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Being a Shyster: Re-visioning the Actor with Learning Disabilities

A personal introduction by Clive Barker on the place of the Shysters in Midlands theatre:

I moved from London to Birmingham around the time the new Birmingham Rep was built. I thought it had all the worst features of a theatre and all the best features of a municipal crematorium. There were serious flaws, too, with the Midlands Art Centre, although my children enjoyed the Saturday morning activities. However, soon a group of idealists founded the Birmingham Arts Lab, whose work was exciting and enjoyable, and brought to the city the best of new experimental theatre. Some years later I moved to Coventry, which I had thought of as a theatrical desert since the death of Brian Bailey, with the Belgrade staggering through a succession of unfortunate managements. But the past ten years have seen a glorious flowering of small companies which display both vision and technical ability. Central to this activity are the Shysters, a group of actors with learning disabilities who have found ways of turning these into their own distinctive theatrical style and language. Since I sit on their board of directors I have felt it difficult to write personally about their work in NTQ, and was delighted when Rachel Karafistan remedied this deficiency by offering us the following article. I love the Shysters: their work entrances me, and I would willingly see their shows once a week if possible. They help to make being sent to Coventry a rich theatrical experience.

RECENT YEARS have seen an explosion of new work featuring social groups which have previously found themselves relatively excluded from professional arts. Such work is essential if we are successfully to create an arts scene that is as diverse as the society it represents. Ruth Tompett in her essay 'Changing Perspectives' states:

> The gender, sexuality, racial origin, class, or ability/disability of creative artists informs their creative work and demonstrates how many of the existing attitudes and structures in established contemporary arts production contribute to maintaining a narrowly based arts scene.[1]

There have, however, been few professional companies which feature work exclusively created by people with learning disabilities. The Shysters are one such company, and their work is an example of what Eugenio Barba identifies as 'Third Theatre', which

> lives on the fringes, often outside or on the outskirts of the centres and capitals of culture. It is a theatre created by people who have seldom undergone a traditional theatrical education and therefore are not recognized as professionals. But they are not amateurs. Their entire day is filled with theatrical experience, sometimes by what they call training, or by the preparation of performances for which they must fight to find an audience.

The Shysters make no apologies for and certainly do not disguise their disabilities; moreover they refuse to let these devalue the quality of their work. In their opinion, their disabilities actively inform their creativity and take it to another level – one that indeed could not be accessed from an otherwise, 'normal' frame of reference. In the words of their director, Richard Hayhow: Some other companies whose actors have learning disabilities try and make their actors "normal": we try to keep them different.'[2]

The Shysters actively challenge our preconceived perceptions of their work as artists with learning disabilities. Forget charity, forget pity: it is respect they demand. Their forthright view of how the world should re-perceive their work opens up many questions about our own perceptions as spectators:

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Imagine a house inhabited by a large traditional family. The head of the family occupies a room on one side of the house. The view from his window represents to him the view of the world. He gives no value or credence to the notion that other rooms have other views. He requires that the view from his window define the outside world for everyone in that house and, to a large extent, the family comply, until finally some of them believe it.[3]

Much has been said about the historic supremacy of the male gaze and its dominance over our experience of art, literature, and theatre. Issues surrounding women as spectators, actors, objects, and subjects have given rise to all kinds of manifestations of so-called feminist theatre. And theatre companies such as Tara Arts are redressing the imbalance in terms of ethnic minority groups, providing the opportunity to create work informed by their culture and experience. Such work is generally taken seriously by the spectator and perceived as professional.

This is not generally the case for theatre companies featuring people with learning disabilities. Until now they have had to accept the implications and limitations of being perceived as somehow inferior and even 'worthy causes'. This is where the Shysters are fighting back. They ask nothing less than to be accepted on an equal footing to the rest of the creative world, and argue that just as the fact that you are a woman or are from a particular ethnic or social background, can inform your individual creativity, so can having a learning disability.

There has been some significant work with people with physical disabilities, otherwise termed 'differently-abled':

The dance company CanDoCo is made up of both ordinarily-abled and differently-abled dancers. Its choreography explores and exploits its dancers' varied capacities and attributes. A performer in a wheelchair is seen as offering a whole range of movement possibilities an ordinarily-abled dancer would not have.[4]

DV8 Physical Theatre company have recently cast 'differently-abled' actor/dancers in their performance *The Cost of Living*. Such work is groundbreaking and forces us as spectators to re-vision physical disability in a powerful new way. However, can such re-visioning truly work in the same way with actors with learning disabilities? Our prejudices concerning mental function/dysfunction/disability are not so easily overcome: it is not as simple as *looking past* a physical abnormality, since these 'abnormalities' are often at first invisible and unpredictable.

