



The Paper Birds present

Thirsty

'TERRIFICALLY SHARP'

Independent on Sunday



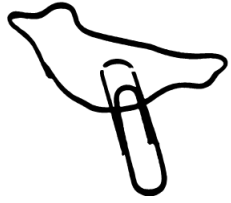
Student Resource Pack

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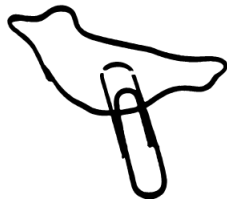
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The Paper Birds

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The Paper Birds

Background & Process

Thirsty was written and developed in 2011. It was developed over a 9-week period over 4 months. The core team in the room were Co-Directors of The Paper Birds, Jemma McDonnell and Kylie Perry, and guest Director, Kirsty Housley.

The 2018/19 touring production is a revival of the original production with a new cast.

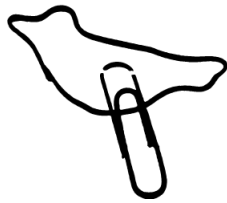
Research methods

Prior to the start of rehearsals, we set about collating research material to use in the room. We set up and distributed an online questionnaire which we asked the general public to respond to. This was shared on our social media platforms and via our mailing list and website. The questionnaire featured questions such as; How much do you drink? Where do you drink and with whom? When did you start drinking? Tell us a funny story about a time that involves alcohol... Tell us a darker story about alcohol... etc. We collected in the responses and had around 100 questionnaires to begin using to paint a picture of Britain's drinking habits.

We also wanted to get some recordings of real people telling their drinking stories – but we wanted to do it in a fashion that allowed the subjects to be anonymous. We set up a pay as you go mobile phone – we bought a cheap handset and activated the SIM card. We published the phone number on business cards with the title 'Are you drunk? If so, give us a call, we want to hear from you!' and left the cards in pubs and bars across the country. We waited for the calls to come in. People steadily started to respond – but we weren't sure that this method was genuinely reaching the general public, as a majority of the calls that came in were from people or acquaintances that we knew or had previously engaged with our theatre work as audiences or workshop participants.



*2018 rehearsals with new flat pack set.
Left to right: Chris Perry, Josie Dale-Jones, Georgie Coles*



The Paper Birds

Background & Process

We would leave the phone switched off and aimed to collect answerphone messages. We could listen back to them, but unfortunately the quality of the calls was not good enough to use the original recordings in the final show. It was 2011, and we had bought a cheap handset – it wasn't a smart phone and we couldn't connect the phone to a laptop and download the recordings.

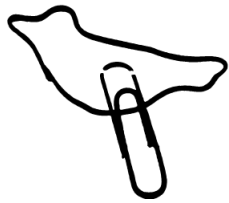
Instead, we transcribed the calls and aimed to use the words verbatim in the rest of the rehearsal process. The calls ranged in content – there was singing, shouting, telling jokes, complaining about having a boring night out, political rants. But overall, we weren't sure of the authenticity and motive behind the calls – it felt like some of the callers knew they were potentially going to feature in our show and so were trying to be provocative or interesting enough to make the cut.

And then one day during the process, we received an email to The Paper Birds' account from 'anonymous@hotmail.com'. The email contained a story – the tale of a young girl moving away to university. It told of a night out, of getting so drunk she didn't know what had happened and that she was certain she had been assaulted. We were compelled by this story landing in our inbox. We felt a duty to include it in the show, and in comparison to most of the other stories we were using in the rehearsal room, this one seemed to take precedence and eclipsed the other tales. The story became our central through-line.



Early devising rehearsal for Thirsty at National Theatre Studio.

Left to right; Kylie Perry, Shane Durrant, Jemma McDonnell



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Interview with the Director: Jemma McDonnell



Why did you want to make Thirsty?

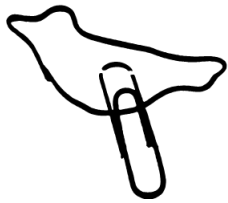
The thinking behind 'Thirsty' came at a point when we were turning 30. It made us reflect on where we were in our lives and question our behaviour. Was it ok to behave socially and publicly the way we had as we were growing into adulthood? For us, this meant that we enjoyed a drink at the weekend – that we would go out to bars and not remember how we got home; and somehow this behaviour seemed a bit juvenile compared with how we thought 30-year olds ought to act. Surely by now we should behave more... adult? And so that got us thinking, and reading.

We looked to news articles that spoke of women and drink, of rising statistics, to images of girls in high heels and smeared make up sitting on kerbs eating chips, or throwing up in city centres in the wee hours. These women were judged in a different light to their male counterparts – but why? Why shouldn't women drink to excess?

