6. Dancing on a Knife’s Edge: Performing Violent Co-Dependency in Bryony Lavery and Frantic Assembly’s *Stockholm*

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In 1990s Britain, explicit and brutal sex acts were par for the course during a night out at new writing theatres. Playwrights such as Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane and Philip Ridley, members of the ‘In-Yer-Face Theatre’ gang (as codified by Aleks Sierz in his 2001 book),[[1]](#footnote-1) did not treat sexual acts as off-stage activity.[[2]](#footnote-2) Perhaps the most notorious of these plays was Mark Ravenhill’s 1996 play *Shopping and Fucking*, including oral/anal activity (with blood), in full view of the audience.[[3]](#footnote-3) These plays were not just about spectacle; intimate violence on stage signified a world often external to the action where atrocities were taking place, such as the Balkan conflicts, as referenced in Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995). On the other hand, this was sex and violence observed at a cool distance by an audience securely behind the fourth wall. Whilst the action often bordered on the surreal, the performed violent sexual act, although enacted through mimesis, often closely reproduced what that act might look like in real life, meaning there was little room for imaginative engagement for the individual spectator. As such, watching this type of theatre could often feel voyeuristic; this was likely the intention for at least some of the ’In Yer Face’ writers. However, as Britain moved into a new millennium and theatre makers realized that there were few boundaries left to push, a different sensibility emerged.

As Aleks Sierz writes, the ‘In-Yer-Face’ approach which ‘had been so provocative in the mid-1990s, began to show signs of rapid aging’ in the first years of the 21st century. Whether this was because audiences were tiring of the viscerally confrontational nature of these plays, or due to the ‘success of new(ish) physical theatre or live art companies such as Frantic Assembly’ who showed that ‘a fusion of text, dance and music was still one of the best ways of avoiding the banality of suffocating dramas set in sitting rooms’[[4]](#footnote-4)—or a combination of both—is up for debate. However, what can be argued is that sexual acts were enacted in new forms on stage. This chapter explores how Frantic Assembly, one of Britain’s best-known devising companies, working with playwright Bryony Lavery, portrayed sex in their two-hander *Stockholm* (2007) in a way that encouraged imaginative engagement with the action on the spectator’s part, allowing them to feel embedded and even complicit within the unfolding violence.

Frantic Assembly was founded by Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, who were undergraduates together at Swansea University in the mid-1990s. Heavily influenced by the work of Welsh devising company Volcano, they initially produced work for student festivals before becoming professional theatre makers.[[5]](#footnote-5) Today, they are one of the best-known British devising companies, whose work tours extensively and has been widely documented and disseminated by themselves, critics and researchers. They have also provided movement direction on acclaimed productions such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (National Theatre, West End and touring)*, Market Boy* (National Theatre) and *Black Watch* (National Theatre of Scotland). The signature Frantic approach combines a robust physicality and music with text, often written by a leading British playwright (including Abi Morgan, Ravenhill, Simon Stephens, Lavery, and others), that moves between realism and lyricism. It is an approach which has proved enormously popular: as Mark Evans and Mark Smith state, it is ‘rare for living theatre practitioners to have had such a perceptible influence over such a range of performance work, and to have established such a foothold in the curricula of a nation’s schools.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

This success can be partly ascribed to their holistic approach to meaning-making, which leaves spectators room to come to their own understanding. Unlike the ‘In-Yer-Face’ practitioners, Frantic productions, which always include moments of interpretive movement exploring the subtext/subconscious of characters or the emotional weight of the action, are much more ‘in-yer-mind’. Rather than keeping audiences at a distance, they are invited to actively engage intellectually and emotionally with the characters and their situation. For this reason, they choose their collaborators, including Lavery, very carefully. They have worked with her on a number of productions, including *It Snows* (National Theatre Connections, 2016)*, Beautiful Burnout* (2010), and *The Believers* (2014). Their first major production, however, was *Stockholm* (2007), in which she was present from the earliest stages of development.[[7]](#footnote-7) Lavery’s background in devising meant that she immediately understood Frantic’s approach of working through physical exercises in order to develop narrative; as Graham says, at every stage of the development of the play it felt like they were ‘inspiring and bringing out the best of each other’, and that Lavery was ‘an incredible collaborator.’[[8]](#footnote-8) It was important, given the subject matter of the play—an abusive romantic relationship—that the team had a shared understanding and approach to portraying this relationship in a complex, nuanced way.

