



Co-commissioned by and developed at West Yorkshire Playhouse and Greenwich Theatre

The Paper Birds present

Broke

Displaced families, gambling addictions and beans on toast.
Real life stories from the front line of poverty and debt in the UK.

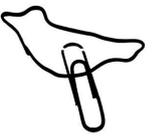


‘BROKE IS A PASSIONATE AND THOUGHTFUL SHOW...
EXPOSING PAINFUL LIES ABOUT POVERTY’

Scotsman

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Teacher Resource Pack



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Process & Development

'Broke' was made over a 6 week period. There was an additional 2 weeks of interviewing and research and development before the rehearsals started. It was made at West Yorkshire Playhouse and Greenwich Theatre.

We wanted to tell real peoples' stories and experiences about their relationship with money in modern Britain and we developed a strategy for approaching that. This included creating an online survey which people could fill out anonymously. It included questions such as 'how much do you earn?', 'what do you spend your money on?', 'who is to blame for the financial crisis?' and 'tell us about a time where you've been completely broke'. The anonymity of this questionnaire allowed people to share honest answers.

We collected 200 responses via the online questionnaire. Yet we knew that the response we were receiving was from a privileged demographic; we had reached these people via our online outlets – our website and social media. Therefore, the audience we were interacting with were already 'friends' of The Paper Birds. We wanted to delve deeper, to meet people with whom we didn't have things in common, to meet with people who wouldn't ordinarily interact with theatre.

We arranged some visits to Leeds North Food Banks. These are run by The Trussell Trust, a trust run and managed by the church. We visited two different branches and met with several people there. We also visited a Salvation Army drop in centre. This centre was heavily subscribed – we met lots of people who wanted to share their stories and experiences. We recorded some interviews, we made notes, we arranged to meet one young woman again. We felt she had a lot to say, and we empathised with her situation.





Back in the rehearsal room, we took all this research and started work. We worked quickly. We would mark out the types of scenes we wanted to create and set about making them. We limited our 'play' time – with such a short devising process we felt less room for experimentation, and a sense of urgency in creating the right material.

We started with 3 separate strands, and began to construct scenes to illustrate those strands. They included;

- The people we had met and their verbatim stories. In particular we wanted to choose one character to 'lead' the show and it was natural that we focus in on Sally as we had interviewed her the most.
- Our stories, our personal relationships with money as the performers making the show. We identified what was relevant from our personalities – Kylie's debt, Shane lending Kylie money, Jemma being good with money.
- The wider world – how the monetary system works, how money is created and the National debt of Britain.

We began to develop material that explored all of these strands. Once we had each of the strands near completion we began to layer them together, sequencing the order of scenes. We do this towards the end of a process, we try to identify the highs and lows of the structure. We think carefully about the emotions we are trying to arouse in the audience – where they might laugh and where they might empathise with the characters.

The show premiered at Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Pleasance Dome in August 2014. It took to the road on a UK National Tour January – March 2015.





Social, Historical & Cultural

Following the 'credit crunch' 2007-2008, the UK entered the deepest recessionary conditions in living memory. As the liquidity from the financial services sector came to an abrupt halt, the investment 'life blood' of the economy in short supply, numerous companies, including long established high street businesses, ceased trading and consequently, unemployment rates rose to the highest levels since the 1980s. After the initial 'bailout' of the banking sector, political attention turned to the growing public deficit and the spectre of public sector austerity came to dominate the policy agenda. This agenda swiftly moved from how best to regulate the financial services industry to the question of the 'welfare bill' and the growing problem of 'worklessness'. From this point, particularly as the Universal Credit Scheme passed through parliament and came to be implemented in various phases, much was said in political and policy debates about the lives of the 'poor' and many 'common sense' assumptions informed these discussions. However as is often the case, omitted from these discussions were the voices of those people living of low income.



The 1980's

The Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher is in power. Britain changes under her leadership. Public services such as the railways are sold off for profit. Trade Unions strike; famously the coal miners were on strike for over a year. The miners are campaigning to keep their jobs, to keep the coal pits open. Lots of industries are in danger of losing their value and worth in Britain as materials and services are sought abroad for cheaper costs.

As industries were lost, that meant jobs were too. Ordinary people suffered unemployment like never before. With whole industries wiped out, it left thousands of workers with no option but to claim 'the dole' on the welfare state. Without replenishing the industries with alternate employment paths, thousands of workers remained unemployed for years to come.

