

***A Simple Tale: an account of the theatre O's production of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent****

*By Gus Casely-Hayford, King's Cultural Institute*

**theatre O**

Joseph Alford, Director  
 Carolina Valdes, Devisor &  
 Performer (Winnie Verloc)  
 George Potts, Devisor &  
 Performer (Verloc)  
 Dennis Herdman, Devisor &  
 Performer (Ossipon &  
 Inspector Heat)  
 Leander Deeny, Devsior &  
 Performer (Stevie &  
 Vladimir)  
 Helena Lymbery, Devisor &  
 Performer (Mother & the  
 Professor)

Helen Mugridge, Production Manager  
 Emma McKie, Deputy Stage Manager  
 Simon Daw, Designer & Video Co-Designer  
 Matthew Hurt, Writer  
 Paddy Molloy, Illustrator & Video Co-Designer  
 Gareth Fry, Sound Designer  
 Anna Watson, Lighting Designer  
 Lucy Moore, Producer for theatre O  
 Marc Teitler, Composer  
 Eva Vilamitjana, Choreographer  
 Jemima James, Assistant Director



*Explosions are the most lasting thing in the universe ...*

theatre O have built a reputation for devising innovative physical theatre. For the second half of 2013 they focused their particular skills on telling Conrad's intimate epic, *The Secret Agent*. The process the company deploys is inherently risky – they begin rehearsals with minimal scripts and discover the play together. Each actor finds their character and develops their back-story as simultaneously, scenes are selected, choreography is determined and sets are fashioned around and through shared discoveries. The best results of these improvised scenarios are tightened and scripted for inclusion in the finished production which is driven by collaboration. The process is difficult and inherently risky. Experimental work finds a place alongside the crafted pre-scripted scenes, but its dangers are mitigated by the skill of those involved, and the trust that they share in the team and the process.

This is an account of the production.

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### *I. The Manifesto*

The arrival of the twentieth century was accompanied by a moment of widespread soul-searching and angst. It was a time of deep-rooted cultural reflection, triggered not just by the death of Queen Victoria as the century opened, but by something less tangible and even more universal - something that had the power to inspire even greater instability and far reaching anxiety. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the gearing and grease between the great cogs of Western societies had begun to fail. Class, Empire, sexual politics, religion, race: the substantive cultural pillars that had supported the most productive period in modern European history began to clash one upon another. Rather than offering stability and continuity, the great institutions that drove the Western machine looked increasingly vulnerable, even unstable. By the turn of the new century, it was no longer a question of whether change was coming, but of its impending scope and scale, of who would be the victors, and who would buckle and be broken beneath what threatened. To those that wanted to see, it was a time of profound ambient trepidation, as the norms and certainties of the Victorian era were fatally undermined by the violent birth of what was unanswerably named: *Modernity*.

Enlightenment's last chapter: Impressionism, (a movement born out of a lust for light, a search for existential truth and raw sensuality) turned itself inside out. And in its final death throes – from once glorious essays in perfection, Impressionism ended its days producing nihilistic statements of choking smog and gloom. Very little could resist the brilliance of *The Modern*. In its presence the long fading glimmer of the Enlightenment guttered and finally died. In the residual gloom, under that unanswerable assault of uncertainty, Western culture, the source of seemingly unstoppable momentum slowed, and then stalled. Questions and fear bred their own politics, heightening the polarities between those who hankered after a radically different future and those who looked nostalgically at all that the old century represented. For those that looked backwards, it was a halcyon era of long summer afternoons, for those that looked forward it was the sunset of a corrupted and unsustainable epoch. Revolutionary thinking and radical enquiry surged to fill the growing vacuum. Many of the questions and much of that new thought came from the political margins, from the sociological periphery - from young thrusting artists and writers, from *foreigners*, irreverent and radical thinkers, from loose coalitions of the once voiceless but now all emboldened and seemingly united. In reality this was a coalition held together by little more than the zeal with which its members challenged the status quo. Yet they scared

the political establishment and the general public alike - they were seemingly groups with little to lose, who knew that despite the fear they engendered, that they spoke to the time.

By 1905 at the moment of the first waves of mass political and social unrest in Russia, Joseph Conrad had already seen some literary success; his writing was being regularly published in monthly reviews and newspapers. For a popular audience Conrad's prose may have been unsettling; at his most uncompromising his books could be interpreted as almost deliberately difficult reading. Conrad often chose timely and popular subjects, but he delivered his stories in elliptical narratives that repaid patience, but were often hard to excavate. Yet his core messages, the underpinning narrative of his novels, recorded and diagnosed the ambient condition more forensically, more fearlessly than any of his contemporaries. Conrad read the paranoia and ambient stress, he sensed the sublimated anger and suppressed fear and recognized that profound change was coming.

Conrad knew about the human condition. In his twenty years as a Merchant Marine he had travelled widely and seen first hand the best and worst of many of the things that his peers described in their fiction. Although Conrad was a child of the Victorian era, (almost fifty when the old Queen passed and the new century dawned) his tense, morally ambiguous writing seems to place him firmly in the twentieth century. For Joseph Conrad, a Polish émigré, who had childhood memories of his father's incarceration for revolutionary activity, the world could feel like an irrational tinderbox. As he began writing *The Secret Agent*, he must have been watching Russia simultaneously unravelling with a deep fascination. It was in Russia, at a young age, where he found out quite how fragile the most immutable things could be. Not only did he witness his native country disintegrate but in 1861, when just five years old, Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski was arrested and imprisoned. Apollo was a member of a group allied to the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. As Eastern Europe grew twitchy and increasingly unstable, an association with a man like Bakunin left you very vulnerable. Korzeniowski, and his family, were deported to a remote region of northern Russia where the young Joseph Conrad watched as his mother slowly succumbed to fatal tuberculosis, followed four years later by his father. They were deaths that sat at the end of a causal chain that had begun with little more than vague associations and rumors and like so many it was a tragic and infuriatingly pointless end.

The senseless loss of his family would be something that Conrad would lace into almost everything that he wrote. He mined loss without self-pity, often blurring the line between pathos and comedy, between tragedy and satire. He saw loss through a variety of filters. He

would use loss as a mechanism to interrogate the effects of psychological trauma, the corruption of innocence and the magnetism of evil. These were all themes well covered by his contemporaries, but Conrad forced his readers to dive deeper into darker waters. He voraciously feasted upon the most horrendous stories of the age, gave a platform to the victims, and voices to the evil – told their difficult and tragic stories of loss without moralizing or trying to lessen the profundity of their plight with the satisfying endings of Shaw and Kipling or the bucolic romance of Hardy. Loss was loss. Conrad's was an unrelenting world that arguably reflected the age from which it was drawn more fully than any of his peers. And although those injustices, those losses of his childhood, would always haunt him, in his writing he found a poignant way to utilize them.