Meeting the Shysters

I was first invited in 1996 to run a workshop with the Shysters (or Fountain, as they were then known). I was cautious not to offend, overstretch, confuse or patronize the actors who, I was informed, had learning disabilities. Despite being told of their skills as actors by their director, Richard Hayhow, I still went into the workshop cautiously and even ready to 'dumb down' the work.

As it turned out, there was no need. My caution was grossly misguided – I was in fact dazzled by their commitment and depth of feeling. They could switch between laughter and tears with ease, conviction, and professionalism. What is more, they were accomplished manipulators of pathos and bathos. I was fearful – but fearful of how far down they would voluntarily reach inside themselves (it usually takes 'ordinary' actors a lifetime of chipping away at their inhibitions to reach such truth). Moreover I was most fearful of how my own prejudices, informed by the knowledge of their disabilities, might have clouded my initial perceptions about their skills.

The fact that they have learning disabilities has (for the actors at least) ceased to be an issue. They have left behind this label – outstripped its negative connotations and surpassed all associated expectations. They are busy creating a new language to describe their individuality and celebrate their achievements as actors.

The Polish actress Basia Pradzynska, who has trained and performed with the Russian theatre company Derevo and the Polish company Teatr Biuro Podrozy, and runs a regular theatre workshop class for Polish people with learning disabilities, explains it like this:

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They seem to have the ability to straddle the border between reality and imagination more effectively and honestly than 'ordinary' actors. You almost instantly believe their actions and words – they have no need to pretend.[5]

Basia cites two occasions when she has witnessed an actor undergo a total transformation. The first was a physical montage in a workshop by Elena Yarovaya (an actress with Derevo) and the second involved a young man with learning disabilities who transformed into a cat during a workshop led by Basia:

You could actually see the claws growing out of his hands and feet, such was his total belief in his transformation, and as a result we believed totally with him.[6]

The absence of pretension is a key to this discussion. On the whole, actors with learning disabilities appear more able to negate their ego and as a result portray a real truth.

A Brief History of the Shysters

Whilst touring some of Coventry's poorer estates in 1990, members of the Belgrade Theatre became aware of young people with learning disabilities doing menial tasks in day centres and being paid a pittance. Says the theatre's producer, Jane Hytch:

We set up a theatre company called Fountain to explore ways of working with them. . . . It was very hard-going. They felt alienated because they couldn't read very well, and we had to work without scripts. It was socially driven rather than theatre-driven.[7]

Within the original group of 45, they spotted around a dozen with the potential to act, and these formed the basis of the company that is now known as the Shysters. In those early days the work could be classified as community arts, and its focus was largely on process, not product, the emphasis being on giving voice to an otherwise silent and underrepresented group. Mark Webster in *Finding Voices, Making Choices* states that:

what differentiates community arts, say from amateur arts, or the professional or commercial arts, is that:

- It promotes participation, regardless of the existing level of skill or 'talent'.
- It is undertaken by a group who either have the same collective identity, or a goal greater than the art form itself, or both.
- It is developed primarily to provide opportunities for people who through economic or social circumstances have little access to the means to participate in the arts.[8]

Now, however, as Jane Hytch explains, the parameters for the community work of the theatre have changed:

We're not here to be social workers. We're trying to produce fascinating work. What this company brings is a fresh interpretation of theatre.[9]

The Shysters was set up in 1997 as a professional company for actors with learning disabilities. 'Shyster' is an archaic English word for a crooked lawyer, and by extension a con-artist and trickster – a real-life actor. There is an obvious connection here with the artifice of theatre – a shyster would need a fair degree of art and cunning in the execution of his or her profession.

The Shysters today are a company of nine actors with learning disabilities and theatre practitioners who together create new plays through a unique devising process. But its deeper roots perhaps lie in the career and vision of director, Richard Hayhow. Richard took over the Open Theatre Company (OTC) as Artistic Director in 1990, and it is the OTC that oversees the work of the Shysters.

Having studied drama at Aberystwyth University during the 1970s, where students routinely worked with companies like Brith Gof, Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, and the Cardiff Laboratory Theatre (which went on to become the Centre for Performance Research), Richard had been exposed to experimental and international theatre work, and it is little wonder that he emerged with a less than conventional way of perceiving theatre and directing. He went on to undertake a course in directing in 1981 at the Drama Studio, London, building his experimental training at Aberystwyth into his work as a director who preferred to serve as a guide and facilitator with his actors. He aimed to enable the

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actors to work from within themselves and to bring what they uniquely had to give to the devising process, rejecting traditional forms of directing in favour of a less prescriptive approach: 'He saw the role of the director as ensuring that what is expressed is communicated in the theatrical context to its best potential.'[10]

Richard strove to include all kinds of people in his theatre work and as such became heavily involved in community plays. He has directed community plays in Worcester, Banbury, Lincoln, Bridlington, Woking, Hereford, and the Millennium Mystery Plays in Ireland during 2003. Unafraid of challenge, and unhappy that such work should be perceived as somehow inferior, he set about professionalizing it, beginning by innovating from within, to raise the standard and quality of community work to such a level that it had to be taken more seriously.

