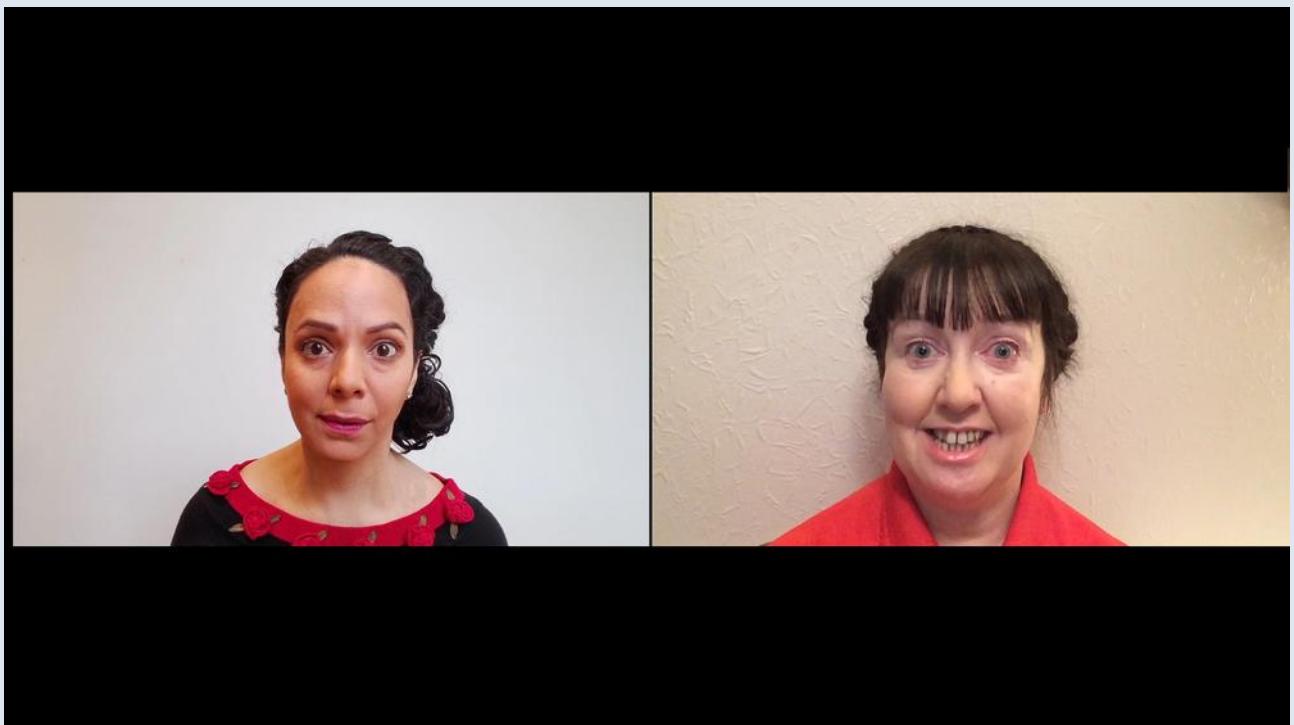
Language.

We discover the meaning of the play and uncover the sub-text; we use our instincts and analyse each detail.

And the production is shaped by the ideas and inspirations of our artistic collaborators: designer, lighting designer, movement director, choreographer, composer.



Suzanne Ahmet, 'How To Land'



Géhane Strehler & Nia Davies, 'How To Live or The Trouble With Women Is...'

Directing In Extraordinary Times

So what has been different in the rehearsal process for our Nothing on Earth: Shorts? Everything. How do we translate the very physical, visceral process of creating theatre outlined above into working online via video conferencing apps, working literally in isolation, separated by 100s of miles – no handshakes, no touch, no standing in a circle? No accidental discoveries when chatting at the tea break or looking at the designer's carefully conceived set model, evocative mood boards or lively costume drawings.

However, the approach to the text is the same. With each monologue the actors and I applied all the techniques outlined above to help us create the world of our historical and contemporary heroines – the 'ATA-girl' who loves to fly Spitfires, the Co-op worker who helps build a Lancaster Bomber, the cabin crew who takes up work in a care home, the young woman who defies the odds to become a pilot.

And the new digital medium allows us to collaborate internationally. When we read through the 6th film, How to Live, on Zoom Shalini Peiris was in Sri Lanka, Chanel Glasgow in Trinidad and the rest of us were in England and Wales.



Géhane Strehler, 'Learning To Fly'



Géhane Strehler, 'Learning To Fly'

Learning To Film

With the first Short, Learning to Fly, set in our heroine's own home, the skies, and at the de Havilland Airbase, Hatfield, Géhane Strehler and I were learning not just to 'fly' but to film. And the budget required us to deliver in a week.

In my approach I owe so much to the wise counsel of Grant Watson, Pursued By A Bear Associate Director (Film) and of Christina Kapadocha, Lecturer in Theatre and Movement, East 15 Acting School, who had guided the Top Girls cast and myself back in the early days of working via Zoom.

Christina talked of trusting the medium of working on Zoom: finding the exact relationship of the eye-line of the speaker to the camera, making the space yours, working carefully on physical detail, noting that every movement matters. Trusting that you can be SEEN and be FELT by your audience, and allowing yourself to be playful, and be organic in the rehearsal process.

We were not suddenly trying to pretend we were experienced film makers or try to reproduce a television programme. We were making 'theatre on film' and our priority was to make as strong a connection as possible between the actor telling her story and the audience watching and listening at home.