Conrad, like almost everyone in London had followed the story of Martial Bourdin and his tragic end in Greenwich Park, just beneath the Observatory. Bourdin was an emaciated low-ranking anarchist activist who on February 15, 1894 traveled by train from Westminster out to leafy Greenwich, concealing a small bomb beneath his coat. As he made his way across the park, something happened. No one was able to quite ascertain exactly what occurred, but the bomb detonated. Much of Bourdin's body was blown apart, spraying bits of his abdomen and limbs more than sixty yards across the park. Bourdin was not dead. And in his final half hour rather than leave the world with a profound statement, though conscious, Bourdin remained frustratingly silent. He bequeathed no twisted rationale, no list of accomplices, no evil or foreign association, nothing against which to rail or to react. All Bourdin bequeathed was his senseless act, and his silence. The pointlessness of the death must have resonated with Conrad. He observed with a shocked amusement that 'the outer



wall of the Observatory, it did not show as much as the faintest crack.' Not only had Bourdin's bomb had little effect on the observatory, it had cost so much, for so very little. The police scoured London for some clue to bring some rational closure to the case, eventually concluding that "some mischance or miscalculation, or some clumsy bungling" had probably caused the bomb to detonate in Bourdin's hand. After raiding the Club Autonomie, a popular meeting place for foreign anarchists, and searching Bourdin's Fitzroy Street room, they uncovered significant amounts of money and concluded, that like so many anarchists, that he planned to flee whence he came: France.

For more than a decade the story of Bourdin must have lingered at the back of Conrad's head, festering with the memories of his childhood in exile. The themes of anarchy, of seemingly pointless pursuits, of seemingly meaningless sacrifice, and of course of Conrad's great meta-theme, loss, must have churned in his consciousness. Nurtured by his friend and muse, Ford Maddox Ford, Conrad returned again and again to reconsider the same ghosts. He knew better than many that in the very pointlessness of a violent death could lurk the power to destabilize. In the summer of 1905 as Russia began to succumb to its first revolution, Joseph Conrad began to see how he could turn those loose thoughts into *The Secret Agent*. And with Conrad-esque serendipity, as he began to write, a single news story captured the headlines. It was another story of *loss* from France; it signified something connected but something quite different:

*Courrières - 6.30am Saturday, March 10th 1906*

The door of the mining office opened. For the first time since news of the fire, the crowd gathered at the pithead, fell silent. Mr Barault, the Chief Engineer fixed his gaze at a distant point on the Pas-de-Calais hillside, slowly closed the door and began the short march along the path toward the mine. Holding his gaze above the heads of the waiting families, he strode with a metronomic precision, allowing the sound of the splintering coal underfoot to ring out his intent. If all went to plan, the last vestiges of the blaze would soon be extinguished, the remaining miners would be freed, and by evening everything would be back as it had always been. Yet, between each stride, he sensed a doubt in the silence - how could he not? His own management hadn't hidden their doubt, the local politicians were beginning to express their expediently timed doubts, the anarchists and local troublemakers had been whipping up dissent and doubt amongst the crowds at the pitheads - and as he strode on past the miners' families, Barault felt their doubt too, he smelt it.

The lift containing Barault had barely begun its descent into the mineshaft when the hillside seemed to exhale. It was not one explosion, but a concatenation of seismic blasts, as a ferocious funnel of unstable gases and coal dust cannonaded through the mine, combusting shaft after shaft beneath the French countryside. One by one the pitheads at the neighbouring towns exploded - Coron, then Lens followed by Mericourt, - there was a moment of silence.... then the landscape shuddered and the pit mouth at Courrières belched, ripping the roof off Barault's mining office, tearing the mine workings out by their roots, and throwing a long column of debris and flame into the sky. The handful of men in the main shaft were instantly vaporized, and more than a thousand miners below were

gassed, crushed, and what remained of their bodies left as carbonized husks. Everything that was once fixed rocked on its footings: attitudes, emotions, politics all quaked, before re-settling, subtly but unquestionably, altered. And that doubt, that ferocious doubt was airborne. By the morning after the Courrières Mining disaster, news of the explosion filled columns in newspapers from London to New Zealand. The reports lingered on descriptions of how the very atmosphere had become unstable, of how a cascade of explosions had torn from town to town, of how the angry, powerless, communities had turned on the pit-owners. The anarchists who before the explosion were society's outsiders and freaks suddenly seemed to represent something quite rational. The explosion felt the perfect analogue for a feverish moment when the world was ripe and ready to change – when all that was needed was a well-placed spark.

Conrad recognised that stench of political cordite from his childhood and here it was present in Western Europe's polite heartland, impacting not those on the political fringes, but Average Joes. It was as a clarion call that crackled across the Western world, an energy that became manifest in the music of Harlem, union newspapers of Detroit, the politics of St Petersburg, and the painting of Paris. They all carried similar and linked messages from the fringes into the heart of their societies, messages sent to rock the status quo. As Conrad wrote the first words of *The Secret Agent*, in America Scott Joplin had a breakthrough with his experiments in musical form. Joplin liberated the pianist's right to enjoy more and more freedom, playing innovative harmonies, mocking the thudding, plodding Nineteenth Century rhythms of the left hand into submission, pushing the new genre to its limit to discover Jazz lurking beneath. This was a new kind of cultural deal, it didn't ask for silence or your attention - it was violent, physical - it grabbed you, ragged you, robbed you of choice and tormented you with that fact. For Joplin, as the son of a former slave, resolving oppositions on the keyboard between the left and right hand, between black and white keys was political. His work brought the music of the un-polite intensity of fields and backstreets to the concert theatres and dance halls and with it came the politics. Many people instinctively feared it, but could do little to stop its spread. It was born out of a moment of unanswerable change, change that rippled around the world. By the time Conrad had published *The Secret Agent*, Einstein had published his first paper on relativity, Sigmund Freud his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Henry Ford had become convinced of the possibility for a mass market car, Pablo Picasso had completed the sketches for *Les Femmes d'Alger* – incendiary devices that each challenged and remade disciplines – all defied long held beliefs, and placed humble ordinary humans at the centre of a new narrative.

## II. Constructing the Device

To heighten the sense of climactic, Conrad set *The Secret Agent* not in the early twentieth century when it was written, but in 1886 - in a London sitting ripe and ready for change. London was a city that he knew well, loved deeply, but that still held the power to scare. The book follows the final few weeks in the life of Adolf Verloc, a middle-aged pornographic shop owner and part-time Secret Agent. Verloc is an irredeemably lazy man, who is married to the patient, stoical, hard-working Winnie. She is a model of hard working female loyalty, resolutely dedicated to her husband's wellbeing, to the support of her aged mother and her mentally disabled brother, Stevie. Together Winnie, Stevie and Mother spin like satellites around Verloc's ego, administering to his every domestic need - working tirelessly driven by the ever-present knowledge of how vulnerable they would be without him. Verloc does little to reciprocate, spending much of his time in the murky, motley presence of a group of second-rate anarchist activists and aspiring terrorists. And though the Anarchists look upon Verloc as an ally, he is a Secret Agent with a clandestine agenda.

