

*Attempts on her Life*  
by Martin Crimp

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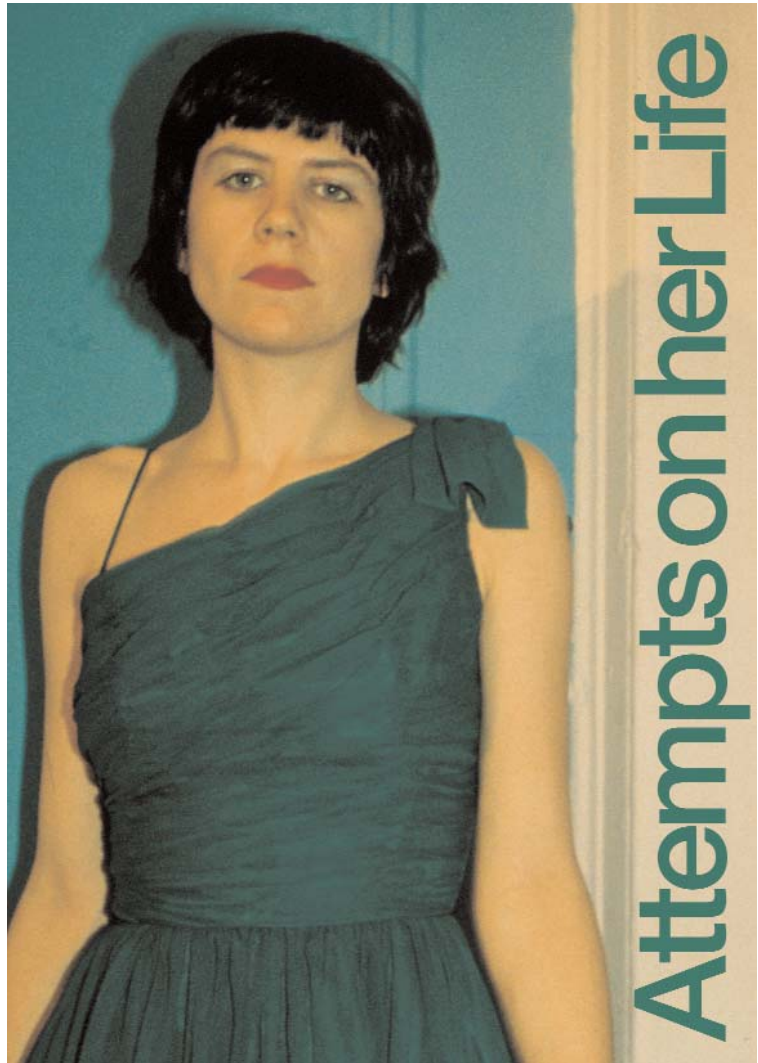


photo (Vivienne in the green dress, NYC, 1980) by Nan Goldin

**Further production details:**  
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# The National's production

*The Company*

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**DINA KORZUN**  
**HELENA LYMBERY**  
**PAUL READY**  
**JONAH RUSSELL**  
**ZUBIN VARLA**  
**SANDRA VOE**

Directed by  
**KATIE MITCHELL AND THE COMPANY**

Designer  
**VICKI MORTIMER**

Lighting Designer  
**PAULE CONSTABLE**

Video Designer  
**LEO WARNER** of Fifty Nine Ltd

Choreographer  
**DONNA BERLIN**

Music  
**PAUL CLARK**

Sound Designer  
**GARETH FRY**

Company Voice Work  
**KATE GODFREY**

Staff Director  
**LUCY KERBEL**

**Opening of this production:**  
The Lyttelton Theatre, 14 March 2007



Members of the Company  
Photo by Stephen Cumiskey

# The setting

*Attempts on her Life* is a relatively 'free' play to work on insofar as there are no prescribed characters, the action is not set anywhere specific and there are minimal stage directions. While this freedom can be very exciting for an actor it can also be very frightening: if you don't know who you are playing nor have any idea of why your character says the things they do, what distinguishes *Attempts on her Life* as an acting performance, rather than a recital of an abstract poem to the audience? The production's director, Katie Mitchell, was aware that the actors (and indeed the designers, composer, choreographer etc) needed a very clear framework around which they could work to alleviate this fear, and also to give the production a sense of coherence.

She worked with the actors to create a set of circumstances within which the action of the play takes place. These were as detailed as they would be when working on a piece by Chekhov or Ibsen. The difference is that the company devised these circumstances themselves, rather than being given them by the writer.