Yet there was another legacy that Thatcher left behind; the notion of creating a capitalist mentality. Under her leadership people were encouraged to aspire to reach the top, to earn more, spend more, to buy property and cars. She famously sold off social housing, (homes owned by the government and rented out to people on low incomes), thereby reducing the provision for low income families in the future.



2008: Financial crisis. The credit crunch arrives as banks and lenders realise that they have lent too much money out to people that can't pay it back. They tighten their purse strings and no more money is to be loaned. This also has a repercussion on whole nations. In Europe, Greece is the first country to fall into distress, the Greek government faces bankruptcy and is offered support from the IMF, (International Monetary Fund). Greece is quickly followed by Spain and Italy – all struggling to keep up with their existing loan repayments to the IMF and facing bankruptcy.

In Britain, Northern Rock bank collapses and the people who have placed savings in their care risk losing all their money. The government steps in and saves them with a huge loan.

2014: Six years on from the financial crisis and across Europe the waves of austerity measures have firmly rooted. Austerity means to budget tightly, to control the spending and not be frivolous with where the money goes – to make cuts. Health, education, the arts; many public sectors that are funded by the government have seen huge cuts to their budgets in an attempt to control spending and make a recovery quicker. The government needs a return to a healthy GDP (Gross Domestic Product – the monetary value of all finished goods and services produced within a country) in order to climb its way back to a healthy financial state.

Austerity has impacted in all areas of our modern lives; in long waits in A & E at the hospital due to staff shortages, in the amount of supplies you might find in the school stationary cupboard, in the price of food and petrol, or how often your black wheelie bin gets collected. What has been reported more and more over the past few years is that the people with the lowest incomes are finding it the most difficult to feed and clothe their families, whilst the top earners are making even larger sums of income.





Verbatim & Political Theatre

In recent years, The Paper Birds have been creating new plays that are given the label 'verbatim' and 'political'. Verbatim Theatre traditionally sees the playwright interviewing people that are connected to the topic or stimulus of the play and uses their testimony to construct the piece. In this way the theatre artist seeks to achieve a degree of authority and honesty unattained with fictitious characters.

A verbatim style of theatre uses the real words from interviewees to construct the play. Champion Decent, Australian playwright and author of the verbatim theatre play *Embers*, said it is "not written in a traditional sense... but is... conceived, collected and collated". This is also true of the way The Paper Birds creates new work – by speaking to people, hearing their stories and creating a collage of their words upon the stage. At The Paper Birds we aim to give voice to the voiceless, and with *Broke* we were very much seeking to find the people in our society who due to their financial circumstances and status, were being left unheard.

Political Theatre is a genre of performance that is constantly redefining itself and changing according to evolving culture and society. In the history of theatre, there is a long tradition of performances addressing issues of current events and central to society itself, encouraging consciousness and social change. In Ancient Greece, the political satire performed by the comic poets at the theatres had considerable influence on public opinion in the Athenian democracy. Those earlier Western dramas, arising out of the polis, or democratic city-state of Greek society, were performed in amphitheatres, central arenas used for theatrical performances, religious ceremonies and political gatherings; these dramas had a ritualistic and social significance that enhanced the relevance of the political issues being examined.

In later centuries, political theatre has sometimes taken a different form. Sometimes associated with cabaret and folk theatre, it has offered itself as a theatre 'of, by, and for the people'. In this guise, political theatre has developed within the civil societies under oppressive governments as a means of actual underground communication and the spreading of critical thought.





In the 1980's there was a wave of political theatre that emerged as a reaction to the government and social change that Britain was experiencing. Companies such as 7:84 and Monstrous Regiment, playwrights such as Edward Bond, David Hare and Caryl Churchill were redefining what political theatre was and could be. In the 1990's a new wave of 'in your face' playwrights emerged, playwrights such as Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane.

All of these artists affected the evolution of The Paper Birds as we began to define our own identity. We understood that as theatre makers we were elevated into a position of power; that we could affect social change with the message of our shows and the areas of discussion we could instigate within our audiences. We want to make our audiences think, to raise questions and conversations long after they have left the auditorium and ultimately to share the stories on stage of those not able to speak loud enough to have their voices heard within society.

For a wider look into Verbatim & Political Theatre, visit YouTube:

Politics in Theatre: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCyvfScSuBE>

Verbatim Theatre: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ui3k1wT2yeM>





Themes, Motifs & Technique

Fast-forwarding & Interviewing

Stylistically, The Paper Birds use movement and physicality to add another layer to our storytelling. In *Broke*, we wanted to depict the editing process that the verbatim material we had collected had undergone. By demonstrating the nature of fast-forwarding through the material we collected, we are referencing the artistic licence that we had whilst choosing which characters and extracts to show the audience.