Géhane Strehler, 'Learning To Fly'



Géhane Strehler, 'Learning To Fly'

Creating The World And Finding The Character

Grant advised us to break up the monologue into sections, and find a location for each, allowing Géhane's 'ATA-girl' to live in each moment and to create a variety of tone and dynamics.

He encouraged me to ensure that the piece had a forward momentum; 15 minutes in which we saw all the differing personality traits that make up our heroine – she's witty, self-aware and nonchalant, a risk taker, who also is reflective, loving and has experienced grief, loss and change. She says that when she is taunted by the men around her she has to 'wisecrack back, showing the fellas I can take it', a nod to the witty ripostes of women characters in Hollywood films, played by actors like Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis and Katherine Hepburn.

And Helen Chadwick's original songs enhanced the world we were creating. She chose key words and phrases from Anna's scripts, which influenced the delivery of the text, and meant, in her words, that the songs could 'reflect on and highlight the themes from the play and the whole project'.

See the **Nothing on Earth: Blog** for descriptions of Grant Watson's and Helen Chadwick's process.



A detail from 'Learning To Fly'



Géhane Strehler, 'Learning To Fly'

Props And Place

In a traditional rehearsal room we would work with objects as soon as possible. We would ask – what does this object mean to me? Does it evoke specific memories? Has it been neglected? How many hands have held it?

And we ask what is the atmosphere of the place in the text? Is it a social space or a work space? How does it affect the character?

Learning to Fly is set in 1943. We conveyed the period with careful choice of costume and furniture, finding any period detail we could in Géhane's home where she was filming, e.g. the weathered old brick walls and the evocative iron railings.

We contrast the privacy of the bedroom, with its soft colours, flowers and special photos, where our heroine is sharing with us both her joy of flight, and her sorrow at the loss of a comrade, with the cold metal of a garage door, a public space, austere, out in all weathers, suggesting the hard lines of an aeroplane wing and the freezing temperatures in the open cockpit.



Géhane Strehler, 'Learning To Fly'



'Learning To Fly'

Storytelling Techniques

We used all the approaches to text outlined above. Just as usual.

And drawing from our experience of working on solo shows in the theatre we examined the different approaches to the storytelling in the text.

When is the character completely in the moment?

When is she reflecting on the past?

When is she simply telling us the story?

When is she literally reliving the past, in action?



The trailer on the big screen in Hemel Hempstead town centre



Shalini Peiris in the trailer for 'How We Live or The Trouble With Women...' on the big screen in Hemel Hempstead

Involving The Audience

Our final Short, woven together by Anna Reynolds, How to Live Or, The Trouble with Women... has been commissioned by Dacorum Borough Council.

The Short contains evocative memories of Hemel Hempstead High Street in the 1950s; of a wedding cake baked in England and transported to Africa; of journeys taken across the globe, with families fleeing from the Spanish Civil War, and young women leaving all that was familiar to them to help with Britain's labour shortage; of beloved aunts encouraging the younger generation to go to university; of the excitement of seeing the young Queen Elizabeth in her Royal Car; and of the cataclysmic events of the Second World War, being evacuated from London, flying Spitfires from Hatfield aerodrome and surviving being buried alive in the Blitz.

These are stories shared by and about women by the residents of Dacorum as part of the Hertfordshire Year of Culture 2020; stories gathered through workshops and from a call out for contributions.

Key to my work as a director is finding ways to involve the audience, and with this Short the public becomes involved in the creative process, offering their memories and gently giving us advice on 'how to live' in the here and now.



Suzanne Ahmet's filming set up for 'How To Land'



Nia Davies's filming set up for 'How To Build A Plane'

A Leap Of Faith

As theatre practitioners we are used to reinventing ourselves to respond to the context in which we find ourselves; you want a piece of new writing – ‘we’ll do it’; you prefer an adaptation of a well-known novel or a classic – ‘yes of course’, you’ve got 12 actors and no budget – ‘fine’; you can do anything you want with this but there must be songs – ‘great’.

But this experience for theatre makers all over the land must be one of the quickest transformations of all. In our case from planning a tour of a full length brand new play, with a workshop programme for Elders and involving community participants in singing in the show, to rehearsing on Zoom and Géhane finding herself not just an actress but art director, locations scout, costume and make-up artist, and what’s more filming the monologue herself on the Pursued By A Bear tablet.

Géhane and the Nothing on Earth: Shorts acting company describe this process beautifully in the **Nothing on Earth: blog**.



Nia Davies, 'How To Build A Plane'



Safiyya Ingar, 'How To Take Off'

Take To The Air!

And so we bring our Nothing on Earth: Shorts project to an end. It is touching that the week we completed our final Short the last female RAF Spitfire pilot died aged 103. Eleanor Wadsworth was one of 165 women who flew without ‘instrument flying instructions or radios’. When interviewed by author Karen Borden “she joked about how ‘flying straight and level’ was her mark ... and how marvellous it was to take to the air on her own” (quoted on BBC website January 10, 2021).

And we are reminded of a great pilot who has inspired us throughout this venture. At a workshop with Elders in Dacorum in 2019, when asked who was a boundary breaking heroine, one participant exclaimed joyfully – ‘Amy Johnson! She is the one, she is the one!’

In a promotional film in 1932 Amy dazzles her audience with her appeal to seize the day and we end our Nothing on Earth: Shorts with her voice ringing in our ears:

‘I say to the youth of the country
Adventure isn’t dead
There is room for romance
Take to the air!’

To see all six Nothing on Earth: Shorts please
visit our website:

www.pursuedbyabear.co.uk

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