The set of circumstances Katie and the actors decided upon were based around a live TV show. They decided that the characters have all been head-hunted to appear in the first episode of a new BBC competition in which teams of people are put together and given a topic around which they must improvise live. They are handed the topic in a sealed envelope less than one minute before the

show goes live and if they manage to improvise successfully for two hours they win half a million pounds for a charity of their choice. There are five judges who have the power to knock the group out of the competition at any point. Each member of the panel has control of three lights – one green, one amber and one red. If they think the group are doing well they turn their green light on, if they think the group are only doing reasonably well they will switch to the amber light and if they want the group out of the contest because they are boring, hesitate for too long or deviate from their topic, they will switch on their red light. If all five red lights go on, the group are knocked out of the competition and a new team is brought on for a chance at winning the money. The group are able to see the panellists' lights from where they are on stage so can tell when they are safe and when they are close to elimination.

The actors gave personalities to the five panellists: TV comedy writers and performers Chris Morris, Rory Bremner and Paul Merton, the broadcaster and producer Kirsty Wark and artist Tracey Emin. It was thought that the characters would have huge respect for these people and trepidation at performing for them. In addition to being watched by millions of people on live TV in a brand-new show, they would go in front of panel of people they wanted to impress professionally.

In the action leading up to the start of the play, the characters meet for the first time an hour before the live broadcast begins, completely unaware of who else will be taking part. They have each sent a list of equipment they would like to be waiting for them to use during the show, such as lights, cameras, musical instruments and computers. Beyond these items, the only other props they are allowed to use must be sourced entirely from what they happen to have brought with them to the TV studio in their bags and pockets. There are other rules, such as that their improvisation must contain at least one song and one dance number, and that they will be given mystery props and items of costume that must be incorporated into their act. One minute before the show goes live, the group are given their improvisation topic: 'A Satire on the Ills of Western Consumer Society'. At this point, the



From left: Liz Kettle, Jonah Russell, Michael Gould and Zubin Varla  
Photo by Stephen Cummiskey

# The setting

characters enter the studio and our play starts.

This set of circumstances was created predominantly for the actors' benefit so that they could have a secure understanding of the situation their character found themselves in and could respond accordingly. None of the information about the setting was made explicit to the audience and there were no notes in the programme explaining that the setting for the play was a live TV broadcast. The setting was devised collectively, with all the actors involved at every point so that to the audience they would appear to inhabit an identical world. For instance, an important condition for the actors was that their characters were in the first episode of this new show and had no idea of what would happen next. If ten of the actors played a sense of nervous apprehension but one played that the show had been on TV for years and knew exactly what was coming next, the cohesion of the world of the play would be lost. For this reason all decisions about the setting were clearly communicated within the whole group, either in discussion sessions or typed up and pinned to the walls of the rehearsal room.

To further cement the actors' understanding of the world, they took part in a series of improvisations to enact the steps running up to the beginning of the live broadcast. An actor from outside the *Attempts on her Life* company spent an afternoon with the group playing Laura Casey, the imaginary BBC producer who has convinced the characters to

take part in the TV show. The actor, Sarah, improvised Laura's initial phone call or meeting with each of the 11 characters, while the rest of the actors formed an audience to watch. By having Sarah play Laura consistently, all the actors developed a shared memory of the producer and they could carry a very clear picture of her in their heads while they were on stage (and possibly think, How did I let this woman persuade me to do this!). Additionally, the actors improvised their characters as they prepare to be driven to the TV studio on the day of the broadcast, and then the group's initial meeting in the green room an hour before the broadcast. They improvised being brought onto the stage exactly fifteen minutes before the broadcast goes live, to check their equipment and have their radio mics fitted. Then, exactly 14 minutes later, an envelope was delivered to them containing the topic for improvisation. One minute later, the theme music played and a buzzer sounded to signal that they should start improvising, and the actors went into the first scenario, 'Tragedy of Love and Ideology'. It was agreed that going from an improvisation of the minutes before the live broadcast into the scenarios was very useful for reminding the actors of the immediate circumstances – that they are terrified, have no idea of what will be thrown at them next and are full of adrenaline. Before every performance at the National, the actors planned to arrive on stage 15 minutes early to improvise these steps, so that by the time the curtain went up they had already been acting for quarter of an hour and would be in tune with the level of fear experienced by their character.



