# NTQ Reports and Announcements

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Franc Chamberlain

## Eating Words: a Performative Banquet

Personal memories – and lapses of memory – two months after a unique event arranged by Richard Gough and the Centre for Performance Research for the SCUDD Annual Conference at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, on 3 April 2004.

IT WAS raining as we walked from our hotel on the sea front to the part of the Old College where we were to have our pre-banquet drinks. We were ushered into a large, high-ceilinged room which had a table with drinks and chairs around the edges. People stood or sat and talked, and then were given questionnaires to fill in. I have an image of a young woman wearing a white blouse and a black skirt handing out the questionnaires but I have no idea whether this is a memory or a figment of the imagination filling in a lacuna. I do remember a shortage of pens and thinking: 'Who brings a pen to a party?'

We knew that we each had to take a completed questionnaire to the Castle Theatre, but not how the information was going to be used. Information such as our mobile phone number, our idea of a good night out, whether we told lies, and a favourite line. I wrote the first thing that came to mind: 'Listen, a star just fell shattering like crystal' – a line I wrote for an adaptation of *Pelléas et Mélisande* a few years ago. I have no idea why it returned at that moment. I don't remember the other questions.

When everyone was gathered and had completed their questionnaires, we were ushered round to the Castle Theatre. Quite a few people were there before me, and the entrance was congested when I arrived. Gradually I made my way into the foyer. The floor was covered in bubblewrap. Two or three performers in formal evening dress were raising glasses in a toast, freezing and repeating the action (what were the colours? 'Black, white, and red' is the answer that comes, but I am unsure). There were trays on which stood sherry glasses filled with water.

As I moved around chatting with friends, I noticed that people were getting cards with numbers on, which they were putting over their heads so that they hung behind their back. I saw a loose card numbered 23 and picked it up and put it on. I then realized that other people had picture cards as well and had got rid of their questionnaires. I was told that I was supposed to have exchanged my questionnaire for a number. I looked around and noticed that there was a queue for the ticket kiosk. I have no idea how a card had come to be lying around for me to pick up, but I got in the queue and I exchanged my questionnaire for a card. The one I already had was taken away and I was given a new one. I became interested that the number I'd handed in was 23 and the new one I was given was 32. I found it amusing that I'd got my first number by doing things in the wrong order, and that when I did them in the correct order I was given a number with the previous digits reversed. Something to talk about in those pre-prandial moments. I was aware of Richard Gough dressed in a tan caretaker's coat, leaning on a broom.

We were led off in numbered groups, one group at a time. Each group was led down a corridor; there was an exhibition on the walls: framed images, objects, and texts: food and recipes. Mostly small frames . . . in my memory the walls were white.

From the corridor we were led into a curtained-off space. The drapes, I think, were black. In the centre of the space was a rectangular table covered with a white cloth. Around the table were about five performers in evening dress. They conversed and moved, fell silent and froze, and spoke and moved again. I don't remember the content. Something more than small talk, something both intense and oneiric is how it seems now. Around the edges of the space were chairs, on each of which was a brown paper takeaway bag, containing an aluminium tray with a reflective cardboard top. Inside the container was a stick with a piece of tofu and a mushroom.

By the time I arrived, two-thirds of the seats were filled (we had been led through in three groups). I sat, talked with people, reassured one that the food was vegetarian, looked around at others, saw friends who weren't at the SCUDD conference and whom I hadn't seen for nearly ten years. Running from beneath the table to the chairs were strips of red ribbon creating a pattern like an Imperial Japanese flag. The light in the room was quite low, with most of it on the central area

The performers left and Richard, still with his broom, addressed us. He draws our attention to the ribbons. It seemed that some people hadn't previously noticed them, and I found that surprising, but it was a secondary feature after the



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performers around the table and the bags on the chairs. We were instructed to pick up the end of a piece of ribbon, of which there were two to each chair, and all together to pull the ribbon towards us. The task was to do this as an ensemble and we were desperately bad at it! On the end of each piece of ribbon was a small pot of food. We repeated this action once. I don't remember what the food was, although there was something different in each of the two pots and one of them wasn't suitable for vegetarians. Shrimp, I think. There is plenty of talking around the room, with people remaining in their seats.

At some point the tablecloth was removed. I have a vague recollection of seeing it happen, but paid little attention. The table was revealed as a steel-topped kitchen table. I don't see these very often nowadays but I remembered how hot they get from a time when I worked in a bakery on a night shift, pulling trays and trays of hot loaves from the oven onto the table and then sorting them into racks. Particularly tired one night, I attempted to rest by leaning my forearm on the table. I leaped up with a scream, pulling several layers of skin away from my arm.

I didn't have time to dwell on my memories, as the evening moved on to the next sequence. I had no idea what to expect. I felt that the food we had received so far was a kind of foreplay, a foretaste. But I wasn't sure, and I enjoyed that sense of uncertainty, trusting that I would be satisfied but unsure how.