According to Graham, Lavery did not have to ‘invent the universe for a new play’; instead, she took the elements of the universe they created in the workshop and gave it ‘order.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Graham and Hoggett, with an idea germinated from personal experience of watching friends in a mutually-abusive relationship, wanted the couple portrayed to be ‘realistic, to have aspirations, to be intelligent, eloquent at times’ but needed a writer who could explore the ‘dark places.’[[10]](#footnote-10) As such, the sexual passion had to be fore fronted, not only to show a couple who desired each other intensely, but how that desire could turn to violence. The earliest stages of the process involved two dancers and two actors; as Lavery states, at this point she “simply *watched* Frantic Assembly make movement ideas for two weeks. I tried to write… but realized text and movement wanted to occupy *centre stage* […] So I made *movement* the scenes.”[[11]](#footnote-11) What resulted was a script which both evidenced this process and provided space for the directors and actors to incorporate movement, allowing spectators to have a more visceral, embodied understanding of the couple’s highs and lows, something which is not easy to capture through dialogue. This also meant that spectators were not explicitly told what to think about the couple at key moments of (positive and negative) passion; by exploring the sexual relationship through stylized movement a complex picture of co-dependency emerged in which neither person was the hero or villain.[[12]](#footnote-12)

On the depiction of sexual activity on stage, Amber Massie-Blomfield writes that ‘theatre is uniquely placed to explore this terrain’ as it is a medium ‘that asks, pointedly, what it means to watch, by forcing us collectively to be aware of our spectatorship.’[[13]](#footnote-13) In the case of *Stockholm*, spectators were explicitly drawn into the intimacy of Kali and Todd’s relationship. One of the results of the two-dancer two-actor rehearsal process was that the characters were revealed to spectators both in the way they wanted the external world to see them—stylish, sexy, completely in love—and a less curated version where their subconscious insecurities are given voice. They move from direct address to each other, to narrating their lives in the third person, and to a surreal other, shared voice, called ‘Us’ which emerges from the house (and the depths of their psyche). According to Lavery, when ‘they speak in the third person, they are either presenting a view of themselves which they would like us to buy, or talking about something they cannot admit into their dangerous construction of a relationship.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Similarly, their movement is sometimes self-consciously choreographed and other times instinctively violent.

In the script, this contrast is suggested through speech and stage directions, which are unconventionally written in bold, signaling their importance. For example, early in the play spectators witness Kali and Todd’s first sexual act on the stairs of the fashionable home they are so proud of. In the script this appears as:

**She performs an accomplished and elegant sex act upon him as**

**TODD**

That’s ‘Harlequin *Indulgence’* **[the wallpaper]**

That’s ‘Antique White’ **[the paintwork]**[[15]](#footnote-15)

As the sexual act continues (note Lavery does not say precisely what the ‘act’ is and lets her collaborators decide how to physicalize this moment), Todd describes their house, and narrates the action (‘And she pleasures is that what you say in your language? him’)[[16]](#footnote-16) not to Kali but to himselfؙ—and an audience which he cannot see, but imagines. Whilst the act is occurring (in the 2007 stage version it was portrayed as manual stimulation leading to fellatio),[[17]](#footnote-17) he also tells us about a moth (‘A something alive a not of him…’) which alights on a letter from his mother, functioning as an early signal of how his relationship with Kali has caused distance between him and his parents. In his final moment of ecstasy, he repeats ‘He’s not alone’ until the moment of climax when he says ‘He’s *Alone*!!!!’, again serving as foreshadowing that the relationship may not be as glossy as it seems.[[18]](#footnote-18)

On stage during this scene, actor Georgina Lamb, as Kali, moves in shadow whilst Samuel James’s (Todd) face is lit, as he tells us what Kali is doing to him. In stark contrast to the explicit scenes of the 1990s, spectators do not observe the sexual act; they imagine it, aided by Todd’s words, movement, the soaring accompanying music, and the flowers which bloom through the walls as he approaches climax. As such, the moment manages a high level of complexity; it is intimate, but also funny, as his physical pleasure is punctuated by his ecstatic commentary on house design. There is a sense of love and connection between the two of them, but also a hint of isolation and loneliness. As Evans and Smith write, within this very ‘compact’ moment, we have a ‘range of images to do with sex, intimacy, solitude, family, love, domesticity, humour and violence’; one moment is responsible for setting off a range of questions within the spectator’s mind.

Similarly, an episode in the kitchen suggests both desire and danger. Todd and Kali tell the story of the time they first met; again, this is both to each other and, using third person, to an imagined other (which the audience stands in for). The stage directions read:

**They start to drink one another**

**They start to cut each other up and eat each other…**

**And pour each other and drink each other**

**They savour and devour each other[[19]](#footnote-19)**

According to Graham, this moment was taken directly from an exercise in rehearsal. Whilst the workshop activities were offered ‘as tools’ to get Lavery ‘thinking and writing’, she saw the potential within the movement to express through the actors’ bodies that which the characters were not able to put into words.[[20]](#footnote-20) The scene, as realized on stage, sees Todd and Kali, fueled by alcohol and moving with intensity under a red wash of light, run cutlery over each other’s bodies, but with the suggestion that at any point the eroticism could turn violent. Again, there is nothing explicit in this moment—it is all suggested, and the obvious metaphor allows the audience to consider what it means for a couple to devour themselves. The moment also significantly exists both in their memory, but also within the kitchen, which, like the couple, is ‘beautiful’ but also ‘dangerous’;[[21]](#footnote-21) designer Laura Hopkins’s set has a line of large and sharp knives stretch across a space that is normally associated with cozy family domesticity.