> Richard's aim was to demonstrate that the products of community theatre could rank in artistic value beside mainstream theatre productions.[11]

In addition to directing community plays, Richard worked with Other Voices Theatre Company, based in Worcester, and then with Fountain Theatre Company, based at the Belgrade. Then as part of his own Open Theatre Company he established the criteria to determine who the nine people would be to make up the company that was to become the Shysters. The individuals would have:

1. the ability to improvise and devise;
2. the ability to express him or herself physically;
3. the necessary degree of support provided by parents/carers so that s/he could commit her/himself to the work;
4. The willingness to commit to working two days a week and the demands of a performance/touring schedule.[12]

Since then the company, still based in Coventry and supported by the Belgrade Theatre, has gone from strength to strength, and has recently secured three-year funding from the Arts Council of England (West Midlands) and Coventry City Council to embark on an ambitious programme of both theatre and multi-media projects. This funding has provided greater stability for the company and allowed them to make four freelance workers permanent members of staff – Richard Hayhow as Artistic Director, Kathy Joyce as Associate Director, Sue Walker as Administrator, and Sunny Patel-Jones as company assistant (and also actor).

Today the rest of the company comprises Karen Burke, Lisa Carney, Matthew Gosnay, Matthew Granaghan (who replaced Tasleem Hussain during the *Tango Apocalypso* tour), Alan Kelly, Katherine Marshall (who replaced Katherine Summers during the *Scary Antics* tour), Sunny Patel-Jones, Kelvin Syme, and Jon Tipton.

Creating Work

As the group began to evolve into a professional company, a series of training workshops took place to develop the group's skills and devise ways of working together. A number of professional artists (of whom I was one) ran skills sessions with the group and through this process several of them were identified to collaborate in devising the shows which followed. These were Alex Jones, a writer who created the voice-over narrative for *Scary Antics* and the text for *Fallen Angels*, which grew out of a devising process; Nettie Edwards, the designer for *Scary Antics*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Tango Apocalypso*; Mike Longemore, composer for *Fallen Angels*; Michael Hall, Lighting Designer for *Scary Antics*, *Fallen Angels*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Tango Apocalypso*; and the present writer, in my capacity as movement adviser on *Scary Antics, Fallen Angels*, and most recently *Tango Apocalypso.*

Having access to the work of the company in this way has provided me with a unique insight into the way its work is created. The honesty of the actors is marked: if they don't like doing something, they don't do it, if they don't like an idea, you know about it. However, this honesty and openness is the key to the success of their creative method. Whatever is brought into the working room, be it

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an emotion, problem, piece of music, or object, can potentially be utilized in the creative process.

The company have adopted a multidisciplinary devising approach that allows the untrained actor to release and harness their creativity. There is often no plan at the outset of how to develop the work. They welcome all the aspects of who they are and what current concerns they may have into the devising process. Richard explains:

> We embrace what each day brings in from the outside even though it may sometimes seem irrelevant and inappropriate. We engage with ourselves and our lives and emotions in this way. All of these things we see as opportunities and not incidentals; we use them to create together. We have learned to be very opportunistic in this way.[13]

The Shysters actively use the emotion that the actors bring in to the working space at the time; a theme is not imposed or forced. To take an example, the day after Jill Dando's murder many emotions were expressed by the actors which then went on to form the catalyst for the piece *Fallen Angels*:

> None of us could answer the question 'Why is the world so cruel?' effectively except to suggest that whoever had made the world was cruel. . . . One person's raging against the world had led to the development of the character played by Jon Tipton in *Fallen Angels* of a cruel God who enjoys inflicting pain on humanity.[14]

Music, Physicality – and Intuition

In addition to being in and taking from the moment, music is the Shysters' common language. They very often construct stories and scenes from movement directly inspired by a piece of music, which seems to present itself at just the right time in the creative process. Music also provides a channel through to the exploration of deeper emotions that avoids the obvious trap of simply portraying what is banal and linear. Often the music that is used has a filmic quality to it – but it is not that the Shysters are acting to the music, more that the music liberates the potential of the imagination: the actors simply use it to 'imagine things to'.