from left: Zubin Varla, Dina Korzun and Sandra Voe  
Photo by Stephen Cummiskey



# 1997

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 1997

Katie decided to set the production in 1997, the year in which the writer, Martin Crimp, completed the play. This was largely because Katie felt the references to terrorism within the play are now outdated and could therefore be offensive. Since the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001, terrorism has taken on such a radically different shape and position in the public consciousness that it was agreed it would be more appropriate to leave the play located within the world order for which it was written. Specifically, the production was set in April 1997, a very interesting time politically for the UK. It was shortly before the General Election in which Tony Blair and 'New' Labour came to power with a landslide victory, ending 18 years of Tory rule. In April '97, the election campaigns were in full swing and there was a strong sense of excitement across the country that the political landscape of Britain was about to change dramatically and for the better. For the characters, all left-wing thinkers, the promise of a Labour government would have been a very good thing.

One of the first pieces of homework Katie set the actors was to find out three facts about the early months of 1997. The actors shared this information with one another to build up a clear picture of the world in which their characters operate. It soon became clear that although 1997 was only ten years ago, notable changes have taken place in society.

For instance, in 1997:

- A minority of people owned mobile phones. Generally people relied on landlines at home



Zubin Varla  
Photo by Stephen Cumiskey

and call boxes in public

- The Internet was a mystery to most people. An average UK secondary school may have one computer terminal connected to the internet with few students bothering or knowing how to use it. Similarly, email was not widely used, particularly for personal correspondence
- Smoking was acceptable in most public buildings and on trains and aeroplanes. Office workers smoking at their desks wasn't unusual
- Princess Diana was alive and photographs of her regularly covered the front pages of the tabloids. It wouldn't be until July 1997 that she would be killed in a car accident while being chased through Paris by the paparazzi
- 'Reality TV' shows such as *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol* had yet to appear
- The phrase 'War on Terror' was not in existence. Groups such as Al Qaida and the Taliban were unknown to most of the UK public.

Because war and violence are such strong themes in *Attempts on her Life*, the actors took a great deal of time researching the state of world politics in 1997. They found they had to look back over several decades of history in order to understand the situation in 1997. They focused on conflicts in Rwanda, Bosnia, Northern Ireland and Israel and Palestine.

Katie was very keen not to use a big Brechtian device such as displaying the date on a backcloth to let the audience know that the action was taking place in 1997. Instead, she worked closely with the production's designer, Vicki Mortimer, to ensure that everything on the stage was precisely period in the hope this would give the audience enough subtle hints to recognise when the production was set. This meant that everything, including the lights, musical equipment, computers, props, costumes, and hairstyles, were circa 1997. Small details such as having the actors wear the red AIDS ribbons (worn *en masse* by the UK public in '97 just as rubber charity wristbands are in 2007) were carefully incorporated into the design to give further clues to the audience. The only 'cheat' involved the video cameras, which were modern: cameras from 1997 simply couldn't have achieved what the production needed them to.

# Characters

Because this production of *Attempts on her Life* was to be incredibly technical and involve large sections of live video operated by the actors, it became clear early on that the characters had to be capable not only of creatively and intellectually coming up with the ideas in the text, but also of being able to physically achieve them. Between them, the characters would need to have a range of skills including script writing, composing, lighting, sound and video operation, acting, dancing, and floor management. Katie suggested that the characters should all be multi-talented creative professionals who have a primary skill and also a range of secondary ones in which they are reasonably capable.

She created backgrounds to their characters: Zubin Varla plays Cyrus Kape, a composer/musician who also has a background in writing and appearing in political sketches as a student and as a part of a writing team for a TV sketch show. Helena Lymbery plays Beth Mason, a visual artist who works predominantly in video art but has also done some soundscape work and so knows how to use sound equipment. The skills allocated to each character in part reflected the abilities of the actor playing them: Zubin's musical ability made him an obvious choice to play a composer, while Paul Ready and Jonah Russell had both undertaken a large amount of the video work in *Waves*, Katie's previous multi-media production for the National, and so became characters that work in film. Once Katie had given out the 'bones' of each character, by allocating their primary and secondary skills, it was down to the actors to build up their characters into fully formed, three-dimensional beings. The only other thing that Katie and Martin specified was that although the members of the group come from a range of social classes and backgrounds, they are all university educated and left-wing in their thinking.

The actor's first task in building up their character was to create a 'back history' for them in the form of a biography. This included details of important personal and professional occurrences as well as world, political or cultural events that would have affected them.

