Colour, Noise, & Craniums
Adapting *The Third Policeman* as an Electronic Opera

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I have a large head. Vast, in fact. For a gentleman with an inclination towards hats, this is a constant source of frustration. Wearing the hats of friends gives me an instantly ridiculous appearance, like the crap Vaudeville song-and-comedy man I perhaps should have been. It comes as no surprise, then, that the image that inevitably springs to mind when thinking of my adaptation of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*

should be two gargantuan heads. Those who, for better or worse, saw the production – which was hailed as 'a burst of imagination, colour and noise' or a reason to stand at the end and shout with an alarming venom for your money back, depending on who you asked – went away with, if nothing else, the image of two vast fibreglass heads embedded somewhere in the recesses of their minds, ready to pop out in nightmares sometime next year. For the cast, who also took the roles of stagehands, puppeteers, prop repairers, or nurses for my dreadful, if occasional, mood-swings, the heads were much more. A source of exhausted amusement, a huge unwieldy rod for our backs, a portal into a magical world, even – on one leg of the arduous but marvellous tour – a

pair of suitcases. The two giant heads remained with us at all times, a constant reminder of the idiosyncratic way we had chosen to spend six months of our lives.

Standing at train stations with Oblivian Substanshall (*Sergeant Pluck/Old Man Mathers/Sergeant Fox*), Elvis Herod (*Sergeant MacCruiskeen/ John Divney/Finnucane & Co-Director*), Vulnavia Vanity (*Protagonist*), Martha Moopette (*Mrs Divney & Costumes*), and my two little girls Talulah & Autumn (*Divney's Children*). A picturesque lot as it is, all usually worse for wear due to the succession of prior evenings – ripe raw material for the gossips and whisperers on platforms. Then add to that recipe two heads each larger than the average human torso, staring out and watching, pensive and wide-eyed, the passing trains. The heads seemed to adopt the physical and emotional states of the group.

There weren't always going to be enormous heads in my version of *The Third Policeman*. The idea popped up fairly late in the creative process, with the heads still being finalised and modified during our rehearsal week. Like many elements of the show, the heads grew out of necessity. Initially, like every other UK-based project I've attempted to wrench screaming into life recently, the production was rejected for funding. (One eloquent gentleman interjected online at a later stage, when I attempted Crowdfunding to launch the project, 'No wonder you were rejected for funding, look at the state of you.' Charming. He's now firmly on my birthday card list.) My stab on Crowdfunder was, at least, partially successful and generated enough cash to begin to bring the beast to life. And lo, it came to pass, we opened at *Tête à Tête: The Opera Festival* then intermittently toured the UK and Netherlands over the following months.

What the lack of funding lost us, however, was time. Every member of the company worked for a pittance; consequently, it seemed unreasonable to demand they dedicate weeks of their precious time to memorising the torrent of words the roles of the Policemen necessitated. This is where the large heads came into the story. Back in the heady days of writing Arts Council applications, I had imagined a beautiful, organic production utilising the layered glass techniques of Russian animator Yuri Norstein in combination with music generated from a combination of onstage instruments and musical automata. The lack of financial support, coupled with determination to make the work happen, led to my returning to precisely what I didn't want to do: pre-recorded music and live singers, which I eventually combined with a large back-projection that could be scenery, animated sequences, or words, mixed with live shadow-puppetry.

Flann O'Brien's work is often described as Surrealist, a description that has never rang true to me. The world the protagonist enters seems more a form of reality

that has had a bicycle pump stuffed into an incision and pumped-up to the point just before it bursts. To inflate reality, so it feels swollen. Indefinitely just about to POP!

So what more appropriate way, then, to suggest this uncomfortable inflation of reality than to physically inflate the heads of Messrs Pluck and MacCruiskeen, solving the problem of underpaid artists – with much better things to do – learning the immensity of words, and their relationships to fragmented rhythms and bursts of electronics at the same time?

Looking back, I realise the extent to which the necessity of compromise from earlier ideas really created this opera (or 'Electronic Neuropera Vaudeville Machine' as it was eventually billed). The whole storytelling technique was fuelled by the close integration of words, music, performance, puppetry, animation, and design, with constant overlap between the elements and no room whatsoever for error. To work, the whole production literally had to run as a machine. But it was a homemade machine, crafted with uncertain hands in the constant quest for solutions to ever increasing problems. Unfortunately, that's the way I like projects to be…

How do we bring Mathers back? What are the qualities of Sergeant Fox? How on earth will we go to the Underground Chamber and discover the infinite and magical qualities of Omnium? Oh, and that bloody wooden leg, how do we deal with that...? That old classic suspension-of-disbelief became central to the adaptation and led me on something of a crusade on the virtues of 'unreality.' Taking as a starting point the idea that the evolution of dramatic storytelling in the 20th century has entered an unreasonable cul-de-sac of realism caused by mainstream cinema, I developed a style of storytelling where we attempted to present the narrative progression using whatever means were appropriate. Stylistically my adaptation of *The Third Policeman* ended up somewhere between opera, pantomime, and vaudeville, shot through with Eastern-European influenced animation film and puppetry. Sometimes characters would appear on-stage, sometimes in shadow, sometimes as puppets, sometimes as phantoms in the back-projection.