We recognised the complicated debate surrounding women and binge-drinking. We felt that it affected us – the way we had experienced growing up in Britain, getting smashed was almost like a right of passage. We were interested in that – in how as a nation we are attuned to drinking to excess whereas in other countries the drinking culture is completely different. And most of all, we were interested in the politics surrounding the issues of women and drink; why shouldn't we be able to drink without the threat of violence or abuse? And why, as a whole nation, do we drink?

What is Thirsty about?

'Thirsty' has two storylines running simultaneously. The first strand is the story of a young girl, 18 years old who has just moved away to university. This was a real story that was sent to us that we recount verbatim in the show. She is in a new city trying to make friends and she takes part in the whole drinking culture surrounding that. There is one night that she details; going out, having a great time in a few different bars with her new friends, meeting a guy that she likes, and eventually going home with him. But then she can't remember anything clearly. She thinks he assaulted her, she thinks he was taking naked photos of her, but because she can't remember, and because she was so drunk



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Interview with the Director

she feels that she has no claim to report the attack or even to share the story with anyone.

The second strand details the real friendship of the two performers on stage; how they met at university, and how their lives have been entwined ever since – they've worked together, shared a flat, holidays, memories. The very best of friends. But when one of them moves to a different city, they grow apart. The distance between them is reflected by missed phone calls and a sense of estrangement – not knowing the general details of each other's day to day lives.

The subtext here is about friendship. In the story of the two performers, getting together occasionally and going out for a few drinks means that they can reconnect and share and be open and honest with each other in a way that they don't regularly anymore. They can say things that they really mean.

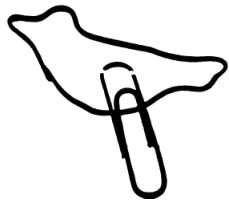
The two different strands are important because together they highlight and accentuate some of the reasons why we drink, but they also allow us to discuss the debate of whether women should drink to excess and the complicated arguments surrounding that.



What were your intentions for the production?

Our intentions were to explore 'booze-Britain'. We wanted to examine how, and why as a nation, we drink. But crucially this wasn't going to be a show about alcoholism or addiction. Instead 'Thirsty' was to research and interview real people about binge-drinking, about the science and reasons behind why the general public like to have three or more drinks in one session as a social event – not about long-term alcohol abuse.

Initially we had thought that the piece would be a patchwork of different characters and verbatim stories. But as we worked on the show, the central story of the girl at university became so prominent that our intentions changed – we felt compelled to share her story.



The Paper Birds

Interview with the Director

Once we had focused in on this one story, it meant that our intentions for the piece became clearer. We wanted to demonstrate both sides of the debate surrounding women and binge-drinking; that a) if you are a woman and you drink to excess in public that unfortunately, you may become vulnerable to ‘predators’ and face danger in the guise of unwanted advances, or assault. But the flip side of the argument, b) that as a woman, why should you not be allowed to take part in the same behaviour as men? Why shouldn’t women feel empowered to drink, to behave how they want, and shouldn’t it be the issue of abusive men under the microscope rather than women’s behaviour?

And at the heart of all of this, ultimately our intention was much the same as all the work we make; to make a piece that audiences engage with, a piece that entertains yet makes you think and makes you feel. We intend to make work that is accessible – that doesn’t alienate audiences and is inclusive in who it is for, in breathtaking theatricality.

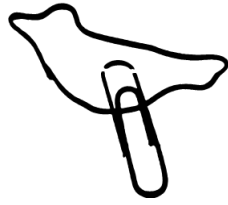


*Designer Fiammetta Horvat
mid set-build (2011)*

Why did you set it in toilet cubicles?

The idea for the set came about very early on in a discussion with designer Fiammetta Horvat about water – we intended to use water as a recurring motif throughout the piece, to represent alcohol and to accentuate the movement of ‘being drunk’. The bathroom setting allowed us to push that strand further. The white tiles were able to create a blank canvas and able to transcend lots of different locations.

The connotations surrounding public toilet stalls in bars also came into play; we liked the nod to ‘girls going to the toilet in pairs’, as well as our experiences of what the atmosphere is like in the girls toilets on a night out – it’s a safe place where girls can check in with each other and re-do their hair and make-up, as well as the more negative connotation of being sick or falling asleep in the cubicle.