An extract of Kate Duchêne's biography for her character, Maxine Houdille, details some of the more informative moments in Maxine's life between the ages of 16 and 21:

**1965** (aged 16) I get 8 O' Levels

**1966** (17) The World Cup

**1967** (18) 3 A' Levels: French, English and German. Get a scholarship to Cambridge, Girton College, to read French and Russian. On my first night, I meet Anne Henderson, an immensely rich heiress from Suffolk who looks as if butter wouldn't melt. She turns out to be the wildest person I ever know. She is the first person I meet who smokes marijuana, which I try at different points throughout my life and which always makes me throw up. I take her home to visit my parents in Norbury. They are charmed and delighted by her blonde hair and cut-glass accent and have no idea that she drops a tab of acid in the back garden and that I have to sit up all night seeing her through a bad trip. At Cambridge I attend, write for and perform in Footlights smokers almost every week.

**1968** (19) Cambridge.

Go to Edinburgh Festival as part of Footlights Revue. See *Jules et Jim* at the Arts Cinema which sparks a lifelong love of Truffaut and interest in cinema. Student riots in France.

**1969** (20) Extraordinary year in Moscow, teaching English at Krupskaya School Number 1. River trip down the Volga. I start writing a novel based loosely on my experiences. Unable to see moon landing as in Russia. In fact, barely aware of it. The pill. First man on the moon.

**1970** (21) Cambridge.

Read *The Female Eunuch* as soon as it comes out and am blown away. It resonates with a lot of the unhappiness I observed in my mother who was a reluctant housewife married to an exacting Swiss husband, and to my relationship with my brothers whom I adore but who have both always expected me to be domestic and resolutely ignored my academic achievements. I graduate with a First and am nearly persuaded to stay on and do a PhD but *Monty Python* has started and also blows me away, not least because its stars are ex-Footlights. I write for and perform in the Footlights revue again. It is moderately successful and I am summoned to the office of the Head of Light Entertainment at Radio 4. He is very surprised to find I am a woman as I now call myself Max, but it is too late and he has to commission me. I write successfully for many radio sitcoms and comedy programmes while also battling with my novel about my time in Russia. I want it to be a personal story about a young woman teaching in Moscow which reveals and illuminates the whole East/West political situation. I join Amnesty International.

# Characters



Dina Korzun  
Photo by Stephen Cummiskey

All the characters created their back histories, bearing in mind the range of skills their character demonstrates during the performance. At one point Maxine has to translate into English a car advert that one of the other characters narrates in Russian. For this reason, Kate incorporated a year in Russia and a languages degree into Maxine's back-history.

The next step was for the actors to improvise moments from their character's back history. Working in chronological order, Katie asked them to select important moments, privately and professionally, that had helped shape their character in some way. So Dina Korzun improvised her character, Luiba Galkina meeting her husband for the first time in a lobby of a hotel in Venice. She then improvised a conversation between them several years later about a movie they are working on, where she has an idea for an alternative and better ending. In all of these improvisations, the actors would have a very clear sense of the year in which they were taking place and how old they were in them. These improvisations helped the actors begin to build up a memory bank for their characters and lift them off the pages of their biographies.

# Rehearsal process

## WORKING ON THE TEXT

The work the actors did on the setting of the play and their characters was done in tandem with an ongoing analysis of the script. Generally the rehearsal days were divided up into several sections – a couple of hours doing character improvisations, then another couple spent actually creating the work with the cameras, and then another couple spent looking at the script. Every day felt very varied and meant the actors were constantly using different parts of their brains.

Rather than using published copies of the play available from bookshops for rehearsals, the NT compiled a special 'rehearsal text' for the company to use. This was because Katie wanted several changes to be made to the content and special formatting of the script for the benefit of the actors and the production. The main change was that the first scenario, 'All Messages Deleted', was removed from the script completely. The scenario consisted of a series of answerphone messages left for a woman called Ann. They come from a collection of callers including Ann's mum, an apologetic boyfriend, someone making vicious threats and a woman from a car salesroom telling Ann her vehicle is ready for collection. Katie was concerned that the scenario immediately sets up the idea in the audience's minds that Ann does actually exist. The audience might then spend the remainder of the scenarios searching in vain for this woman who is actually a series of different women, children, even a car. Katie sought Martin's agreement to cut it from the production. Without 'All Messages Deleted', the play could no longer retain its full title '*Attempts on her Life – 17 Scenarios for the Theatre*' so for this production at the NT it is simply being called *Attempts on her Life*.