The story begins in the family home as Adolf Verloc is preparing for a meeting with Mr Vladimir, the new First Secretary to the embassy of an un-named foreign country. Winnie



and the family fuss and dote over Verloc, but beyond the bounds of his seedy shop, he is not universally respected. The meeting does not go well. Vladimir mocks Verloc for his complacency and lack of ambition and sets his Agent Provocateur an assignment, as a last opportunity to

redeem himself. It is un-negotiable mission - to blow up the Greenwich Observatory. Verloc tries to resist the mission, but Vladimir explains he has no choice, that Britain's lax attitude to terrorism made the whole of Europe vulnerable. They had little choice but to attack the Observatory, a symbol of science to drive a wave of reaction against the rising forces of anarchy. Verloc is given little choice but to try and procure the explosives from his old anarchist comrades. He knows they are a pretty useless group of misfits, (made up of men like Comrade Ossipon a handsome romantic anarchist and The Professor an ailing academic

who carries an armed time bomb in his coat) but they are Verloc's only hope.

The book begins as linear narrative, but with the explosion, the timeline fractures, resettling only when Chief Inspector Heat, a sturdy, traditional policeman, begins to investigate what appears to be a suicide bomb at the Greenwich Observatory. Heat is one of the few wholly sane characters in the book, and after the bomb we desperately need him to begin to settle and reshape the world. Heat is quickly drawn by the evidence to the pornographic parlour of the Verlocs. Heat knows Mr Verloc as a second-rate police informer. The Chief Inspector's arrival at the shop interrupts the husband and wife discussing a possible move to the Continent. The inscrutable Heat calmly explains to Mrs. Verloc that he has recovered an overcoat from the scene of a bombing with the shop's address written on a label. The coat belongs to Stevie. After Heat leaves, Winnie confronts Verloc. Our Secret Agent confesses that he had allowed Stevie to carry the bomb, and that there had been a terrible accident. But rather than forgive him as he hopes, Winnie is desperately angry and upset. In a moment that bristles with tension, Verloc feeling guilty and awkward, belittles Winnie and her grief. The ever stoic, reflective Winnie explodes, stabbing Verloc with a kitchen knife, leaving him dead in a pool of blood. In the final passage Winnie flees to the Continent, allying with the manipulative charmer Ossipon. But almost immediately her emotional instability and remorse begin to worry the anarchist, and after relieving her of Verloc's money, Ossipon abandons Winnie Verloc to commit suicide in the Channel. Winnie leaves nothing behind but her wedding ring.

It is a shocking ending to a shocking book – loss is heaped upon loss: loss of old century values upon loss of ideology, upon loss of love, upon loss of hope. It agglomerates Conrad's losses into a single tale - the loss of his childhood explored through the death of the permanent-child Stevie, the loss of his ever faithful Mother mirrors the demise of the equally dependable Winnie, and the loss of Conrad's Anarchist father is the murder of the unthinking politically naive Verloc. And losses are not passive losses, they are wrenches. Falling dominoes, violent jolts in the plotline, as Winnie murders Verloc, whose negligence in turn kills Stevie, whose clumsiness results in his own death. Hidden within it is an archaeology of Conrad's pain, of our pain, but set out as a sadistically painful comedy.

The Secret Agent was unsurprisingly not rapturously received when it was first published - the narrative, the characters, its core subject are all far from 'simple' or easy. It is a book that can leave the reader puzzled and unsure. It is an unconventional tale written by an unusual writer. Conrad had a hard early life, undoubtedly suffered depression, and even attempted suicide, and it would be easy to look at the author's personal demons for an



explanation. But this is not a book wrought from nihilism or despair; the Secret Agent is inspired by something more ambitious, more positive.

Conrad dedicated *The Secret Agent* to his friend and mentor HG Wells - Conrad describing Wells lovingly as '*an historian of the ages to come*'. Though short-lived, it was an important relationship for Conrad. In his admiration for the work of Wells are important clues about his own writing aspirations. In its own way *The Secret Agent* is as prophetic as anything that Wells wrote. Whilst HG Wells hypothesized how science might rescue humanity, Conrad captured something of the future of our inner landscapes, of how basic failings in the human condition would impact upon what we might become. Years after his relationship with HG Wells had broken down, Conrad wrote of his old friend, '*you don't care for humanity, but think they are to be improved. I love humanity, but know that they are not!*' And it is that residual potential for love, so evident even in the darkest characters that redeems the story, and which gives us the appetite and permission to laugh. *The Secret Agent* might be considered a difficult story: loss is heaped upon loss - loss of old century values, loss of ideology, loss of love and ultimately loss of hope. It is an archaeology of Conrad's pain, of our contemporary concerns, but within that loss is a beautiful humour and an uplifting sense of humanity.

Since 9/11 *The Secret Agent* has established a place as part of the cultural curriculum for a new generation who have celebrated its eerie prescience, its broken counter-heroic characters, its strong amoral undertow and a beautiful narrative arc that ruptures and disintegrates in the wake of the bomb. It has proven as Conrad hoped, a timeless tale – an ever-shocking story. It is a story that continues to confuse; one can only wonder at how it was received by traditional readers when it was first published in its serialized form. There are so many plot points that are profoundly shocking: the bomb's complete evisceration of Stevie, a pathetic almost Dickensian figure trapped in an endless childhood. It is a narrative element with the whiff of Tarantino-esque rococo torture – so deliberately extreme that today it seems awkwardly funny. The leaden passivity of Winnie is so over-powering that she almost ceases to be saintly, becoming one of the masochist-mannequins from the porn shop that she serves in. The utter uselessness and over-education of the anarchist ring is obviously a barely-veiled criticism of the weakness of the anarchist intellectuals who had failed Conrad's parents when it really mattered and has become a timely reminder of our impotent reactions to the post 9/11 world. Each character is beautifully crafted but profoundly flawed. And in laughing at the anarchists, but finding no moral compass with which to navigate to an ultimate narrative salvation, the reader is somewhat cast adrift –left

trapped in an Alice in Wonderland nightmare. At the end of the story there is no cozy conclusion or hero around which we can cohere, just the kind of hysterical laughter that accompanies blind terror. We want to laugh, but there is the echo of the asylum-scream in every passage of humour. It is as though Conrad has foreseen the extreme-genre fiction and filmmaking of the late twentieth century and borrowed their love of transcending the line between humour and horror.

The *Secret Agent* is one of Conrad's finest novels, *a simple tale* that seems to improve as time accretes layers of meaning onto its core truths. The book's inherent difficulty means that there aren't many theatre companies that could or would take on an adaptation. Conrad himself attempted to adapt the book for the stage in the 1920s, but the play like the book was not well received. It has been adapted for cinema, once by the young Alfred Hitchcock in 1936, then by Christopher Hampton in 1996. Both were only partially successful - neither chose to deal with the fact that the original story was conceived in irony. And as a pared back straight story *The Secret Agent* is a bleak and difficult story to adapt for the stage, and hard to digest in any form.

