

A level Theatre Studies

Component 2

Creating Original Drama

Working Notebook

Performer

BREATH

Carys Nicolle

Playing Maurice Robinson and multiple roles

Influencing practitioner

Bertolt Brecht



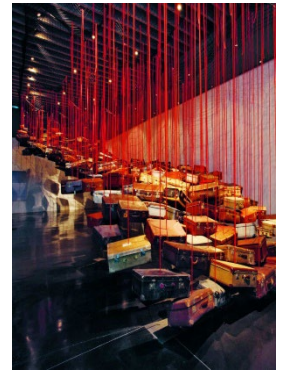
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Section 1 Rationale and Research

Rationale for our starting point

We were inspired by the art installation *Accumulation – Searching for the Destination* by Chiharu Shiota, which depicts a large number of suitcases hung up on red strings, as it represents individuals' journeys through life and how parts of these journeys are shared with others. This led our early discussions to be about immigration, asylum seeking and displacement as we felt the journeys in the art installation could be about seeking a better life. This then led us to think about the Essex lorry deaths in 2019, in which 39 Vietnamese people suffocated in a lorry trailer while being trafficked into the UK. We felt it was important to create a piece of theatre about this so that we could highlight the fact that there is limited safe passage for economic migrants coming into the UK and the power and opportunity created for the human traffickers.



Dramatic influences

Our early research included the theatre company *Gecko* and their use of breath intentionality and emotion as we felt breath would be a central idea of our piece due to the 39 Vietnamese migrants' cause of death being suffocation. Our earliest research led us to watch the documentary *Hunting the Essex Lorry Killers* so that we could gain a clear picture of the events that took place not only for those within the lorry but also for their families and the traffickers involved. While we liked the focus *Gecko* had on breath, we wanted to give a voice to the victims through verbatim and present a full view of the events so that the audience would be forced to think about and learn from them. This moved us towards having Brecht as our practitioner as his techniques enabled the audience to form their own opinion on pressing political matters.

Practitioner research

We learnt about the range of techniques Bertolt Brecht used in his pieces through participating in workshops. One of the techniques he used which we felt would fit our piece was episodic montage as it stops the audience from getting too absorbed and enables them to focus on the message of the piece; this structure of avoiding a linear plot would enable us to take an epic approach, giving a 360° view of the tragedy, which would in turn ask the audience what the issue is and who is to blame for it. Our piece follows the dark and bleak reality of migration in a modern world, we felt we needed to incorporate comedy as this would show more depth, we did this through Brecht's technique of *späss*. *Späss* is when a serious subject is presented in a funny way, causing the audience to laugh and then question why they laughed, making them think further about the message of the piece.

Brecht emphasised the importance of giving a 360° view of events, so the audience could form opinions for themselves. We looked at Brecht's *Lehrstück* plays *He Who Said Yes* and *He Who Said No* which are teaching plays that provide a clear message and moral; this led us to take a dialectical approach as this would allow us to discuss the events surrounding the Essex Lorry Deaths from multiple angles, allowing the audience to come to their own conclusions about them. The two plays are often performed together as Brecht felt it showed an important thought of his on the practice of *Lehrstück* and its role in preparing for a new society: "To be in agreement also means: not to be in agreement". We wanted the audience to experience this sense of conflict when forming their views so we showed the characters to not just be black & white by incorporating more sides of each

character, for example Gheorghe Nica's reasoning for becoming part of the trafficking pyramid being to pay for his daughter's treatment. We furthered this conflict and 360° view by showing the impact of the events on both the families of the victims and the lorry driver Mo Robinson, while also giving information about the events from the perspective of the victims, their families, the traffickers, and the public.

Another way Brecht created a full view was with his boxing ring analogy as this encouraged the audience to take sides, we have incorporated this by showing the traffickers and those who were trafficked as villain and hero archetypes. We have also included posturing like body builders into the villain archetype of the traffickers as it makes the characters bigger and more exaggerated, it also acts as a link to the styles of theatre Kabuki and Noh which Brecht was inspired by as they incorporate very visual aspects. In *A Dialogue about Acting*, one of the things Brecht talks about is the idea of actors being demonstrators and the audience being spectators, meaning that the 'demonstrators' show the 'spectators' all sides of the story in order to force the 'spectators' to think about the message behind the piece and form their own opinions on it, we have incorporated this approach throughout our piece.