The next difference between the published copy of the play and the rehearsal text involved the titles of the scenarios. Because the characters are supposed to be improvising everything live, Katie felt the titles were often unhelpful as they seldom pre-empted the text of the scenarios itself. So the phrase "faith in ourselves" gives the title of the scenario it appears in at the very end of it, but because it is coined by a character supposedly after the scenario has been titled, the logic of the spontaneity of what the actors are saying is blown apart. Secondly, Katie felt the titles offered the actors no helpful suggestions

about how to act the scenario, so she and Martin worked out a series of alternative titles for the company's benefit which they believed would be more useful for the actors. These new titles aimed to articulate simply and clearly what the characters were trying to do by saying what they say in the scenario. 'Faith In Ourselves', for instance, became 'The group shows how film companies use images from developing countries to produce feel-good films'. As the ensemble addressed each new scenario, they would cross out the existing title from their scripts and replace it with the new title from Katie and Martin.

The final alteration to the script for rehearsals was the removal of spaces between each scenario. In the published editions, each new scenario begins on a separate page but Katie felt this would encourage the actors to think about *Attempts on her Life* as sixteen short pieces, rather than one long continuous scene. As a result, in the rehearsal text the scenarios were spaced out on the page so that one ran straight into the next.



# Rehearsal process

## CREATING THE WORK

Before addressing the staging of each scenario, the group would first of all sit around a table and do some analytical work on the text. They would discuss what they felt the writer was targeting in that particular scenario, for instance, feel-good Hollywood films, advertising or TV police dramas. They would then comb the text for clues about how successfully the group's improvisation might be during that scenario. A high frequency of pauses or silences for instance would suggest the group are having difficulties in sustaining an idea; the way they use the video equipment would reflect this.

Once this had been done, the group spent time looking at the material they felt the characters were targeting in their improvisations. Sources included TV programmes popular in 1997 such *The X-Files* and *Prime Suspect*, home shopping channels and info-mercials, as well as the work of video artists such as Sam Taylor-Wood and Bill Viola. Once they had become familiar with the way these sources were constructed – how the shots were framed, the length of shots and the types of edit points taken – the group would attempt to make their own versions, using the words of the script as the text. Coming up with a successful solution often took several tries. To accompany the musical number 'The Girl Next Door', Katie knew she wanted a 'feel-good' pop video. The group watched and experimented with creating several different types of pop videos before settling on a

homage to Abba's video for their song 'Mamma Mia'. The group downloaded the video from youtube, watched it several times and then worked on their own shots live on stage.

During the creation of the video, the actors would generally come up with the initial ideas which were then honed artistically and technically by Katie along with the production's video designer, Leo Warner and lighting designer, Paule Constable. Additionally, the production's sound designer, Gareth Fry and composer Paul Clark would add sound effects and music to enhance and clarify the group's ideas. This meant that the process was highly collaborative, during which much of the creative team spent a great deal of time in the rehearsal room with Katie and the actors. When they were unable to attend rehearsals, they were kept up to speed with everything by reading our creative notes which were emailed to all members of the creative team at the end of every day. These notes would inform them of the work that had been generated that day and any interesting thoughts or discoveries that had been made.