The Paper Birds

Cast & Creative Team



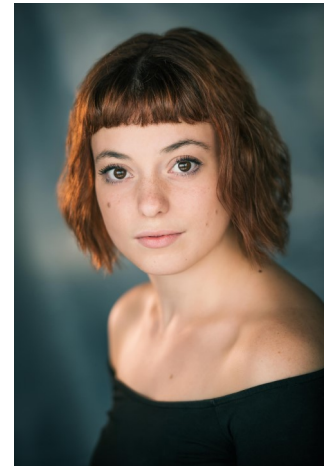
Georgie Coles

Georgie graduated from Rose Bruford College in 2014 and has since worked with The Paper Birds as a freelance performer & facilitator. Recent credits include *Mobile* which she toured nationally in 2016-17 and *In a Thousand Pieces* schools' tours in 2017-18. In 2018 Georgie became part of The Paper Birds' core team as Creative Learning Associate. She is currently devising *Ask Me Anything* with singer/songwriter Rosie Doonan which premieres across the UK in 2020 and where Georgie plays the drums on stage in a live band. Her other credits include roles with Shady Dolls Theatre Company at Vaults Festival & Olive Tree Theatre Company.

Lydia Chase

Lydia graduated from East 15 Acting School in 2019, with a first class honours degree in (BA) Acting Community Theatre.

Lydia is a freelance performer and choreographer with a varied background including street theatre, dance and movement. She has recently written and produced her own show 'She's Still Standing' which premiered at Southend Fringe Festival in July 2019. Lydia is thrilled to be part of The Paper Birds team delivering their unique creative learning programme in schools and colleges.



Written & Directed by: Kirsty Housley, Jemma McDonnell, Kylie Perry

Composer: Shane Durrant

Lighting Design: Vince Field & Kylie Perry

Set Design: Fiammetta Horvat

Sound Design: Benji Fox & Shane Durrant

Technical Manager: Darren Perry

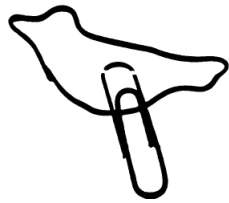
Set Build: Olly Link

Movement Direction: Wendy Houstoun

Production Manager & Technician: Aaron Carter

Produced by: Georgie Coles

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Thanks to The Pound Arts Centre



The Paper Birds

Themes, Motifs, Technique

The Performers Vs The Story

Throughout 'Thirsty' the two performers on stage are engaged in a constant battle. It emerges that Georgie wants to share the verbatim story that was presented in the devising process; the story of the girl who can't remember what happened to her, the girl who was assaulted. Georgie believes that we need to present the ending of this story to expose the real dangers that women face and to confront the injustice of these.

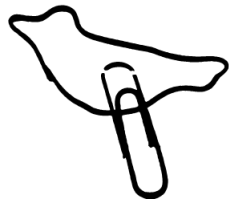
In contrast, Lydia doesn't want to go there – the reason being that if we demonstrate that young women fall prey to danger if they drink to excess, then the message of the show becomes troubled. As feminists, we want our female audience to be empowered by the messages in our work; we don't want to have to dumb down our behaviour or change our actions because we 'might get assaulted'. The problem at the heart of this issue, the one that we, as a society, should be addressing, is the issue of male aggression towards women rather than chastising women who do drink.

Friendship

Although on the surface 'Thirsty' is about alcohol and binge drinking, there is an underlying theme that runs throughout the piece about friendship. The friendship of the two performers is introduced as a real strand. We learn about how they met and how they have a real relationship outside of the production. Friendship is featured as a theme as it was one of the main reasons that people listed when trying to articulate why they drink – because they drink with friends. We also wanted to explore how alcohol breaks down barriers and allows people to connect – to let their guard down and say things they find difficult ordinarily. This is represented by Georgie's speech to Lydia near the end of the play – where she confesses that she misses her and that she loves her dearly.



Georgie Coles & Shona Cowie in Thirsty (2018)



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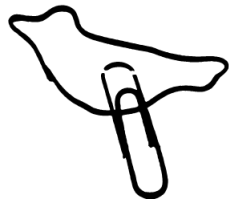
Themes, Motifs, Technique

Photos

As a strand in the piece, the motif of taking photos originated with the verbatim story of the girl. Her story mentions that the boy takes photos of her when she is passing out and as part of the assault – and this led to us lacing the use of the camera all the way through so that it is already a theme by the time we see him take the photos of her at the end. It begins with the ‘hen-do girls’ at the start – they race around the audience daring each other to have photos – the tone is light and jovial and reminiscent of the type of memories collected on a night out. Then we see Georgie and Lydia taking photos as they detail their friendship – here the connotation is about the photos we compile over the years with friends and the memories they throw up. We later see the camera emerge again once the atmosphere has started to take a turn – as the performers are sodden and slipping about in the water, and then finally it takes shots of Lydia as she is passing out. This strand is important because it represents the intrusive nature of photos being taken without your permission. It also nods to the social media generation and the idea of photos being taken and posted publicly to shame or humiliate.