Intuition plays an important role in Richard's creative work. He feels he is free to trust his intuition much more when working with the Shysters, since they don't ask questions with regard to the meaning, motivation, and purpose of each and every exercise as is the tendency with 'regular' professional actors: rather they just *do*, and in this way Richard as director has acquired a freedom away from the linearity of justification. Very often he will just put a piece of music on and see what happens in the space: he need not set up an activity or agenda of work, just trust the energy that is in the room at the time.

The work is often physical, but it is not dance, rather a journey of movement inspired by music. In this way, Richard becomes a kind of director/composer, with the actors as the notes – but the score is anything but predictable:

> We rely very little on words; although all of us within the company are articulate to varying degrees, music and physicality both have a universality beyond words that we like. In the end this journey leads to a theatrical form that is often surreal and absurd.[15]

This is not to say that words are not important for the work of the Shysters. In fact, they employ a writer, Alex Jones, to construct verse directly inspired by the actors' improvisation, which the actors then go on to learn and interpret for themselves. This was very much the case with *Fallen Angels*, as Alex explains:

> Mined from an improvisational process, steered by the director, Richard Hayhow, I take away my notes and respond to what I have seen and learnt. Music too is an inspiration at this stage, often leading the performers into abstract circumstances that nevertheless reflect on their feelings and experience. Often, the script has a poetic quality to it; almost a verse drama, often dark, and always chock-full of humour, reflecting the various characters of the Shysters. The script develops and grows as the process begins to turn into a rehearsal of what I have attended. Richard will suggest changes and throw in other ideas, spotting what works and what doesn't.[16]

Under the direction of Richard, the company have from the outset been deliberately educated away from the preconceived notions of

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naturalism, of theatre as dialogue, as representing everyday life. It is ultimately his vision for their work that has opened doors into each individual actor's creativity. In the most recent workshop I ran with the company, we worked on the themes of passion, lust, love, romance, and loss – and how to embody these on stage using the idea of the Tango. But Richard said that he did not want the company to waste a lot of time learning dance steps – so instead, using music, the actors themselves individually created moves which conveyed the way they felt inside and it was these movements that we then collected and choreographed.

Richard's unique rapport with the members of the company is what ultimately holds the group together. They trust him, so the work is honest. To this end, Richard does not see his role within the company as purely directorial: 'The role I have with the Shysters as "director" is not facilitator, director, dictator, observer, carer . . . but all of these things at different times and in different ways.'[17]

Their less than conventional approach to creating work has so far won the company a great deal of respect in all the right places. Gerry Robinson of the Arts Council said of the Shysters that it was 'a joy to see work of such quality',[18] while in 2002 a West Midlands Arts Final Report stated: 'The work is beginning to find an aesthetic in which learning disability is integral yet invisible within it.'[19] But it is the ordinary spectator the Shysters are out to win over. They do not seek compassion:

> Beware of sympathy. Beware of making concessions. They need none. The Shysters have left that all behind them. They make no case for allowances to be made for them. They are not asking for the possibility of being cast in roles normally reserved for 'normal' actors, if such extra-terrestrial beings exist. The Shysters start with the assumption that theatre is created out of experiences of human beings and is expressed through the physical actions and emotional inflexions of actors. They are like us and they are not like us, and in that lies the power and attraction of their drama.[20]

Can it be that the Shysters have crossed that line? Have they successfully marched into the realm of the 'professional company' and been accepted as equal and worthy of such status? Amongst an informed and open-minded few, perhaps so: but generally the



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Right: *Tango Apocalypso*. 'Let us dance in faith, hope, pleasure. Let us tell stories of love.' Top to bottom: Alan Kelly, Matthew Granaghan, Katherine Marshall, and Sunny Patel-Jones.

Opposite page: from *Scary Antics*. On his own in his flat, Jack's thoughts turn murderous.

Photos: Michael Hall.

battle has not even begun. It is not however for a lack of creativity – the company's repertoire of work is impressive and expanding.

A Trilogy of Creativity

The company currently has in repertoire three productions that very clearly trace its development as a whole and individually. It has been an intensive journey. The first production, *Scary Antics* (1999), utilized masks and physical theatre techniques to tell a tale involving universally relevant themes: love, loss, isolation, and alienation.