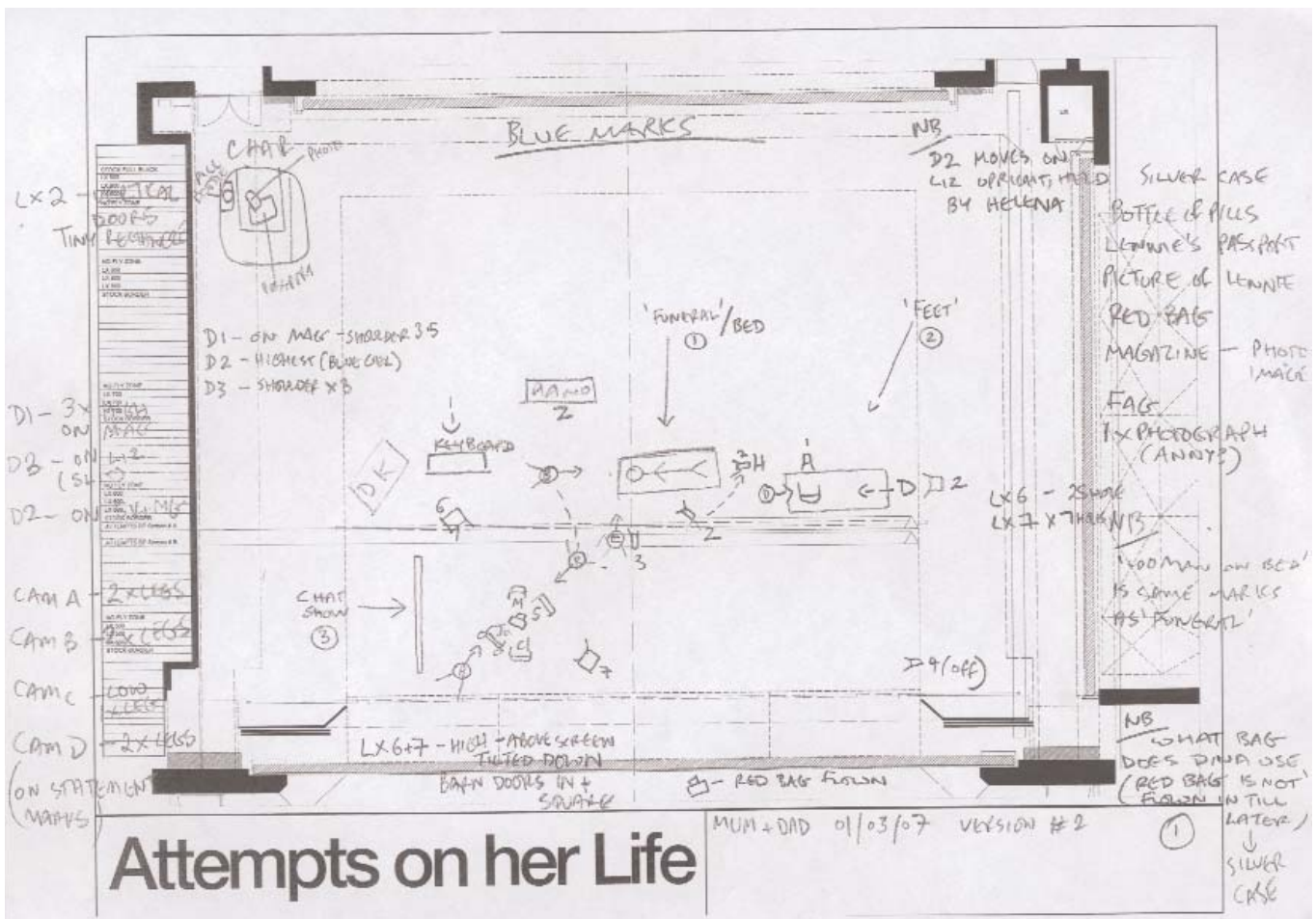
from left: Jonah Russell, Sandra Voe, Kate Duchêne  
Photo by Stephen Cumiskey

# Rehearsal process

## RECORDING THE IDEAS

Because of the complex technical nature of the work, everything that was made by the actors was recorded meticulously so that they could return to it later to remind exactly what they had previously been doing in that scenario. The stage management team made detailed diagrams of where all pieces of equipment were positioned on the stage at any given moment and which member of the cast moved which object.

The Assistant Stage Manager, Dan Read, made this diagram for the scenario 'Mum and Dad.'



# Rehearsal process

Throughout the entire rehearsal period, the production's Staff Director, Lucy Kerbel notated all the actors' attempts at creating the video work for any given scenario. This meant that there were often more than one set of notations for each scenario, as they were revisited through the process. For instance, one idea for 'The Occupier' began with:

"On the stage right side of the screen there was the image of Claudie sat on a sofa eating a packet of crisps. She leaned forward towards the camera as though she were switching on a TV. At this point a blue light shone in her face like the flicker from the TV screen. As Claudie switched on the TV, an image appeared on the stage left side of the screen, showing Helena stood in front of a blue-screen projection of a page in a magazine showing items of furniture. A hand was in shot adjusting the magazine's position. Zubin played keyboards over the top of a pre-recorded synth track. Helena began speaking the text from "when a letter comes" as if she were a presenter on a home shopping channel. On "a cup of tea", Jonah joined her in the frame as a fellow presenter and they spoke the text between them."

However, a later idea for 'The Occupier' began with:

"There was a shot of Paul stood close to the camera looking into the lens as though he were adjusting the camera. Behind him Claudie stood in front of a screen as though she were a model in a photographic studio

waiting for the shoot to begin. Sandra entered the frame and applied make-up to Claudie's face. Zubin checked Claudie's clothes. This image was projected onto a blue-screen in front of which Jonah and Helena sat. They began speaking the text between them from "when a letter arrives". They were filmed alternately from behind and the side. When they spoke the text it was as though they were talking to Claudie through her earpiece, telling her what kind of woman she should appear to be in the photographs that were about to be taken. The images of Helena and Jonah were inter-cut back and forth with the image of Claudie in the studio. When the image of Claudie was on the screen a voice distort effect was added to Helena and Jonah's voices so it sounded as though they were coming through Claudie's earpiece."