### III. *Priming the Device*

theatre O has a history of building successful physical and comedic theatre productions. For more than a decade they have been making plays that have gained the company a reputation for being brave and ambitious. The actors began the formal *A Secret Agent* rehearsal process in late May 2013. Before that morning, there had been years of fund-raising and incremental development of viable approaches to the material. The time has been invested in discerning how an elliptical Conrad-narrative might effectively be worked and shaped into stage-able scenes. As the project gained momentum two experimental workshops were hosted to introduce the ensemble to this Conrad. From those workshops, a basic set has been conceived – a bare black calico backdrop with two black wing-shaped movable screens that sit on a gloss black floor. There is an understandable feeling of excitement and expectation as they gather on the first day. Doing justice not just to the text but to the shared expectations is going to be a challenge.

The rehearsals begin in one of the large backrooms of the Shoreditch Town Hall. It is a once grand mid-Victorian building that feels like the sort of environment that Adolf Verloc, *Spy* and *Pornographer*, might have frequented. It sits in an area of Central East London that has in recent years become gentrified as London property prices have risen. A convenient location, good restaurants and innovative galleries have driven the development of a highly

dynamic demographic, dominated by a mix of culturally-focused young people, South Asian Muslim families and pockets of the Old-Left. They are in many senses the heirs of Verloc's world. The cyber-augmented young are the new Anarchists - the Ossipons, the children of stalwart middle-classes who want to change the world, and to do it on their own terms. Their neighbours, South Asian Muslims are part of a demographic that since the recent London terrorist campaigns, have become the most likely to be stopped and searched by the police. They have been the subject of concerted profiling and surveillance initiatives that have palpably changed behavior and impacted on confidence: today this naturally socially introverted group feel less culturally present than at any time in recent history. They have found themselves in some of the least attractive Victorian-era social housing alongside loyal pockets of *Professors*, well-educated older generation socialists who have hunkered down turning their backs on the aggressive pace of socio-political change that is raging in the world beyond.

On the morning that rehearsals begin handfuls of young people gather ready to join anti-G8 campaigners. They are preparing for a coordinated campaign of action in the build up to the summit. Over the next hour, a number of small groups make their way past the old town hall. Later that morning they will work their way down toward Oxford Street, Regent Street and Piccadilly Circus to join the 'StopG8', 'Carnival Against Capitalism'. The air fizzes. The police are even more anxious and nervy than usual. Every officer seems to be dressed in riot gear, each police vehicle seems to have its lights permanently flashing and its sirens screaming. By mid-morning the police release intelligence of a Central London anarchist cell that is coordinating citywide events - half an hour later their squat, (a former Police Station in Beak street) is raided. For those following events via social media, rumors of arrests and planned attacks build one upon another, the atmosphere becoming more suffocatingly tense with each turn of events, until by late morning it feels as though the city is about to explode.

Within the rehearsal room it might not be quiet, but it is still with concentration. Joseph W Alford, the Director, begins the first pre-rehearsal workout. He has not shaved, and looks strangely like the young Joseph Conrad. The unfolding situation beyond the rehearsal walls has not escaped him – he has been quietly developing the play since just after 9/11 acutely aware of how uncannily aspects of the daily news mirrored Conrad's nightmarish and humorous vision. And Joseph is not alone in making those connections; The Secret Agent has become a counter-culture Bible – the book that has inspired dissent and counter-cultural movements from Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber to the G8 protestors. For Joseph the link between Conrad's narrative and what is happening outside are what make the story ripe

for adaptation – and what makes it so important that they do not succumb to Hollywood’s approach of sweetening the more challenging aspects of the story. Joseph W Alford wants this story of the last days of Adolf Verloc to be as funny, as moving and as hard-hitting as Joseph Conrad’s.

#### IV. Setting the Timer

Even from the very beginning, it is apparent that it is not like conventional theatrical creative processes. theatre O have devised their own way of making theatre. The ultimate narrative stewardship does not sit in the hands of any one person. The director will direct, the writer will write – but the spirit of the play and the manner of telling the story - will be shared. The play will be slowly excavated from the shared consciousness and ambitions of the company - the director’s role to draw the right elements from the well of ideas that the group proffer and develop - the writer’s role to craft scenes, but also to agglomerate the ideas of the company as they arise. When working well, theatre O’s process is like watching Jazz improvisation, everyone knows their character, or their role, they know Conrad - but they must work together to find the best play, and their particular contribution within the possibilities. The ideas flow endlessly, and when an obviously interesting suggestion or improvisation emerges, the atmosphere shifts as it is worked and accommodated into the narrative. But there are also times of angst and doubt, periods when the momentum slows and answers are not forthcoming or universally accepted. It is also a methodology that heightens the sense of vulnerability that actors can naturally feel.

As they go through the first session of stretching and limbering exercises, across London the composer has begun work on ideas for his score and the set designer and animator are thinking through their initial contributions. In a production meeting the previous week, a number of broad thematic parameters were laid out from which they are all working. The production is going to begin a multi-venue tour, and so the sets constructed will need to work in spaces of varied size and shape – the distressed screens. The set designer Simon Daw wanted to convey a feeling of the space being found, of the perforated, tattered backdrop being ‘make-shift.’ Joseph, the director, has an ambition, ‘if we are going for *a found, distressed calico look* – we must be true to salvage – we should actually use salvage’. It is early days, but it is indicative of what is to come. Joseph and his company are uncompromising in their drive to achieve what they want. In thinking of using salvage, they are narrowing their options and making the design more challenging to deliver. But the director feels the integrity of salvage, that antiques are most true to the spirit of the original.

As Joseph emphatically explains, ‘when Conrad looks at the body exploded, he is so obviously struck by the mechanical nature of the remains – that visceral distress should be mirrored in every piece of furniture.’ Helen, the lighting designer, interjects that rather than looking impoverished, the holes in the set ‘could glow’ like stained glass, allowing light through. The set designer, Simon, adds that there is something evocative and nostalgic about the light flooding through perforated fabric, but reminds the group that these panels are to be further animated by projections designed by Paddy Molloy. There are concerns about projecting onto the black set that are left to be resolved. But they are keen that the seeming simple set can come to life, that it will be able to capture scenes pulled from Stevie’s imagination, and the sense of Conrad’s imagination. The set designer is full of ideas of how to achieve these things – but although theatre O have managed to raise £210k to bring the production to life, but they will need to sell tickets to make it truly tenable. Even here at the most successful end of mid-scale theatre there are still resource limitations.

On this set *The Parlour* is the only room in the house and it will be through the lighting design that the bar, parlour, office, and the street will be each brought into being. The lighting design will have to be scalable to work with the varied venues – Helen wonders whether some lighting might be integrated into the set, that the lights could be distressed to feel compatible with bomb-blast aesthetic. This got Joseph’s (the director) imagination racing; he wonders if it might be possible to reflect chaos of the bomb-blast by exposing the wires, cables and stage paraphernalia for all to see. But Helen pulls the director back, arguing that ‘we need beautiful, simple effects’ single lights doing lots of jobs. As the creative excitement bubbles, Simon, the set designer, looks concerned and then he asks, ‘how distressed do you want it?’. It is obvious that even though the process is highly collaborative, they all seek creative steerage from the director.