> What concerns the Shysters is how we don masks to function in society and seem unable ever to take them off again. . . .[21]

> . . . a surreal evening . . . beautiful, mesmerizing . . . energetic, unconventional performances. Nettie Edwards's picture-book set design is a delight, setting the scene for what is effectively a masked journey through a world of joy and pain.[22]

Speaking about the creation of this performance, Richard Hayhow notes how:

> People with learning disabilities have a sense of being worthless, or failures, and need to express and explore this in order to develop. Otherwise, as with the person who suggested the theme, the response is not always appropriately expressed.[23]

The company's second production, *Fallen Angels* (2000), premiered at the Belgrade's Arts Alive Festival in 2000. It was billed as a 'twenty-first century gothic spectacle', and toured nationally. Dealing very directly with the emotions of hate and anger, *Fallen Angels* dissects the consequences of being marked or set apart from others: 'The play therefore became an act of revenge, a way for the group of telling people how they felt about the

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world.' Simultaneously the piece explored the related themes of people as different/normal individuals and why they do wrong. Unlike *Scary Antics*, which took place largely without the use of words, the use of voice coupled with non-naturalistic verse became the idiom of this second production. In *Tango Apocalypso* (2003), the company's third and most recent production, the dominant themes are of love and forgiveness.

During the process of creating this trilogy of work, the company has naturally reached some kind of resolution. They now recognize the need for new pastures. Each actor within the company has been on a unique personal journey during the creation and performance of their work. Some have reached a very definite conclusion, and have emerged as more rounded, content, and driven individuals; some are in the middle of their journey. So several decisions have been taken to further the company's continued development.

First, it was decided that the stronger members would take more of a back seat in this next production. Second, that the new production should tell a woman's story, since the previous two had been principally inspired by stories from the male actors. Also, after leading the creative work of the company for the past seven years, Richard is now keen to focus on 'spreading the word' about their work, and to ensure that the company's achievements to date are both acknowledged and capitalized upon.

Part of this focus involves taking *Tango Apocalypso* to the Edinburgh Fringe in 2004 and seeking collaborations with other companies to develop related work. Associate Director Kathy Joyce will assume responsibility for continuing to explore creative new work. In addition, currently the Shysters are exploring the possibility of touring all three productions – in part because only a handful of people have actually seen the work, but also because they learn so much about themselves every time they perform.

Challenging the View from the Window

In addition to devising their own work, the company have also taken part in some very ambitious crossover productions involving professional actors and those with learning disabilities – notably *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which premiered at the Belgrade Theatre in October 2001. This ground-breaking production saw members of the Shysters become the first company of actors with learning disabilities to perform in a fully professional production on the main stage of a repertory theatre. The production involved the main members of the company having to learn Shakespearean text.

The professional actor Karl Morgan, who played Puck in the production, said of the experience of working with the Shysters: 'A lot of actors over-intellectualize. With the Shysters, there's no crap and no egos. The truth comes across'.[24]

The second collaboration was with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre on their production of *Of Mice and Men*, during which the Shysters worked with six Birmingham schools to explore themes from the play before devising and performing their own version on stage at the Birmingham Rep. And most recently the company have been completing a production entitled *The Monkey King*, of which Independent Care Standards Monitor David Braybrock said in his OFSTED Report for Sunfield School of June 2003:

> It is a partnership venture between the school, a local maintained, middle school and a theatre company. It involves adults with learning difficulties who perform with the disabled and non-disabled children. It is a truly exciting creative venture which already has clearly affected and influenced everyone who is involved. . . .The work is accessible, powerful, and compelling both in its structure and content. It builds on the strengths of all the pupils and thereby creates greater self-confidence, poise, responsiveness, and delight, which belied the level and nature of their profound disabilities. The rehearsal gave them, their families, and the staff the opportunity to focus on their creative abilities rather than the extent of their disabilities.[25]

It would appear, then, that in their exhaustive programme of work the Shysters are remaining true to their original aims of rattling commonly held perceptions of actors with learning disabilities. They are not charity cases, but have an important role to

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Fallen Angels. The book is wrecked. A vengeful god gets his come-uppance and it's time to fly. Top to bottom: Kelvin Syme, Sunny Patel-Jones, and Jon Tipton. Photo: Michael Hall.

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play in stirring innovation within theatre; and it is their disabilities and the way they inform their individual creativities that are at the heart of this change.

The Shysters have distanced themselves from the 'community' label. Community as a word implies charity, socially focused, and suggests little about ground-breaking professional art. However, in turn this has created a problem with how to 'sell' the work of the company. How marketable is ground-breaking work by actors with disabilities? Is the work visual, physical, alternative? What is the 'label'? Do they need one? In the end the company just sell the performance in whatever way they think will bring in an audience.

There is also a great and understandable need within the company to be seen and accepted as *normal*. However, this contradicts the feeling that what makes theatre interesting is what is different and unique about people. They have settled rather uneasily for the notion of 'individual', as opposed to 'different' or 'normal' at the moment, as a way of resolving this tension.