By notating every idea that the group experimented with, they formed a bank of ideas by the end of rehearsals, from which they could select those that best captured the ideas Martin explores in the text and add them into the final production.

## LINKING THE IDEAS

Having decided on the way of presenting each individual scenario, the group then had to work out a way of physically moving from one scenario into the other. These transitions often involved moving massive amounts of equipment around the stage, in near darkness and at high speed. For this reason, the group had to spend a great deal of time practising the transitions, both in the rehearsal room and then on stage during technical rehearsals and the preview period. It was important that every piece of equipment was set in precisely the same place each time a scenario was revisited: if a light was set even 30cm further left than previously, the lighting for an entire shot could be thrown out and the actors in frame could be left in darkness. Practising these transitions and perfecting the individual shots themselves made a painstaking process for the entire company, with every person having responsibility for taking personal notes of their role within every moment of the show.



Live onstage projections  
Photo by Stephen Cumiskey

# Interview with Martin Crimp, writer

**The play is now ten years old. It has been performed many times in many different countries, both professionally and by amateur and student groups. Do you feel the world in which the play is performed is changing? And are audience responses to it changing?**

I don't know. I think it's worth pointing out that ten years is not a very long time. Seen broadly, we're still in the half century after the war. After the war there was a sudden acceleration of consumer culture and of youth culture as youths became consumers in the 50s and 60s with vinyl LPs and all of that. So, clearly there's been a big acceleration in take up of technology and that seems to me to be part of what happened after the war. For me, at my age, ten years doesn't seem like a very long time. I think we're still in a curve which is growing exponentially and it's about to hit something key with global warming and so on. I don't know what that is. I don't think the next thing has happened yet – it wasn't 9/11, that's another blip. I don't think the next thing has happened and we don't know what it is. The last big thing that happened was the war – the big war – and that was only half a century ago. That's not very long. The older I get I realise I was born just after that to parents who had had bombs dropped in the streets. We were lucky here, and the rest of Europe was in a state of occupation, of warfare, people were having to make appalling moral decisions which we in this country have largely been spared. I don't know what the next big thing is – maybe it will be good, not bad. I don't think it has happened yet. So this play, is surfing along a wave which is still growing, still arriving.

**At the front of the published script of *Attempts On Her Life*, you quote the French cultural commentator and philosopher Jean Baudrillard: "No-one will have directly experienced the actual force of such happenings, but everyone will have received an image of them". Can you explain what Baudrillard was talking about and why you felt this quote was particularly apt for this play?**

It's very simple – it's nothing very profound. It's exactly what he said: that in the world that we live in now, we are aware of many different kinds of experience, globally, because of technology, whether it's TV or now the internet. So, we might have the impression that we know about a lot of things, and I suppose the

play is partly about dealing with the overload of information.

**Is that why there are a number of different scenarios, rather than one continuous narrative?**

Well yes, because if you're sitting down as a writer, like you're meant to do and think to yourself "What am I going write about?", part of you might think, "Well that's an impossible decision to make because now there are so many choices which include the nature of a globalised world". So you could say the form of this play, which is to tell a number of different stories rather than just one story, reflects the fact that there are many stories to tell.

The normal way of writing a play, of representing the world, is to give the illusion that you have people on stage who are real people, who are experiencing real problems or whatever. That's normally the art of a dramatist or the art of a novelist, to give this illusion of people enacting life. The thing about that is that you can't necessarily get very far or you can't necessarily reflect a world that's full of multiple stories. So really it's a very simple technique; it's the thing you're not supposed to do, that rather than show the story, you tell the story. This is simply a play in which the story is being told and the drama in the play is about conflicts within the teller about telling the story.

**When you were writing the play, did you know anything about the people who are telling the stories?**

I did have some ideas originally, which I then suppressed – so I'm not going to tell you what they are! In fact, having done that, I then moved on in other plays: I realised I didn't in fact need that, I don't think it's very useful. It's like a ladder that you climb up to a certain point and then throw away afterwards. It's not useful for the writing.