Joseph has a vision that seems to be pulled from early-film and late-Vaudeville, from fairgrounds and Punch and Judy shows. He says, ‘we are witnessing the moment just after the explosion, and the play is excavating order from the chaos’. He does not want an accurate Victorian parlour, but a set pulled from early film, chairs that might collapse and reassemble, like in a Buster Keaton film, furniture that defines the frame of the stage, as in a chaotic Max Beckmann domestic scene. He begins to conjure an image of a poor, but loved domestic environment that can with imagination be endlessly rearranged to tell the story – a table might become a horse – ‘from what seem like humble things the world will be conjured’.

The perfect analogue for transformations the company seeks are embodied in The Cabinet of Desires, (COD) a wardrobe sized booth or box that is the interface on a myriad of pornographic possibilities. For a story that has been compared to Alice in Wonderland, the COD is the looking glass through which dull conventional things can take on some magic. Helen asks how the COD will be powered; would it be wound, wheezing and coughing into life via an old dynamo? Or is it a slick and beautiful interface onto our dreams? Joseph throws it back at the lighting designer saying, 'the more interesting the box, the better.' And that is Joseph's ambition for everything, the costumes are conceived as being more than clothes, they are extensions of the characters that don them, 'and physical opportunities to drive the narrative'. Joseph suggests that the Professor's coat might be a steam-punk assemblage of old cables, wires and fuses with the bomb buried deep within. They imagine possibilities with Mark, the composer; perhaps there might be a live band playing unconventional instruments - styrophones, a toy piano, or the sort of accoutrement that you might find in a porn shop. Joseph wants to see a musical moment in which the voices of all the performers compete one against another in an increasingly intense cacophony until they settle and end in harmony. Mark knows that it is a story constructed at moment of change, the explosion is the dynamic trigger that drives the shift in narrative, and the music must reflect that. They want the music constructed with an awareness of the period, but not slavishly so. As he speaks he seems to imply a slight tension between sound and music that will have to be overcome. Gareth, (who is he?) wants to build an audio-landscape, to wrap the audience in London to bring the small space to life. They will have to work closely together to make sure that the audio all sits comfortably. Paddy, the animator, wants to take the ideas of the morning away to storyboard each scene for two projectors. As the session closes, Joseph acknowledges what everyone is feeling, 'this is a scary process, that will demand embracing the unknown and not bottling things up.' He invests the group in the idea of dealing with and accommodating challenges as they arise. And developing something as ambitious as the Secret Agent is guaranteed to test; already one of the actors has dropped out on medical grounds. But there is an understanding that if each of the talented individuals in the company works to their strengths and is true to the spirit of Conrad that they will produce something special. theatre O have built a reputation around their highly collaborative production techniques and watching ideas firing one after another is impressive – but how one conducts, contains and directs this kind of energy over the long duration of the production will be fascinating to observe.

Joseph half-jokingly reads something he calls a rehearsal code, a list that demands each

company member's trust and understanding. It in part raises a smile because the whole production has been made possible by the complete over-commitment of everyone involved: these are not just actors but *devisors* - they are not just the production crew, but friends. theatre O are a company that are driven by the husband and wife team of Carolina and Joseph. For this production Carolina has taken on the central role of Winnie, whilst Joseph directs. They are both alumni of the Jacques Lecoq School, the font of physical theatre. It is hard not to worry how the intensive and unforgiving process might affect their relationship – but there are an array of close relationships involved in bringing the production together. Although much of the company have not worked together, everyone involved has helped to nurse this project into being. It is immediately evident the extent to which they are all directly, or indirectly, invested in the project at a level that transcends the professional.

As the cast begin their limbering exercises on the first morning of rehearsals, it is curious to see Conrad's characters animated. The immediately obvious thing is that there are no under-studies, each actor is the collection of characters they play. If one of these actors falls ill, so indeed will the character – the show goes on. At this moment, the play exists in the room in the imagination of the group - they will have to find it. The five actors work through an increasingly intense workout. For Dennis Herdman who will play both Ossipon and Inspector Heat, *The Secret Agent* has proved something of an acquired taste. He confides that he found it a hard novel to like, but grew to enjoy the novel more as causality regains coherence in the later chapters. Dennis, like so many, found it initially claustrophobic, steeped in seemingly irrelevant details and odd vignettes. These forensic descriptions seem to serve little substantial narrative purpose, but over the course of the novel they contribute to the incremental tightening of tension, heightening the sense of terrible inevitability. 'And then when the worst eventually happened, it was even more intense than I imagined.' Dennis was mesmerized by the uncompromising and visceral nature of the final passages that leaves the reader wrung out and mourning the loss of Winnie Verloc. George Potts, an actor known for comedic roles who plays the central Verloc role also feels affected by the 'heroic Winnie Verloc', moved by the story of a woman married to save her brother and driven to kill as a desperate and completely justifiable act. Leander Deeny, who will take the roles of 'Vladimir and Stevie' has found a way of excavating some sympathy for the strange Vladimir. Perhaps on the surface, a warped sociopath, but Leander feels that this is a character for whom Conrad builds enough back-story to demand some real thought. Leander reads him as a product of a ruthless system, but who over time has become a

machine. By contrast 'everyone else is trying to find a way out' but Vladimir, perhaps like Conrad, knows enough of the world to understand, that *this is it*. As Leander talks he conveys a profound fondness for the book that he affectionately calls 'a moral-less fable'. Carolina Valdes who will play Winnie, sees her character as a concentrated icon of motherhood who is prepared to sacrifice all for the family. Helena Lymbery, the last in the quintet of actors, plays Mother and the zealous Professor. She cackles and coughs as she talks about the aged infirmed matriarch of the Verloc family. Mother is the emotional keystone of the family. Her verbal incontinence helps Conrad to deliver a deep backstory and offers valuable insight onto the otherwise emotionally stunted family. And Helena naturally inspires the necessary affection to make her loveable rather than dull.

They each seem to have constructed their own ways into the story. To draw them together will require not just their devising skills, not just effective directing, but the anchoring forces of special writing. Matthew Hurt, the writer, has the formidable challenge of pulling the outcomes of the rehearsal processes into a script over the duration of the six-week production process. Matthew feels like many commentators, that every previous adaptation has been 'a bit of a disaster' and knows that to succeed here, that they must rethink Conrad, they must 'break it up and try something new.' And yet they will have to strive hard not fall into the trap of previous adaptations of softening the Secret Agent's core messages.