> Issues of casting and of work opportunity are significant not only in respect of gender, race, and age, but also pertaining to differently abled performers. Opportunities in the arts for differently abled performers are few and it is rare indeed for performers to be cast or choreographed irrespective of a disability.[26]

The Issue of Professionalism

The battle against such prejudice within the system is ongoing and uphill. Richard cites a recent example where he and his actors were about to enter the performance space in a well-known regional theatre and the woman on front of house stopped them and asked Richard: 'So are they in the show? Yes! – oh lovely – Bless! Are their parents coming to see them, then?'

Despite working professionally on the *Midsummer Night's Dream* co-production, the actors were paid only £15 a week, so as not to disrupt their entitlement to disability benefits. Even securing this payment has been a huge struggle for the administrative team behind the Shysters. For the period of the *Tango* tour they have been able to arrange for the actors to be paid £73 a week. However, this is only possible for twenty-six weeks under current legislation.

As a result, the actors within the company often find it difficult to view their work as professional. All the actors have a three-year development plan in which they outline how they want to come off benefits and get a 'proper' acting job. It will not be an easy road for them as individuals, since while they are within the Shysters the actors are safe, valued, and their creativity respected. If, in the 'real world', it is not like this even for so-called 'normal' actors, what hope does an actor with a learning disability have of operating outside this protective realm?

> We are well aware that we operate in a sort of professional cocoon. We have created jobs for ourselves, but the real test of our skills and achievements is in how we can move into and influence the wider theatre world.[27]

Jon Tipton, actor and founder member of the company for the past seven years, told me:

> When I'm on stage I love it – every minute of it. I want to be on stage for ever. For my three-year plan I want to be on TV and in films and join Equity. I just want to be known. The Shysters has changed my life completely. I have done seven years of training and professional performing as an actor – but even now I can't earn a living. I know it's really difficult to be an actor – but that's the risk you take, isn't it?[28]

In addition to his work with the Shysters, Jon has performed with Forced Entertainment in *The Voices*, and is no stranger to casting auditions. When I asked him whether at an audition he would he tell other actors auditioning that he had a learning disability his answer was clear:

> No, because I don't think I have much of a learning difficulty – I am just a bit slower to do things than you. I also wouldn't tell them because those kind of people aren't looking for my kind of people, I probably wouldn't get the job. They look at us differently. I don't want to have to deal with that any more. Nothing out there is normal. My Mum showed me the word 'normal' in the dictionary and my Dad explained what it meant by

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Tango Apocalypso. Above: 'Who do you love?' Left to right: Matthew Granaghan, Katherine Marshall and Lisa Carney. Below: 'Imagine there is only one starry night left till the end of the world – what would we do?' Full company. Photos: Michael Hall.



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sayings things like – you see that bottle standing on there now – well that is normal. When you are driving a car – it is normal to change gear. I don't know. . . . Maybe there shouldn't be a word like normal.[29]

Similarly, fellow-actor Kelvin, who has been with the company for the past six years, said of his disability: 'I can't escape it – it's in my records. It's who I am. But then, no one is normal.'[30]

The Philosophy of Shysterdom

In order to redress this imbalance and create a new language for viewing the work of such companies, the Shysters have set about defining their work and what it actually means to be a Shyster. The company manifesto declares:

- *To be a Shyster is to understand that the journey of life is to find your inner Shyster.*
- *A Shyster sees the world sideways on. They take this view that embraces absurdity and relishes life and turns it into inspired art.*
- *A Shyster finds people fascinating. A Shyster is willing to take people as they find them, to be open and non-judgemental. The everyday and the ordinary delight a Shyster. They bend, squish and shape it into something surreal to be taken back and shared.*
- *A Shyster is someone who, having found the world to be a sometimes frightening and confusing place, finds their own way of surviving.*
- *Shysters embrace the extraordinary and translate it into their reality. They welcome others into their world and invite them to embrace it.*
- *A Shyster communicates their experiences in a hundred different ways.*

The special 're-visioning' the company has here begun defining is further outlined by director and founder Richard Hayhow:

As a company we are proud of our achievements and feel that we have developed an artistic territory that has at its heart the exploration of the creativity of an actor with learning disabilities. We have always been comfortable with the notion that it is our individuality more than our sameness as people that creates our theatre. Therefore we are happy to talk about a 'learning disability culture' and also feel we have made a contribution to it. However, learning disability is a label and as such something the company's actors frequently and understandably reject. Learning disability is central to our work, but we also want it to be invisible within it. This is where the word 'Shyster' has again begun to help us. We are using it to celebrate and transform the learning disability factor, and in the process to colonize the word to mean more of what we want it to mean rather than sticking to its original definition.[31]

This is not a theatre of pity and charity but engaging, absorbing theatre with the truth of each individual actor's experience and character at its heart. There is no room for pretension or pretext – this is straight from the core. The company freely explore their inner angels and devils. They are not afraid to risk ridicule in the pursuit of true representation. As such their work deserves both respect and a platform. Perhaps it can be summarized more simply, as actor Lisa Carney said in a recent rehearsal I attended: 'Take me seriously please. I mean it.'