**It's a collection of stories – is there one that you feel takes priority over the others; or was there an initial story which led onto the rest of them?**

The organisation of it grew on me as it went on, but that's normal for any kind of play – you accumulate a certain amount of material and then you get a critical mass. And that begins to point in a particular direction and tells you where to go. I have personal favourites – the



# Interview with Martin Crimp, writer

last one, *Previously Frozen*, because it's about nothing. That's what you're always aiming to do. It's really nice to write about nothing because in our media-driven, chat show, reality show, interview show culture, we're always looking for a theme and a label and the label on that one is *Previously Frozen*, which is sort of a meaningless, contingent label.

If I were to try to apply themes to *Attempts on her Life* as a play, for instance to say it's about the media or about violence, or about images of women, would you find that frustrating? No, I think that it's inevitable that someone is going to apply themes or use themes or decide that a particular piece of work chimes with ideas, things they feel about the world. Because this play has had a big career, in the world, obviously it chimes with many people, but I think probably for different reasons. I don't know what those reasons are. When you write a play, you just try and write a play, you don't write themes.

**Can I take you back to when you were writing the play ten years ago. Can you remember if there was an initial germ of an idea, or an initial starting point?**

I think it's really hard for people to understand one important thing about writing, which is perhaps more obvious in other arts, but because writing always gets dragged back to themes and ideas – which are very valuable aspects of it – people tend to forget about form. They tend to forget that when you sit down and write, it's not necessarily that you 'want to write about something', it's that you want to write. And writing means constructing and making shapes. So for me the most exciting discovery about this play was when I stumbled upon this way of writing, which is a way of narrating rather than having to wheel on psychological characters who've got a back-history. So for me that was the exciting thing, because it means you can travel and use language to travel – you can go anywhere with words.

So it was the form that drove it, definitely. And I discover if I look back at bits and pieces of writing that there are bits of things which resembled *Previously Frozen* from a long, long time ago – throwaway things. I've always had this fantasy of writing things that you can just throw away. Things that aren't weighed down by portentous meaning.

**Is that going back to people trying to impose themes or a meaning onto the work?**

The ideal writing would be nothing. I think that's the state we aspire to. It would be like the single thing that would be so perfect that you didn't need anything else. It's like saying the ideal thing. The illusion of our writing is that you think that when you've written something you think that you can somehow end the process of writing, that you then stop. That's not true, it's like you see a pattern or a shape, you have written one thing and then you write something else and then that means that actually you can't stop.

One thing gives rise to another. You can see that in the way this play is made. Although it appears to be shapeless or hard to say what the shape is, in fact it has quite a clear shape, because it has symmetry in it, it has two scenes of translation which are symmetrical, it has two scenes which appear to be about the same kind of environment (a war-torn landscape which appears in *Strangely* and *Faith in Ourselves*), and there are other symmetries, like the two songs. So it's constructed in that way. When you think about it, *Strangely* is positioned in the place where you would traditionally place the whatever you call it, the climactic part of a play. That happens instinctively, this shape.

**If in a production one of the scenarios were removed, do you feel the whole play would fall apart?**

People do this, they do reorder them. Reordering does make me a little bit cross, because I have thought about the order. The first one – the phone calls – I realise is really hard to animate dramatically. Because I wrote it at a later stage, for the first production of the play, I can say to people 'cut this if you want' because a. it's hard to animate and b. it might not fit a particular intellectual approach to the play. The other point about this play is that it's being made up. In a production you want that improvised quality to be present.



# Interview with Martin Crimp, writer

**Have you seen productions where this improvised quality isn't present?**

Sometimes, I think I have. It's quite hard to resist the improvised nature of the play, because the language itself tells you it's an improvisation because it's clear people are thinking aloud.

**It's a play that gives the illusion of being quite free in terms of how you stage it. Can that be difficult as a writer, handing over that much freedom?**

I think I'm quite conflicted about this. I do say to people that I want to hand it all over, but of course part of me is fearful about that. On the other hand, the image I normally like to use on the rare occasions that I teach, is that dialogue in a play is like a steel wire, like a tight-rope that goes through the play and has to be capable of supporting everything – including the actors and everything else. I think from that point of view, that steel wire is in place and it's quite a strong one and it can bear quite a lot of weight, so generally I think that means that a. the freedom of the director and actors is in fact limited by what that dialogue insists on, and b. maybe that means that it's quite limited. Generally speaking it works, even if you mess it around, which people sometimes do.

**Are there any pointers you would give to an actor or director who was about to work on the play?**

I think they must have a sense of humour. A sense of irony. A sense of fun. A sense of despair. Those are the things that are required.