Live theatre research

One of the most inspirational live theatre productions we watched was the Bristol Old Vic Theatre production of *Container* as it has a strong thematic link to our piece, it follows group of immigrants travelling to the UK through human trafficking, it is set inside a lorry container which was placed outside the theatre, so that the audience had a clearer view of what the immigrants felt like. The only light used was that of torches and the light from outside when the container doors were opened, it was a fully immersive production that felt oppressive and claustrophobic. This inspired us to create a similar environment in some scenes so that the audience could gain a clearer understanding of what the migrants felt like on their journey, we placed some scenes in torchlight and created the shape of a container with our positions on stage in order to achieve this.

Contextual research

After watching the documentary *Hunting the Essex Lorry Killers* we went on to further research information covered within it. We found out about the UK's governmental policies surrounding immigration and that being allowed in relied heavily on your skills and the wage you earn in your current country. Only three men involved in the trafficking ring were found and charged so we researched into the lives of two of them: Gheorghe Nica, someone fairly high ranking within the scheme, and Maurice Robinson, the lorry driver. We also researched into the victims' reasoning for going – many of them simply seeking a better life for their family – how this has affected their families, and the Vietnamese culture they were raised in.

One of our biggest challenges was our authentic portrayal of the Vietnamese victims as we wanted to show their stories and culture without falling into stereotypes, we went about this by researching the Vietnamese culture and its traditions. In this research we learnt about Vietnamese hat dances which we felt would fit into our piece as it would not only give us a way to clearly transition to the Vietnamese perspectives of the events but it would also link to Brecht's practices as he was inspired by the Japanese theatre styles Kabuki and Noh which involve acting, singing and dancing. We listened to the Vietnamese national anthem and found a translated version so that we could gain an understanding of what is important to Vietnam as a country and then researched further into the

lives of the victims before they left Vietnam to gain a more intimate view of the values of the victims; this allowed our portrayal of Vietnam and the victims to have greater depth and authenticity.

We also researched into the lives of the traffickers Maurice Robinson and Gheorge Nica. By looking at the social media response to Mo's conviction while the case was still open, we found that those from the town he grew up in and those who were close to him believed him to be a respectable man that would never kill or knowingly partake in something that would harm someone and therefore believed that he shouldn't be charged. Our research into Gheorghe Nica found that one of the main reasons he got involved in the trafficking business was so that he could afford his daughter's treatment, showing him as human and that even though someone is involved in something criminal it doesn't make them fundamentally a bad person as they may have good intentions. These sides to the traffickers helped us gain a more rounded and in-depth view of them as people, allowing us to bring more truth to our portrayal of them in our piece.

Dramatic aims

I play multiple roles throughout the performance and I aim to clearly distinguish between them through my vocal and physical skills. The main role I play is that of Maurice Robinson, the driver of the lorry containing the 39 Vietnamese immigrants that died, and I aim to portray him as being in shock from what he has experienced by using nervous ticks such as my leg shaking, fidgeting with my hands and stuttering over my words. I also aim to add authenticity to this role by speaking in a Northern Irish accent as he is from Northern Ireland. I intend to give the audience mixed feelings about Mo as he is shown to have humanity despite being part of something as dark as human trafficking. I aim to contrast this in my other roles, one of which is a xenophobic British person who I aim to show as threatening and disgusted by having intimidating physicality, a shrivelled facial expression and a harsh tone in my voice. I intend for the audience to be shocked by this character so then be forced to think about real people they have experienced like them. I intend our episodic structure to enable the audience to follow the story of the events surrounding the Essex Lorry Deaths while also not being too absorbed into the piece, allowing them to gain a clear understanding and be able to form their own opinions based on a wide view of the events.

Section 1 word count = 1675

Section 2 – Development and Refinement

Devising Approach

The scene we first created stemmed from the text messages the victims sent to their families while they were dying. Our original idea for this focused on one victim saying the texts while the others stated the temperatures the lorry reached throughout the night they died. We gave this scene more depth by making it visual with a lift and the motif of the others crushing the main victim. However, we felt this wasn't as impactful as it needed to be so we developed a more intense and hard-hitting scene that we could incorporate the text messages into. In this, we start in complete darkness and hyperventilate, this builds, and a strobing light effect comes on showing us grasping at our clothes and banging on the walls of the container, we then breathlessly and in a panicked tone say some of the text messages. We made this scene very visual in order for our performance to be read clearly, an important aspect of Brechtian theatre. This scene is then repeated at the end, giving it a cyclical structure and an impactful ending, which forces the audience to think about the message of the piece.

Following our research into Vietnamese hat dances, we choreographed our own using a collection of the moves we saw and included it in our piece as it not only shows the Vietnamese culture but it links to Brecht's inspiration of Kabuki. The hat dance is also a key part of our piece as throughout the process we have developed a theme of hats – police hats, Mo's cowboy hat, and the Vietnamese hats – the difference in hats furthers our 360° perspective of the events. We wanted to use props that were as authentic as possible as a way of making it clear to the audience where the scenes took place and who the characters were. Our research involving the national anthem led us to include lines from the anthem within the reasons why the victims made their journey, showing the core values they held.