The actor Sunny Patel-Jones has been with the Shysters from the outset and explains how important it has been for him:

To me being a Shyster means you can be your own person. Before I wasn't at all – now I am. I was really shy in my first workshop, I was about fifteen – I wasn't like I am now – I was so shy. I wanted to be a Shyster because I liked working with and meeting other people, but the bottom line is that I love to be on stage. When I am performing, all the time I am remembering things that have happened to me in my life.[32]

Sunny's final comment touches on perhaps the most important aspect of the company's work which I will address here: the way in which their work seeks to ritualize experience, to promote catharsis, and actively to use their personal experiences to create art to be shared with others.

We are moving on from the old community arts ethos of 'people getting something out of it' and into valuing the *art*. The Shysters are beginning this process of articulation. . . . The baggage they've carried around from their past gives them a strength of feeling that informs their acting.[33]

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The Shysters' fresh interpretation of experience through its transformation into performance is linked with the shamanic ideal of theatre, or transformation/catharsis. This philosophy of work does not stop with the creative impulse behind the company, but permeates into their everyday interactions. In a rehearsal I attended, one of the actors, seeing that Richard was having difficulty expressing himself, jumped out of her chair and placed her hands on his head and performed a sort of virtual operation in order, as she said, 'to help him think clearly'.

Some of the usual principles of generating material within a Shyster framework run counter to 'normal' practice in theatre. For example, being true to how you feel in the moment contrasts with 'professional' actors generally being urged to keep their private experiences separate from the creative work.

Often scenes are driven directly by personal experience and have a cathartic effect on the actors. Being a Shyster is a life changing experience – a transformation – not only from an artistic perspective, but also practically and personally. Often for the first time in their lives, the actors have the opportunity to tour, travel, and most importantly be seen and taken seriously by audiences who may in any other situation disregard their opinion or belittle their experience. As Jon explains: 'Everything we've experienced outside the show – we put inside the show.'[34]

The Wounded as Healers

In my article 'The Spirits Wouldn't Let Me Be Anything Else: Shamanic Dimensions within Theatre Practice Today',[35] I referred to Erich Neumann's essay of 1954, 'Creative Man and Transformation', reminding us of the ancient myth that only a wounded person can be a healer. Neumann suggests it is the creative person who is forever 'wounded', because:

> He does not, like other men, tend to heal the personal wounds involved in all development by an increased adaptation to the collectivity. His wounds remain open, but his suffering from them is situated in depths from which another curative power arises, and this curative power is in the creative process.[36]

Neumann emphasized that, in order for this process to be effective, it is important that the 'shadow side' of the personality be recognized and brought into creative play, since there can be no light without darkness. Such a duality is evident in the work of the Shysters: 'The Shysters are incredible; they have an energy which transforms even the darkest of moods and can create with the same darkness in a way that shines.'[37]

On their way to a rebirthing of themselves as individuals, each and every Shyster has (or is currently) experiencing to some degree those levels of transformation which are also the characteristic features of shamanism. These include:

- *The call and withdrawal of the shaman initiate from ordinary society and resulting depression.*
- *Soul journey, where the shaman experiences encounters with spirit-animals which may at first seem dangerous, but later become allies and guides.*
- *Death* (*metaphorical and spiritual*) *involving submission and dismemberment.*
- *Rebirth with newly acquired spiritual knowledge and integrity.*[38]

As actors we enter a kind of altered state on stage, and learn things about ourselves and life in a much more profound and impacting way. This can be especially relevant to the experiences of the Shysters. Grotowski believed that one of the vehicles which permits man to have access to another level of perception is to be found in the art of creating a performance. He argued that it is impossible to create such performances if we destroy the bridge to the past: 'The past is the source of our creative efforts. The "total act" is total self-revelation in a moment of extreme honesty.'[39]

As we have seen, the Shysters are not afraid to draw on their past, and in fact embrace the opportunity to do so. The process of creating and performing has a huge cathartic effect on them; in turn this is fed back into their own lives, making them (amongst other things) more confident and outgoing individuals.