Water

The water is used to symbolise alcohol. Rather than use real alcohol or a prop made to look like alcohol, we wanted to be explicit about the fact that it was simply water. The show is non-naturalistic in the way it is constructed, and so we felt that using just water helped to accentuate that. It is also used to create a sense of mess and danger on the stage as well as allow the performers to become messy in appearance. We liked that by simply using spilled water we could drastically alter appearance with wet hair and smeared make up. And of course, the spilled water becomes very slippery – which accentuates the movement and allows the performers to create the look of ‘being drunk’. There is also something in the fact that the audience can invest in the movement – rather than not believe in the performers being drunk – we can accept and get on board with how they fall and slip because we can see the real danger and effect that the water creates on the stage. And lastly, slippery floors and water are synonymous with public bathrooms and so aesthetically, the motif works well set in the location of the girl’s bathroom.

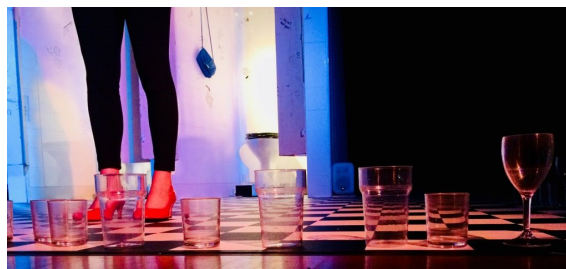


The Paper Birds

Themes, Motifs, Technique

The Red Shoes

We were looking for a motif that could represent the girl – we wanted it to be a prop or item that we could wear to ‘become’ the character. The shoes were chosen as they allowed us to slip them on and off quickly. They were also able to ‘puppeteer’ easily for us to introduce the story of her on the night out.



Non-acting & Breaking the Action

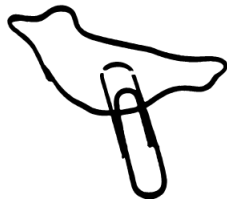
Throughout ‘Thirsty’ the performers refer to each other by their real names – they talk to the audience naturally and refer to the production and their experience of constructing the story. There is a debate around whether to tell the full story of the girl – and we see them grappling with each other.

Performers playing themselves on stage is common in The Paper Birds’ work. Often this is ‘non-acting’ as they talk about the process of making the show. In ‘Thirsty’, we see them jump between playing themselves, playing the character, and narrating the story. We also encounter them ‘breaking the action’. This happens regularly as they address Aaron, the technician, and ask him to add or take away sounds and effects. It happens very early on in the hen-do scene, and it happens repeatedly as Georgie tries to narrate the story.

For us, this way of constructing the piece is resonant of Brecht’s theatre; of alienation effects and of showing the components used to construct the production.

Movement

A regular technique used throughout much of The Paper Birds’ work is the use of movement. In ‘Thirsty’ movement is used to create the effect of drunkenness. Repetition is incorporated to demonstrate the same sequence as it declines in quality the more it is repeated. We represent the notion of drinking to excess with the repeated drinking movement, as well as creating a performative representation of the quality of drunk movement as we see the same journey across the stage repeated until the performers cannot continue any more.



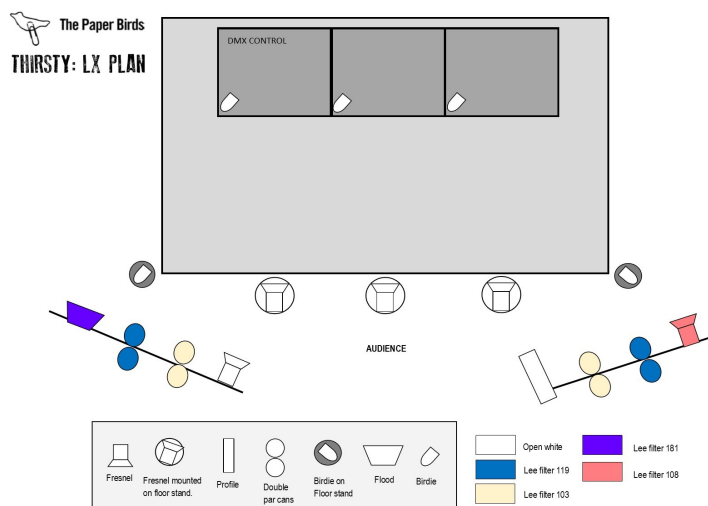
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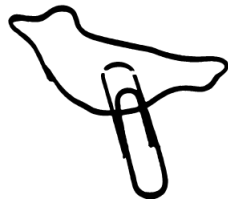
Sound & Light