I devised symbols with which to tell, through the crossover of media, Flann O'Brien's complex story. Our Policemen wore white, Fred Astaire style gloves, which in turn became recurring animated figures in the projection – manifesting objects in the Underground Chamber, or as giant hands building a huge paper gallows, granting a sense of omnipresence and magic to Pluck, MacCruiskeen, and Fox. This omnipresent feeling, which inevitably carries with it a sense of threat, was central to successfully carrying across the tone and meaning of the book. If there is not a sense of disorientation, of collapse, like the universe is a corrugated cardboard box that is closing in on the protagonist's head, then the story has not been told, and ideally the

audience will experience this sensation as the protagonist delves deeper down the rabbit hole.

However, theatre is not immersive in the same way a book is, and the way to bring an audience into the world of a stage-piece is through empathy. *The Third Policeman* is not a novel in which one readily empathises with anybody. How, on stage, do you take a weak-willed, impressionable murderer, and make the audience want to go on a journey with him? Credit must go to Vulnavia Vanity, who played the protagonist as a hobbling, pathetic savant, with a hint of the Chaplinesque coupled with the salivating grotesque, developing a character both ball-scratchingly, nose-pickingly disgusting, and strangely endearing.

The sense of disorientation then arose from a wide range of what you might call 'cross-media-magic,' combining old and new approaches and technologies, uncertain whether you are watching animation or live-puppetry, whether someone is singing or not, voices coming from where they shouldn't. Some characters lip-synched to pre-recorded voices, or voices shouted from backstage. In the sequence in which Mathers returns, the protagonist's voice was doubled with another every few lines from backstage which, when coupled with the spectre of Mathers in the projection (who occasionally was nothing but a vast, floating head, or a spinning fez and bits of floating dressing gown), gave a clear impression of the world melting.

Throughout the entire process of writing, composition, and production, a system of 'Here's a problem, how do we solve it' seemed to recur. Sometimes fascinatingly, often frustratingly, occasionally collapsing into a state of consternation and panic. One example is the black box, which needed to disappear on-stage after the protagonist discovers it under the floorboards of Mather's house. It took months to find a solution. Initially, I had wanted to animate the box onto the back-projection, which would then shine through onto a rectangular piece of gauze the protagonist would hold. Didn't work. We experimented with sponges, and scoured the Internet looking for square balloons. Finally, somebody was collapsing an empty tea-box for recycling, and hit upon the simple solution of a black, foldable box that can disappear with a quick turn away upon Mather's coughing, slipped into a compartment inside the protagonist's jacket.

Not all the problems were so easily solved. In the early stages of composition, I made a mistake. In retrospect I can understand the practicality of it, but at the time misunderstood the connotations. What did I do? Composed the music first. Bearing in mind my adaptation had to squeeze the narrative into one hour, I made a structure that attempted to capture the essence of the story, looking at the book structurally and taking key elements of the shape. From those elements I was able to compose what amounted to an imaginary ballet of *The Third Policeman*, visualising the dramatic

progression of each episode, with the compositions mapped through a circular chord sequence that, added with unexpected chord changes, mirrored the nature of the novel. What I had failed to anticipate was the practical difficulties of actually telling each scene verbally with this music, how to compress the feeling and story of, say, the entire Police Station sequence into around 4 minutes of words and music. My attempt at mirroring the nature of the novel through the music made setting words sometimes extraordinarily difficult. Days on end with book in one hand, pen and paper in the other, microphone in front me, and methodically working through the entire book whilst simultaneously trying to squeeze the essence of 50 pages into 2 minutes, in rhyme. I should add that there was no score, as such – the performers memorised the opera through a guide recording.

One of the peculiar by-products of this process was that my adaptation of *The Third Policeman* contained very few actual words from novel. Perhaps this was inevitable, as the entire libretto was written in rhyme. Each sequence gradually adopted its own style of rhyme. The scenes between the protagonist and Divney ran through what I can only describe as gutted pop-song recitative, and the Police Station / Underground Chamber sections took the elongated, meter-less rhyming style of Ogden Nash to express operatically the relentless stream of non sequiturs that flow from Pluck and MacCruiskeen.