As I recently watched the company's latest production, *Tango Apocalypso,* I asked myself

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a simple question: why is their work having such a strong effect on me? The performance in question moved me to tears on several occasions and then jolted me out of myself into laughter in an instant. The actors' manipulation of the audience's emotions was accomplished and unpredictable, and this is a hallmark of the Shysters' style. You cannot sit comfortably, for you have no idea where the rollercoasters of emotion will take you next: you need to be prepared at every turn to be faced with fragments of yourselves on stage.

It also occurred to me that what the actors were portraying was the very essence of emotion, stripped to its essentials – no complicated psychology, no egos, just pure emotion stimulated by the actors' journey with the changing soundtrack and their relationship with the other actors and the audience. Towards the end of the performance – which culminated in a funeral that turned into a raucous wake which limboed off into the sunset – one spectator was moved to join in with the action and began to move with the actors, even vocalizing his gratitude to them, urging the audience to 'give them another round of applause please!' Such passionate interaction is rare in theatre these days and speaks for itself.

During this performance, I also became aware of another phenomenon in the actors' physical work: because of their different disabilities, their attention to detail in the body was different to that of an otherwise 'normal' actor. For example, one actress, limited (or liberated) by her physicality, portrayed the delicacy of love and intimacy with a simple but extraordinary gesture of one hand. The performance was full of such instances of the actors' unique ability to employ different modes of physicality in order to convey their story. The fact that these movements, these signs even, were not always predictable forces us as spectators out of our normal mode of receivership and invites us to engage with simple, focused gesture rather than grandiose movements. Spectators have also remarked on the clumsiness of the work – not in a negative sense, but as part of its charm and inexplicable appeal. We are not always perfect and nor should our art always be. Richard Schechner defines what he terms 'believed-in theatre' as one 'where conviction and sincerity, direct address or testimony depending on your frame of reference, are more important than professional acting skills.'[40] And Rose Whyman, in her recent report on the company, defines the strength of its work as just such a 'believed–in' quality:

> The Shysters start with the assumption that theatre is created out of experiences of human beings and is expressed through the physical actions and emotional inflections of actors. . . . Although the action is completely fictitious, the real-life experiences of the whole company are the substance of the play. . . . Many of the experiences of the company are those we expect to meet in life, or expect not to meet and have to confront.[41]

The greatest challenge is for us as audiences to confront our stereotypes of people with learning disabilities and thus our tendency to dismiss work with these people as 'charity' or 'community'. It is in fact the ritual of the Shysters' play and the beauty and unpredictability of their creativity that I am able to relate to as a spectator. It is this ritual and association that ultimately means I leave the theatre a little changed from when I went in.

Re-visioning Learning Disabilities

I began with an examination of how our perception of creative work needs widening to include people from previously unidentified or rejected groups. Let me end by quoting again from A. Ruth Tompett:

> Whenever creative work derives from a narrow range of perspectives, we are all being 'short-changed'. Marginalization of difference leads to a limited and limiting arts scene, from which the majority of people find their realities excluded, misrepresented, or undervalued. . . . Everyone stands to gain from the richer experience diversity can offer.[42]

The reality is of course more complex than this worthy aspiration, but the work of the Shysters has done much to encourage inclusivity, shatter preconceptions, shape innovation, and identify creativity that was otherwise latent or misrepresented. There is, however,

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still a very long way to go before an actor with a learning disability can be taken seriously in the mainstream acting world, since the very nature of the industry is intolerant, unethical, and biased to the beautiful. The Shysters are still very much 'outsiders'.

However, as Eugenio Barba points out, such great pioneers of theatre as Stanislavski, Artaud, and Grotowski came to theatre from outside, and hence brought very different meanings and motivations to the art form. They all focused on the development of a legacy to themselves. Barba links this idea of a legacy with what makes 'Third Theatre' groups different:

> The essential character of the Third Theatre is the autonomous construction of a meaning, which does not recognize the boundaries assigned to our craft by the surrounding culture.[43]

Often actors and directors involved in the Third Theatre find themselves there by accident. It is a theatre fuelled by need and a vocational call: a need to create and leave a legacy. The work of the Shysters has evolved out of an urgent need to leave such a legacy. Their legacy heralds the beginning of a form of creativity that is at last beginning to be taken seriously:

> I have seen *Scary Antics* three times. I could happily see it once a week for a long time more. It has moved me with the emotions expressed, it has made me laugh with the clowning, it has moved me to rise to my feet and cheer at the curtain. I feel very lucky to see beginning to flower what I called in an article the 'Silent Revolution': small groups of actors with a vision of the theatre they want to create, which has always been the way the best theatre has come into being. The Shysters are in the vanguard of the growing number of companies making the silent revolution. They are an important part of the future of the theatre in this country.[44]

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