As the warm-up session draws to an end, Joseph is keen to keep the momentum and energy in some vigorous work-shopped experiments inspired by tiny extracts of Conrad. Helena and Carolina are accompanied by a sound piece devised by Gareth Fry. It is a large-scale orchestral piece of music that has them emerging slowly from beneath a large tarpaulin. It sets the tone for what is to follow – it is odd but a memorable vignette that resembles the final scenes of Guadagnino's, *I am Love* - the actors excavating what feel like primal forces. It has the essence of one of the darker passages of *The Secret Agent*, as when Conrad describes society as 'a dim battleground of predatory and fragmentary egos'. It is hard to watch and intriguing in the way that bodily functions draw attention – but how one fashions this highly naturalistic session into a useable vignette will be something to see. Carolina explains that they had wanted to emphasize what came after an explosion, when the residual potential is most evident, they wanted to find the hope that remains after '*everything has been wiped away*'. In that directionless chaos we might feel '*threatened, but we are also intrigued*.'

The second scene involves the male actors vigorously disagreeing and then fighting in slow



motion before returning to their argument. They seem to be inspired by the temporal discontinuities in the original text. The only thing that survives intact is the disruption itself, as Conrad says, 'Explosions are the most lasting thing in the universe ...' They have been especially attentive in capturing the moment of the explosion when we might expect the plot to race forward only to become trapped in a foggy temporal fugue as chronology and plot break down. Leander and Dennis were drawn to how Conrad builds a sense of time and cityscape from small things. This was most evident in the curious detail of Conrad's London, his warped acutely observed descriptions of dogs, rats, horses and insects – that are used to underline the importance and place of each discrete thing.

This opens up a broad discussion about the main themes of the novel. The ontological themes: the power of small things, the causal chains that can be triggered by minor interventions, the imposition of meaning, the things that motivate character; loyalty, the struggle to maintain equilibrium, social injustice, compromise, laziness, duty and loyalty. Joseph feels that it is in part a novel driven by the inexorable power of the causalities and momentum that drives life's narratives, but also by inertia, chronic, crippling inertia. For the first time Helena makes an intervention, *'for many people it is hard to get through the day, because they cannot see the point – we have lost our way. I identify with the anarchists. It is a collective thing, a connection.'* There is quiet in the room for a moment, she has struck a nerve. It is a sentiment that makes sense of what is happening on the streets of London as much as it speaks to what they are trying to achieve in the rehearsal room.

The second day begins again with exercises. Anarchist protests at the G8 summit meeting have intensified. One protestor has tried to commit suicide, jumping from a rooftop live on television. In Greece the national television station has been terminated mid-transmission and in Turkey student battles rage against troops over issues too subtle or complex to effectively convey in a news item. Within the rehearsal room the atmosphere has altered. The subtle but important developments of the first day session have contributed to a renewed drive to be true to the sentiments of the original, not to follow the path of most previous adaptations by softening the narrative. Everyone feels that they need to find a way of keeping the integrity of the work-shopped experiments in the finished production. Joseph's first words after the limbering up address it – 'the essence of these experiments should underlie each scene, sometimes overtly, sometimes hidden.'

They begin by considering how they will deal with the Verloc family business: purveyors of pornography. In keeping with Joseph's chosen aesthetic of fairgrounds and Vaudeville they

want to chart a course between nostalgia and warm, and seedy and sinister. They build a scene around two wing-backed chairs, facing away from the stage, hiding their occupants, allowing for a larger-than-life showman to invite people to ‘step right up’ and experience ‘the varied delights of the Cabinet of Desires.’ The first client, Dennis, resists the offer, weakly arguing that ‘there isn’t anything that I want’ – the second client, Helena is given little choice and is forcibly fellated. It has the seediness and danger of old Soho, and leaves the space crackling with a crime-scene electricity. Joe is excited by the sideshow evocation which suggests audience engagement, of plants and innocent victims being drawn from the crowd.

In the second improvisation scene, stage-husband and wife collaborate. Winnie prepares a prone Verloc as though he was a stuffed boar being readied for the oven. He is disembowelled; old garments pulled like entrails from inside his shirt and his hollowed husk of an abdomen is tied to a spit. It is consciously perverse, aggressive and sexual. It seems to be excavated from the repressed needs of Winnie Verloc and the aggressive manipulation of her husband by the agencies that he works for. Like the previous improvisation it leaves the room feeling touched by tarnished thoughts – Joseph is excited by the energy and the emerging humour.

For the next vignette Joseph gives the group a title to inspire their thinking, ‘the incredible one roomed house.’ It is an improvisation that the whole company take on together. The



cast and all the domestic furniture from the Verloc family parlour are squeezed into a tiny stairwell where they all go about their domestic work, the space so small that each movement impedes or forces another. They have become the internal workings of a clock – there is a Weimar lunacy and contained hysteria about the scene. They seem to have discovered the way

that they will work on the stage, like cogs that grind and purr, humans who have lost their humanity. It mirrors Conrad’s almost perverse obsession with detail, with finding the

profound in the prosaic. The only uplifting element of the vignette is Stevie who plays on a small piano. Joseph says it first, but everyone is thinking it, 'the house of Verloc is just a machine – an inertia machine.' And the director also wants to take the Buster Keaton physical language from the scene.

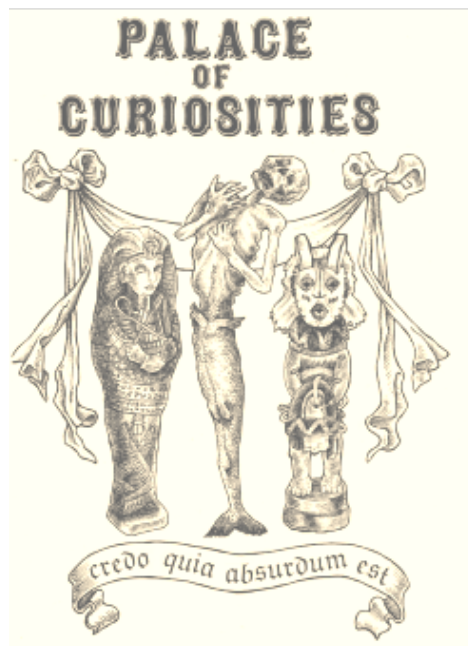
The next morning they begin again with more improvisations, slowly building a palette of vivid ideas. Joseph reminds the actors that the space at the Young Vic is very intimate. There will be no curtain, no barrier, so the performance will need to be complete and utterly absorbing. The vignettes grow increasingly extraordinary. Verloc, the impresario, introduces a strange fairground freak: a woman who is tied to all the furniture in the parlour. Straining, stretching, bent over with effort, she slowly begins to pull the whole room across the stage. It is a potent visual analogue of Winnie's place in the Verloc family, both as the family momentum, but simultaneously as a repository of an oppressive feeling of obligation. Over and over again they return to the space to work through the scenes finding visual and theatrical ways of expressing Conrad and asking more questions of the text.