This next moment I have retold several times. I no longer know what I remember and what I've made up for effect, since I've wanted to impress on people that they missed something special that night. I have been to many conference banquets, but none has come close to this one. I've wanted to make colleagues who had failed to attend the (disappointingly inquorate) SCUDD conference regret their absence.

So there we all were, still sitting around the edges of the room, talking with each other, an empty metal-topped table in the centre. Two women entered dressed in dark suits with white shirts. They're wearing dark glasses. Each is carrying two steel attaché cases. They open the cases by slapping them down onto the table, metal on metal, and opening them one at a time. Each case contained three stainless-steel vacuum flasks, which they arranged in orderly rows on the table. At some point in this process a large pot appeared on the table, which we were now invited to approach. Inside the large pot were soup bowls, and inside each vacuum flask there was hot, red soup. (Black, white, red, and silver steel seem to be the dominant colours in my memory of the event.)

While our attention was on getting soup, a whole wall of curtains was taken away to reveal the full length of the space laid out as a banqueting room. It was a stunning *coup de théâtre*. Along the centre of the high-ceilinged room was a long table laid with plates and cutlery. At the end of the table there was a small block of steps and a white strip down the centre of the table, which was clear of any objects.

At the far end of the room was a curtained-off area through which a cooking range and kitchen staff were visible. As we entered the space, a relatively high bar to our left stretched the same length as the table, and on this were bottles and glasses of wine and olives, garlic (or garlic-stuffed olives?) and some other nibbles. I collected my drink, joked, and found a seat at the table, where I put my glass, and then went to get some food from the food table that ran parallel to the dining table on the opposite side from the bar.

I remember very little about the food. There was a good mix of options and I was content, but nothing stands out in memory over two months later. I loaded my plate (I think it was a large, white, dinner plate) and went back to my place. Unfortunately someone had taken my seat. I tried to find another as people were sitting down, but each place I tried was already taken. More memories, this time of being at a children's party at the factory where my dad worked, not knowing anyone, and not being able to find a place to sit until someone came to my aid. This time, being a big boy, I was able to sort something out for myself. I ended up sitting between two women I hadn't met before, and who were performers with Enrique Pardo's company. We introduced ourselves and struck up a conversation as we dined.

The entrance by which we'd accessed the banqueting area was now closed again and there was a white cloth draped above it, which was used as a projection screen from a movie. I remember it was in black and white, unfamiliar. A woman, two men, a love triangle? A hot night, curtains in a breeze, our conversation fantasizes the narrative. There was another projection but I failed to notice that so well.

Soon after we were all seated, mobile phones began to sound with incoming calls and messages. I received a text, 'Listen, a star just fell shattering like crystal,' and replied, 'They pierced her heels with a sickle of silver.' Texts arrived inviting me to call other numbers, to engage with questions. We swapped phones, pretended to be other people. I became Enrique. Glasses were refilled. My phone rings, my neighbour answers it, I can see a friend across the table, looking around trying to see who she's talking to. I can read her lips moving and I know she's talking to the person with my phone. She doesn't find her interlocutor before the conversation ends.

It's difficult to look back and write about things as if they occurred in a particular order when so many were going on simultaneously. At some point Enrique Pardo, gesturing with a spatula, stood behind the range and gave an impro-



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vised speech about Hecate. Dancing started on the table – the reason there were steps at the end and a clear strip down the centre. Initially it was the performers who danced, then some guests were invited. The area behind the range was filled with cushions, a post-prandial chill-out space. People were invited for cocktails, there was coffee served in the lobby.

Sitting in the chill-out space I noticed the questionnaires we'd filled in. Each had a number which matched the number on the cards we were wearing. The text messages and the phone calls had come in response to what we'd written on the form. Of course that had become apparent as soon as we started reading the messages, but it seems more interesting to say that explicitly now, leaving it implicit earlier on in this text. Why? Because I imagine a reader who wasn't there, and who might not make the connection as quickly as someone who was, might become more active by asking themselves what was going on. Who was calling whom? Who was sending texts?

By this time performers and guests were interacting much more freely, and there was spontaneous dancing on the table. I have no recollection of the music. I can't even be sure there was any music; all that comes to me is the memory of seeing movement and of moving. Dancing on the table with something in my hand. As I focus a little more on that I'm sure I remember music. No tune comes.

All too soon, although it was over six hours since I'd left the hotel, it was time to leave. There was an enormous amount of cleaning to do. I wondered if the performers would be doing it in the morning.

This will stay in my memory as a wonderful performance event. I don't know what will happen to it, though. Will it become more elaborate and detailed? Will I suddenly remember the food and the colours, the name of the woman next to me, the music? Will my imagination continue to work on these things and produce versions which I can't distinguish from the reality?

In my mind's eye there is a woman in an ice-blue silk ballgown, turning. Was she there? I really don't know.



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