The use of technical in 'Thirsty' is paramount to creating the different atmospheres and locations. The set is intended to create a blank canvas for the creation of different spaces; the cubicles can become bedrooms, changing rooms, bars and nightclubs. The sound and light design works hand in hand with the set to enable us to transform the space. Sound designer Benji Fox and composer Shane Durrant have collaborated to create ambient soundscapes that can locate the action immediately – pub and nightclub soundscapes, or the sound of the rain on the street. The soundtrack and music can become warped or distorted as the characters/performers get more entangled in the drunken behaviour of the night.

Both the sound and light are plotted together in the programme QLab. QLab is an industry standard programme that allows light and sound cues to be programmed in order and operated by just the click of a button. During our production week we spend time plotting the cues so that with each new venue we tour to, they are already plotted on the computer. This means that all we need to do in each venue is rig and focus the lights into the correct positions.

The lighting in 'Thirsty' is run by only 12 channels. Some of these lights are paired together in the same channel to enable us to have more coverage across the stage. The design incorporates a bright wash, a dark blue wash, a number of 'specials' – fresnel lights that are focused to specific areas like each of the cubicles - small 'birdie' par cans that are rigged inside the cubicles, and a dark purple floodlight to give the effect of UV nightclub light.





The Paper Birds

About The Paper Birds

Who are The Paper Birds?

The Paper Birds are an award-winning devising theatre company that explore political and social topics. We are artists and educators. We pride ourselves on taking socio-political subjects and making them accessible.

We are story collectors. We spend time in communities, listening to personal experiences. The words of the people we meet form the backbone of our shows, giving voice to the voiceless, painting powerful and very human alternative social commentaries. Our desire to listen, to understand and then 'give voice' means not only making space for the under-represented and the misunderstood, but also that our shows explore voices from all walks of life. We aim to do this in breathtaking theatrical fashion.

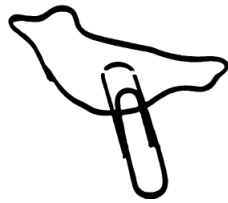
Formed in 2003 upon graduation from Bretton Hall, Leeds University; The Paper Birds was founded upon friendship and a mutual love of contemporary theatre, movement and desire to make work that placed female roles centre stage.

Our original founding members included Michelle Folliot, Helen Lindley, Jemma McDonnell, Elle Moreton, Jenny Robinson and Kylie Walsh; with original composition and music from Shane Durrant.

In 2008, The Paper Birds began utilising the method of interviewing people and placing verbatim material within the script. This developed organically throughout the process for making 'In a Thousand Pieces' and became a defining shift in the direction of the company. Following this, all our productions have utilised this method of researching within communities and speaking directly to people to inform and shape our work.



Kylie Perry & Jemma McDonnell in Thirsty (2011)



The Paper Birds

What are your aims as a company?

Our artistic policy states: 'The Paper Birds strive to create and share devised work that is important; work that is culturally, socially and politically observational and conversationally urgent.' And it is this statement that underpins all of our work – we want to make work that is about something, we don't make work for the sake of making work. We want to evoke discussion and create debate. Naturally, we have found that the topics we want to raise into discussion have a political slant, whether that be about ageing (*On the One Hand*, 2013), booze Britain (*Thirsty*, 2011), human trafficking (*In a Thousand Pieces*, 2008) or debt and poverty (*Broke*, 2014). We aim to make people whose voices wouldn't ordinarily be heard on our stages speak loudly and clearly. We understand that we harbour a powerful tool as theatre artists, and that we can use our voice for the greater good.

Which practitioners influence you?

As students we explored the techniques of Pina Bausch, Robert Wilson, The Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment, DV8, Caryl Churchill, Complicite. When we began to make our own work, lots of these styles and fragments of these other artists' work naturally found its way into the ideas and work we were shaping of our own. We still admire and borrow from the techniques and style of lots of those other practitioners now. We often reference other artists work whilst in the rehearsal room.

It has also been said that we make work that reflects a contemporary take on the conventions of Bertolt Brecht's theatre. It is true that we also make political work, and there are many further shared features; an 'introduction' to the show, explaining what the audience is going to see; 'alienation' effects, for us that means playing with acting and non-acting, dipping in and out of character, direct address; non-naturalism. So many of the common traits within our work now can be linked back to their origin within Brecht's work.



Grace Savage in Blind (2014)