The novel *Breath* by James Nestor includes a prologue which is a passage from the Zhou Dynasty instructing how to breathe and how breath works, as our piece shares the same name as the novel and surrounds the idea of breath we felt this would be a good addition to our piece, it also acts as a link to Eastern Asia. We included physical motifs with the lines to make the performance readable to deaf people as this is something Brecht would commonly do in his pieces.

We wanted to explore the lives of the traffickers to help give a 360° view and develop the villain archetypes, so following our research about Gheorghe Nica, a fairly high ranking member of the trafficking pyramid who Maurice Robinson called after finding the bodies, we wrote a monologue as this would allow for direct address to the audience and breaking the fourth wall. However, we felt that an emotional monologue wouldn't portray him in the archetypal way we wanted to, so we turned it into a rap. This allowed us to not only include posturing and späss to create this exaggerated archetypal villain, but also to create the *verfremdungseffekt* as his story being in rap form meant the audience were less likely to be absorbed into it. We wore leather jackets and sunglasses throughout the rap as a clear visual representation to the audience that our characters were gangsters.

The documentary *Hunting the Essex Lorry Killers* includes the police interrogation of the lorry driver, Maurice Robinson. We wanted to include this in our piece as verbatim to give the audience a realistic view of how Mo behaved. Following this scene, we include a monologue influenced by news articles that describes how Mo was known by his family and friends, during which Mo is seen to be driving the lorry and singing along to the radio. While Mo is driving and singing along to the radio, the only light on stage is torchlight which is used to create the effect of a lorry driving at night; two torches facing the audience acting as headlights and one torch either side of Mo, lighting him by moving the torch front to back and therefore also giving the illusion of driving past street lights. This was not only inspired by *Container* but also by Brecht's common use of the demonstrators operating the lights themselves. We wanted to show Mo in multiple angles to portray that he is human and has depth so that the audience can form their own opinions of Mo with a 360° view of his situation.

Inspired by our live theatre research of the production *Container*, we wanted a way to show the appeal that the UK has to economic migrants, so we looked at things Britain was known for. One of those things is Paddington bear, who is an immigrant from Peru, which led us to a new perspective of the scene. We present Paddington with a placard – a suitcase with the name "Paddington" written on it – as this clearly introduces the character to the audience and is a common technique used by Brecht. Paddington is portrayed in his typical naïve and well-mannered way before bringing on three stereotypical British people who voice opinions commonly used surrounding the topic of immigration at Paddington to show the hostility immigrants face. We then use a stereotypical politician to explain current UK immigration policies in order to portray to the audience their brutality. The use of stereotypes to show these things continues our use of archetypes and enables us to demonstrate more clearly to the audience the barriers immigrants face.

Development and refinement of skills

I play multiple roles throughout the performance and I wanted to clearly distinguish between them through Brecht's technique of gestus. The main role I play is Maurice Robinson, more commonly referred to as Mo, who is the driver of the lorry involved in the Essex Lorry Deaths. In order to give more authenticity to his character, I rewatched the documentary and read articles about him, focusing on how he holds himself physically in footage and key parts of his personality and then worked on replicating this in my performance. Throughout his interrogation he appears in shock from what he has experienced and displays nervous ticks such as his leg shaking, fidgeting with his hands and stuttering over his words. Mo is from Northern Ireland and has a Northern Irish accent, so I learned how to do this accent and incorporated it in the piece to further the authenticity of the character.

Another character I play is a fortune teller who I portray to be eccentric and blind, giving a clear contrast in gestus between the fortune teller and Mo. I use big over the top movements in my arms while having glassy eyes and unsteady footing. This gives this character a lot of impact and creates a moment of späss.

Ideas for final performance

Our piece uses Brechtian techniques to explore the events surrounding the Essex Lorry Deaths, the experiences of migrants and the lives of human traffickers. We aim to create an epic and socio-political piece of theatre that encourages our audience to look further into the treatment of migrants and the reasons they feel it is necessary to travel using human trafficking. We have integrated a 360° view of the events in order to arouse argument within the audience so that they can be more aware of how critical it is that we move forward with migration.

Reflecting on our final performance, what I would do to further develop and improve the piece would be to include more traditional Kabuki style theatre, such as masks, as this would further our Brechtian style while having more impact on the audience.

Section 2 word count = 1288

Total word count = 2963

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