Joseph sets provocations, 'the extraordinary disappearing woman', 'London a cruel devourer of the world's light' – each inspires vivid micro-scenes. Some are discrete stories whilst others layer one upon another; some of these explorations are derived from scenarios taken directly from the novel while others are evocative of themes that seem redolent of the period in which Conrad wrote. After days of building scenes the company stops and reviews who they think their characters are. It serves as a momentary emotional census - cascades of words fill the session, the confidence with which they describe their characters has transformed. And then they go on devising more scenarios, they explore Vladimir the bully, the young fanatic, the weight of the establishment. At the end of the first week Joseph reflects on how far they have come and the scale of the task in hand, 'we don't have a show, but next week these foundations will evolve into the show, and we will keep feeding into our strong structure.'

In the second week the company changes the location for the rehearsal, finding a home at the Young Vic in the Clare Space. They begin the second week building biographies for their characters. Helena constructs a deep and complex backstory of Mother's artisan family in France. She tells of the slow collapse of her marriage to an aggressive alcoholic. We learn how Stevie's stammer and his intolerance of injustice are responses to that early life, as is Winnie's acceptance of Verloc's selfishness and indolence. The abuse by an alcoholic father also offers some psychological contextualisation for Winnie's reaction to Stevie's death. The

father's behaviour explains a great deal. It could be reasonably conjectured that the killing of Verloc is an annihilation of her father and an extinguishing her own deep-rooted feelings of powerlessness. Verloc was also a character fashioned out of misfortune, his bad habits learned in his formative years fighting in continental wars, where he had learned to keep his head down. The characters back-stories and the narrative causalities become hugely elaborate and complex, helping to offer more purchase onto a story that leaves a considerable amount to the reader's imagination.

The company use these new backstories to create a new body of improvisations. They explore Ossipon's final days at university and Stevie's inner world of Alice in Wonderland.



And then during an exploration of Verloc, Mother's hero, Helena says the words, "Verloc you are a loving man – is there anything else I can do for you? Perhaps some washing?" It feels in character but is also very inappropriate. It triggers a series of questions for Joseph, and he poses them with an urgency like he is scared he might forget them, 'what if Verloc runs an anarchist and pornographic sideshow? Could the play begin with the family serving in the shop, working the Cabinet of Desires? Perhaps Ossipon could be an audience member who is pulled from his seat to have his desires

satiated?' For the first time his fellow devisors do not seem completely enthused by his suggestions. It is a plot device that slightly alarms Matthew, the writer. He responds with a surprising frankness - 'I am worried about the diminishment of the political edge of the play', Carolina shares Matthew's concerns about them becoming Vaudevillians rather than political activists. Helena likes the confident move away from a slavish adherence to the novel, and George demands that if there are changes that they should enhance the clarity of the story. There is a momentary tension. Joseph does not back down, he is if anything slightly more emphatic, 'Conrad wrote the novel in an ironic tone, I feel the Vaudeville theme allows that metaphorical distance'. Matthew again responds emphatically, arguing that an extra layer of metaphor might prove confusing and might dilute the core narrative. For him he feels it should be possible to tell the story without making the ideas quite so marked and arch. It is left unresolved – and it seems to linger in the rehearsal space. This is

the difficulty of this method of devising, when the narrative ownership is shared it can create justified artistic disagreements that are hard to resolve.

Even though they do not discuss it as openly again, it turns out to be a significant moment in the rehearsal process. Perhaps it is a coincidence, but it marks the end of the early fluid



stage of development as the cast tacitly recognise a greater creative constraint and control will need to be exerted by the director as the process continues.

The next scenes that they devise are different in scope and character. Joseph leads a number of sessions in which the company starts to build scenes that

relate more explicitly to the narrative of the play.

Three days later Joseph revisits the idea of a shop or a sideshow. He reveals that he and Carolina had visited a fairground, and had been struck by an act, Professor Voltini. Joseph describes in vivid detail the travelling sideshow in which high voltages of electricity are passed through the bodies of Voltini's assistant, Madame Electra. It is an image pulled from the contemporary London streets, yet simultaneously it feels drawn from Conrad's world of revolution and plots. It is the bridge between the two worlds that Joseph has been seeking to link. There is neither disagreement nor hearty endorsement. Matthew who had been most resistant to the idea when it was first raised is quiet.

They begin to slowly build the small scenarios and vignettes into scenes, they forge a beginning in which the indolent, immobile Verloc is dressed by his family, who swirl like satellites around him, preparing him for the day. They layer these scenes with a Buster Keaton-esque physicality and pace. For the first time the costume designer delivers items of clothing making the early scenes look like Max Beckmann tableau. With their deep understanding of the book and the characters and their weeks of preparation, there is a pent up appetite to turn their research into a narrative – and quickly consecutive passages of the play begin to unfold. As the play take shape episodes that explore Stevie's inner world, and the domestic sanctum that is created by Winnie and Mother become the emotional core of the narrative. Without conscious discussion the play begins to unfold as an exploration of family and loyalty. It is an interpretation of the story that makes Verloc's unforgivable weakness, his inability to make the right choice between politics and family, or even

between political choices, even more pathetic. The Verloc family sit like Russian Dolls. Verloc is the hardened outer layer that protects, within Mother guides, Winnie cares – but it is only Stevie at the heart of the nest who can truly dream, and his dreams are locked deep within his disability. When Vladimir breaks Verloc, it is a jolt that leaves the family’s heart vulnerable. Perhaps the great redemptive power of the play is that it gives us a chance to delve for a moment into Stevie’s dreams. And there we discover that at the inner core of this story is not Verloc’s prosaic lust for a quiet life, but Stevie’s noble desire for a small measure of justice. As a narrative arc it is effective and simple. It recasts the play as the story of the implosion of a family, rather than the explosion of a bomb and its repercussions.

Gradually the anarchists and their world is reduced and contained. A scene in which the anarchists meet and argue fervently about ideology is first moved off-stage leaving Winnie centre-stage doing domestic chores listening in. The Anarchist scene is then cut entirely, leaving the world of extremist politics inferred by Verloc’s stress and the crazed Professor’s ranting and Vladimir’s insanity. It is a bold decision, it cuts one of the few moments when we truly gain an understanding of what motivates the men who surround Verloc and leaves the world of politics as little more than a shared psychosis that feeds upon and destroys family. The Secret Agent is now the story of the Verloc family and The Cabinet of Desires becomes the interface between the vulnerable world of family and the crazed, perverted world beyond the parlour. The Cabinet of Desires ceases to be a pornographic tool, it is a conduit between domestic environment and the scary world outside.

Their improvisational work proves very useful in getting to grips with the narrative flow of the play, but then the momentum slows again as they consider the final moments. They muse for some time on how to dramatize the final act of the play, after Verloc’s death when Winnie Verloc escapes to the continent with Ossipon. Joseph wonders if they could suggest the journey through projections, or perhaps sound; could Winnie escape into the audience, to be almost free of the destiny that Conrad contains her within? Could the backdrop continually move, could Ossipon create a Winnie puppet, could the couple’s actions be mirrored by a second couple who are their filmic equivalents? In the end, as at the beginning of the play, they return to nostalgic iconography for visual inspiration. Joseph wants to use a B-Movie melodrama to tell the final stage of the story, by borrowing the spirit of the final scenes of the David Lean film, *Brief Encounter*. Along with the fairground it is drawn from a palette of nostalgic cultural references that place the play very firmly in a moment. In the

way that Conrad looked back to the Victorian era with an ambivalence, here there is an ambiguity in what Joseph seeks in these associations.