What you see in *Broke* is a carefully constructed montage of scenes, of juxtaposed verbatim text and also words that we have written. We have shaped the script to create highs and lows, to make our audience experience a variety of emotions, all with the aim of creating empathy and sympathy with our central character, Sally. It also allows us to demonstrate the nature of us 'filling in the gaps'. After meeting with Sally and interviewing her, we got a sense of her character but we felt there was also an element of her life that we had to 'guess'. There are moments within the show where we see Sally fast forwarding through her daily life; this is a representation of the assumptions we had to make



Charlie & the Chocolate Factory

We tried to identify a depiction of poverty in the UK that we could relate to. Often throughout our lives we see images of poverty in faraway locations; famine in Africa or refugees on the road fleeing war. But these images and tales always seemed distant to us; they weren't on our doorstep. In trying to find a representation of what poverty in Britain could be, we stumbled across the narrative of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. This story resonated with us, not just because we had loved the book and film as children ourselves, but because the depiction of poverty was so explicit. A house with two rooms, one bed with four grandparents sleeping in, holes in the roof, cabbage soup, parents working full time in low paid jobs and still not being able to provide properly for their family. And then, above all else, was the connotation of chocolate. The one thing that all the characters aspired to have, the unreachable nature of finding one of those 5 Golden Tickets; we found all of the connotations Dahl was referencing to be a likened with our modern consumerist culture. Chocolate representing money; in Dahl's world everyone wants chocolate, and in our world, everyone wants more money.



The Child's Bedroom & Toys

The aesthetic decision to utilise a set comprising of a child's bed and all the props as children's toys came directly out of our interviews with Sally. She talked frequently about her son and the cycle of debt she felt he was partial to fall into as an adult. We wanted to represent her son on the stage. We wanted to draw attention to the notion how difficult it is to get out of the cycle of poverty.



Brecht & Alienation Effects

The style of The Paper Birds work shares many resemblances to the key components of Bertolt Brecht's theatre. We make political comment on our modern society, just like Brecht did. We use direct address and remove the 'fourth wall' when telling our stories, and we repeatedly break the action and remind the audience that they are in a theatre watching a performance. We do this for many of the same reasons with which Brecht created his *verfremdungseffekt* – or 'alienation technique'. We want our audience to be reminded that the issues they are seeing played out onstage are real issues affecting our communities now – we want them to be affected by the performance to create social change. Yet there is one strand that we apply differently to Brecht's approach – we want to 'alienate' our audience, but we also want them to become emotionally engaged in places too – this differs from Brecht. In particular, we chose the appropriate moments within our main character Sally's journey to try and connect with the audience – as we believe that the contrast between engaging emotionally and being distanced from the characters can combine to create an important and affecting response from our audience.





Technical: Set & Projection

We felt the set needed to represent a simple aesthetic - without a large, expensive construction; we wanted to keep it simple and allow ourselves the creative freedom of building several different worlds and locations with just a few black boxes. The idea to have characters emerging in the booths from behind black gauze was rooted in that we wanted an area of the stage, or a 'sign-post' to demonstrate to the audience that these were verbatim characters that we had interviewed. The character of Sally is able to transcend this rule and appear both in the boxes and out on the stage. The bed centre stage was chosen as a representation of the main character's son, and the fact that he is always 'present' signifies the importance of him in her life.



Both the lighting and projections used within the show need to be run very tightly. The Paper Birds collaborated with a company who specialise in AV design and digital arts, The Media Workshop. The Media Workshop were involved in the creation of the show from the very beginning; exchanging and developing ideas, and responsible for the creation and construction of the designs projected in the final show. Often this collaboration would lead with director Jemma McDonnell voicing her ideas for a scene and then a dialogue would follow with the digital artists about what capabilities they could achieve.

One of the biggest decisions to make in conversation with The Media Workshop was how many projectors to use, and how to use them. It was decided that we would use two, and that they would sit in customised wooden frames in order for the cast to manoeuvre them and manage where on the stage they were placed and which orientation, portrait or landscape. They needed to be able to move and be switched around to fit the size of the screens they were throwing on to.

The design of the projections was intended to be another visual layer that could transport the drab and simple design of the set into many different locations – a TV studio, a lecture hall, a storybook. Each of the designs has a function and its intention is to drive the action on further and create an interesting and visually engaging aesthetic.