This moment helps spectators to understand the origin of Todd and Kali’s relationship, but also to understand that the potential for violence was there from the beginning; it was something contained within both characters. Later, after tension develops due to Kali’s jealousy, we see her attempt to distract Todd from cooking by suggesting sex; he responds by kissing her, but with a menacing knife held in full view of spectators. Eventually, the tension boils over into what the production, including the ‘dangerous’ kitchen, has told us was inevitable: a violent confrontation. Whilst the action is clear—they hit, claw at, and drag each otherؙ— again, it is stylized, and accentuated by music. We believe in, and are shocked by the violence, not because of its ‘realness’, but because Frantic’s layered approach immerses us in psychological and physical effects of the moment. In addition, as the action appears as a violent duet, there does not seem to be a hero and a villain; both participate, as do spectators, although they, like friends who are aware of the dangerous love, are powerless to act.

Later, in what is perhaps the most disturbing scene of the play, we see the couple in bed, having made up, undressed each other, and gently caressed after the fight. The dim lighting and the blooming flowers on the bed reach back to the first moment of intimacy we witnessed on the stairs; the couple declare ‘We’re not sure this isn’t our favourite part of the situation!’[[22]](#footnote-22). It should be erotic or even tender, but is instead the literal stuff of nightmares. The bed is suspended above the stage, and Lamb and James are secured by straps; the precarity is clear, even within the ‘**very tender wonderful love-making.**’[[23]](#footnote-23) Afterwards, when they sleep, we hear the suggestion of a terrible future where, ‘Squashed flat on the cement floor’ of their cellar, lie their children, ‘cold cocoons.’[[24]](#footnote-24) This is the moment where the spectator’s imagination is engaged most powerfully; the violence is entirely suggested, in sharp juxtaposition to the intimacy of the bed, but it is also at its starkest. We cannot look away or feel detached—they have told us, directly, what will happen, and we have been allowed into the darkest spaces of their minds.

Massie-Blomfield writes that often, ‘sex onstage makes for uncomfortable viewing because it doesn’t ring true’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Whilst the ‘In-Yer-Face’ practitioners attempted to make violence and sex appear realistically brutal, and uncomfortable in its realness, in doing so it allows for a certain emotional detachment. Frantic Assembly’s approach in *Stockholm*, which suggests sex and violence through stylized movement, music, and direct address, has the capacity to engage spectators’ minds more powerfully, drawing them into the most hidden rooms of the characters’ psyche, so that they feel both part of the situation and helpless to act. We are forced to confront ourselves and consider that we do likely know couples like this, who appear to lead Instagram-worthy lives that hide violence and despair. It rings true, and it is the truth that makes it uncomfortable, as we are faced with our own complicity.

1. Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sierz explains that he did not make the term up himself; ‘other people were already using the phrase’ and he borrowed it to categorise a group of late twentieth century plays that used brutal language and violent and often sexual imagery and action. Aleks Sierz, “A Brief History of In-Yer-Face Theatre”, July 1, 2016, https://www.sierz.co.uk/writings/a-brief-history-of-in-yer-face-theatre/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mark Ravenhill, *Shopping and Fucking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Aleks Sierz, ‘Beyond Timidity? The State of British New Writing’ *PAJ* 27, 3 (Sept 2005): 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mark Evans and Mark Smith, *Frantic Assembly* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 1. The company has a well-established educational programme, which includes workshops, outreach, and educational packs on various productions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Scott Graham, personal correspondence with Karen Morash, June 10, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Scott Graham, *Stockholm, A Comprehensive Guide*, accessed April 27, 2024 <https://www.franticassembly.co.uk/resources/stockholm-resource-pack>, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Graham, personal correspondence, June 10, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mary Morgan and Philip Stokoe, ‘Connection Conversations: Directors Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett’, accessed 10 July 2010, http://www.connectingconversations.org/?location\_id=2&item=43 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bryony Lavery, personal correspondence with Karen Morash, May 24, 2010. Her emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a fuller exploration of the process of developing *Stockholm* please see Karen Morash, ‘An Investigation into How Engagement with the Context and Processes of Collaborative Devising Affects the Praxis of the Playwright’, PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Amber Massie-Blomfield, ‘Sex scenes in theatre: Why are we so prudish about making love on stage?’, *Independent*, October 5, 2015, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/sex-scenes-in-theatre-why-are-we-so-prudish-about-making-love-on-stage-a6680511.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lavery, personal correspondence. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bryony Lavery, *Stockholm* (London: Oberon Books, 2007), 31. Please note that any typographical oddities, including spaces, in material quoted from this play are representative of how the text is presented in the script. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lavery, *Stockholm*,31. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I observed an unpublished archive video of the original 2007 stage production. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Lavery, *Stockholm*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Lavery, *Stockholm*, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Graham, personal correspondence. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Lavery, *Stockholm*, 34 and 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Lavery, *Stockholm*, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Lavery, *Stockholm*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Lavery, *Stockholm*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Massie-Blomfield ‘Sex Scenes in Theatre.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)