MacCruiskeen looks at Protagonist.

MacCruiskeen: Is it about a bicycle?

MacCruiskeen begins to make jam sandwiches.

Pluck: Not this one. This is a private visitor who did not arrive upon a bicycle, but he has no moniker, and it appears that he arrived on foot.

MacCruiskeen: I see. Whilst I busy myself with this jam sandwich, after a long day I am a Policeman weary, Perhaps it would be opportune to furnish our esteemed a pied guest with the most vital atomic theory.

MacCruiskeen pulls down a (projected) projection screen.

Projection: The following atomic theory discourse is illustrated in animation, on the projection screen.

Pluck: Everything is composed of small particles of itself and they are flying around in concentric circles and arcs, never standing still or resting but spinning away and darting hither and thither like sparks.

MacCruiskeen: These diminutive gentlemen are called atoms, rather charmingly.

Joe: Watch them close, they speak a touch disarmingly but with authority and lucid phrase that rolls without the obvious clichés.

Pluck: Consecutively and consequentially, you can safely infer that you are made of atoms yourself and so is your fob pocket and the tail of your shirt and this table, my helmet, this shelf.

MacCruiskeen: Do you know what happens when you strike a bar of iron with a hammer or a mace? When the wallop falls, the atoms are bashed away down to the base. Some of the atoms of the bar will go into the hammer and the other half into the stone or the table or the particular article that is residing in the underzone...

Pluck: The result of it is that people who spend most of their lives riding a bicycle over the rocky path begin to interchange their atoms with the bithicle, from the bike theat to the human arth.

MacCruiskeen: I suspect you are a sensitive man, and indeed it may give you a prickle, if you knew how many of the folk of this parish are half-human, half-bi-sickle.

Pluck: When a man is half or more than half bicycle you will not see him so much, if at all, as his inclination becomes to spend much of his time leaning with one elbow propped against the wall.

> – Excerpt from Ergo Phizmiz's *The Third Policeman*

I lifted from everywhere and sluttily cross-pollinated to tell the story. Consequently, the work developed its own language of signs and symbols, its own mythology, separate from the novel. White gloves – Mickey Mouse or Fred Astaire style – became the symbol of Policemen, of control, of magic. The semen of Marcel Duchamp from Maria's Valise infiltrated everywhere, at the death of Mathers, at the bottom of the lift to the Underground Chamber, at the hanging of the protagonist. 78rpm records, the sound of which ran intermittently throughout the piece, also became moons, suns, and ghostly apparitions in the grains of wood. Most prevalent of all, however, were typewriters.

A few months earlier I had visited my friend Bryan the Intrepid Vinyl Explorer in his attic in Lincolnshire. For years, Bryan has scoured the rubbish tips of Northern England and collected huge piles of thrown-away records, to be sifted through at a later date. On the day in question, as is inevitable, I become the one doing the sifting. I chanced upon a brown envelope containing eight shellac records, probably from the 1920s–30s, two of which were broken. On the label they read 'Pitman's Gramophone Course of Typewriter Keyboard Instruction.' I presumed they were records of a stern narrator introducing us to where the 'A' can be located, and so on. Upon putting the first of the records on the turntable, my ears were flicked hard by the sudden finger of the unexpected! A repetitive click over which motorik-style versions of light popular

classical music were knocked out, only broken every so often by a haughty gent intoning 'Carriage, Return!' On each side, a different piece of classical music, to a slightly faster click as we progress through each record.

After my initial composition of *The Third Policeman*'s structure, I inserted elements from Pitman's Gramophone Course intermittently throughout, some giving breathing spaces, others becoming their own scenes. One insertion was right at the beginning, immediately before we meet the protagonist writing the finishing words of his book. Ultimately, what Pitman's Gramophone Course did was place the idea of the creative process, the act of writing, at the centre of the work. In this way, the protagonist's manuscript became visual elements of the substance of the piece: as Sergeant Pluck's documents thrown like a cloud of feathers, as birds whilst de Selby sings of a house as a large coffin, as Sergeant Fox's paperwork, as a floating city on the way to Mathers's house. Taking the idea a step further, my own compositional notebooks for the opera began to be the foundations of set-designs and landscapes. The opera began to digest its own creative process. Glimpses of Martha Moopette and Mike Wade making two enormous heads slunk their way into the imagery.

We find ourselves, then, back where we started, talking about heads. I have a large head. Vast, in fact. For a gentleman with an inclination towards hats, this is a constant source of frustration. Wearing the hats of friends gives me an instantly ridiculous appearance, like the crap Vaudeville song-and-comedy man I perhaps should have been......