The company begin the third week where many companies might have started their rehearsal process: with a draft script, the beginnings of stage direction and an agreed set of back-stories for the characters. They work on visually strengthening scenes, creating intricately choreographed passages through and across scenes and they push the physical comedy, deepening the visual aspects of the narrative. Joseph describes this period, 'these are not really scenes, but moments. We need to add action.' It is an understandable drive. Conrad first conceived *The Secret Agent* as a short story, and it is easy to see why. The book flows from a single event. And what turns that event into something more profound is the vivid nature of Conrad's context for the story and the gritty and vivid nature of the descriptive passages. The company try to infer that richness of detail, through a precision and intricacy of stage direction. Tiny, domestic moments are grafted into scenes, little episodes of physical comedy that help to infer Conrad's monumentality through small incidents. They are small changes but they have an immediate effect as the piece begins to lose some of Conrad's edginess and irony, but what remains is more directly affecting. Verloc's murder evolves into a dance, a flirtation, the house itself becomes a mechanism, the inner workings of a clock that Winnie winds. Balancing the impulses to keep the sharpness and humour of Conrad's original against the drive to entertain is a difficult path to negotiate.

It is another testing moment for the group. The period of improvisation is over, and they must find a new creative energy as they tighten scenes, learn lines and draw the play together. The expansive creative energy that is needed for improvisation is very different to what is required now, and it is very obvious that each actor is uniquely impacted by the change. Helena who has immersed herself deeply and emotionally into the devising process seems to be the most adversely affected, finding the structured line-learning and choreography a challenging transition. She feels she needs to start again with the characterisation to find a tone that she can live with; 'I want to make Mother more real, so that she can be funny,' she says. The cast have had to unravel Conrad's knotty narrative to construct the play and in reconstructing it they must reconstruct and contrive the subtle irony of the original. And they must replace the Conrad-esque tone as if it were always there – the frisson that comes naturally with *improv* has to be captured and suspended within an acting style that can be accessed at will.

For the first time more than three weeks into the process they deliver a complete run-through of the play. It allows Joseph to see how the discrete scenes and vignettes flow within the whole story. There are things that need immediate and obvious attention: the dances and songs are honed, Vladimir's extreme psychosexual scene is lightened, and Helena finds a new voice for Mother and quietens her delivery of the Professor further. But there are more substantial challenges; the transitions between scenes need work to knit the play into a single performance. It is hard and testing work, but they draw the play together with ruthless editing and reconsideration. By the end of the week the set is packed away, nothing but Verloc's chair remains.

For the final week, theatre O return to Shoreditch. The set and props make their way to Edinburgh, whilst the actors work in an empty space on refining their performance. Even now they continue to rethink and adapt. A scene, a final supper, is added after the bomb has been detonated and before Heat arrives. It is a tender and small scene, but its inclusion changes the emotional weight of the play. For the first time we see Verloc not just as the fool, but as a man who could be the focus of love - and that love, and the family, are now cemented as the story's backbone. Joseph spends time with George trying to work with the actor to make Verloc more sympathetic. They add a scene on the eve of the bombing: Verloc is depressed, traumatised and having second thoughts. The salvaging of Verloc is completed by the insertion of a lullaby 'blue moon' sung by Winnie to Verloc. It is tender and strangely conventionally beautiful for this production, but it seems to fit with the relocation of family at the heart of the tale. Now when Verloc laments, 'action is all the matters. The rest is nothing', it renders political discourse, his anarchist circle and Vladimir as being unimportant and people and family as primary. It is a final major perspectival adjustment. It is stepping back from an impressionist painting to see the complete landscape for the first time. The primary rehearsal period is over.

## V. Detonation

Before *The Secret Agent* opens in Edinburgh theatre O have a week of technical rehearsals at the Young Vic. They work for the first time with light, sound, costumes and projections and hone performances further. At the end of the week they deliver two open dress rehearsals. Watching the play 'complete' after seeing the constituent elements discretely developed is surprising. It is seamless in its delivery, the family scenes are very successful and as the play progresses it becomes increasingly affecting, it is visually intriguing, and faultlessly acted, but somehow does not feel completely resolved. *The Cabinet of Desires*



and the pornographic world of Verloc introduced at the beginning of the play feel all too quickly left behind. It makes the beginning something of a problem. The questions raised at the opening haunt the plot, asking testing questions of all the subsequent scenes. It is an issue that is exacerbated by the early audience-engagement scenes which are full of humour leaving the second-half descent into tragedy all the more unsettling. It is in part an inherited problem that one might direct at Conrad, but it is also something to do with tone.

The Edinburgh reviewers are merciless, Time Out's, Andrzej Lukowski wrote scathingly, *'theatre O's devised production seems blithely unconcerned over whether it's a very loose riff on 'The Secret Agent', a comedy reinterpretation of 'The Secret Agent', or very occasionally, a serious attempt to bring Conrad's darkly comic, shockingly prescient masterpiece about the rise of terrorism to the stage..... it insists on getting serious in the second half – a problem, because it's hard to feel invested in characters who were introduced as two-dimensional jokes. It's a shame, because there are constant hints of a good play – possibly several good plays – here'*. And blogger John Roberts agreed, *'The Secret Agent, is neither as adventurous, as thrilling or as funny as we are promised, instead we get a rather over-drawn production that waves on the side of self-indulgency than audience entertainment .... Alford's production lacks pace, lacks humour and almost lacks and real personality, however the latter is saved from its tedious direction and constant superfluous furniture moving by a rather dark and vaudevillian set design by Simon Daw, its dark menacing features almost becoming the strongest character in a rather weak production'*.

After years of thought and preparation and weeks of intensive work, it is a difficult response to deal with. Commendably the company though obviously shocked, do not buckle, they return to what they know, and they rebuild the problematic beginning of the play. The Cabinet of Desires scenes are shortened and the structure's name is changed to the Cabinet of Despair. An opening scene reminiscent of a Momento Mori photograph is cut entirely and the parlour furniture is simplified - the globe, the screen and fire utensils are all stripped out meaning that the set up of the furniture has to be re-choreographed.

The writer, Matthew Held, like most of the company finds this end to the devising process stressful. Even the ever positive Lucy Moore, the Producer, acknowledges the first week as very difficult. Not just performing the play, but continuing to develop the play 'in the limelight of Edinburgh,' tests everyone. She argues that the reviews were particularly unhelpful for 'a piece of work that had not yet found its pace and rhythm,' working against their instinct to nurture artistic risk. Moore feels that for devised theatre, there is a process

of development that needs time and space to reach maturation. Sadly they do not have the luxury of time, and over the course of the first week they rebuild the first section of the play - and despite the reviews *The Secret Agent* draws very positive, capacity audiences.

## VI. Impact