



## Between the Big and the Small Picture: An Interview with RashDash

### [00:00:19] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello!

Today in the Gallery, we meet Abbi Greenland and Helen Goalen, founders of the music, dance and theatre collective RashDash. As they recall in this conversation, Abbi and Helen met at university and set up RashDash in 2009. Their musical collaborator Becky Wilkie subsequently joined as a core member of the ensemble. Since their earliest outings at the National Student Drama Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe, RashDash have distinguished themselves through a highly individual performance idiom which hybridises musical, corporeal and textual dramaturgies together in a way that defies categorisation.

In this interview – a rare one in the series to have been conducted in person before the Covid-19 lockdown – we retrace the company’s journey over the intervening ten years and talk about the making of some of their memorable hits such as the *Two Man Show*, premiered in 2017, and *Three Sisters*, premiered in 2018. The company’s frequently stated idealism, revaluing of the feminine, radical generosity and honest contemplation are present in this conversation too.

The interview took place on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2020 at the Longfield Hall in South London.

### [00:01:42] THE EARLY DAYS

**Duška Radosavljević:** Thank you very much for making this possible, this conversation. I wanted to have an opportunity to talk to you about your work and how it’s developed over the years. Because your work seems to be very representative of the kind of things I’m looking at as part this project – the way in which you’ve sort of led the way with gig theatre, or what we now call ‘gig theatre’, we probably didn’t call it that when you were developing the form. But it seems to be one of the definitive examples that people often cite when they talk about the form of gig theatre, for example. And I guess it’s probably because of the way in which music is built into the way you make work. I didn’t know that you had a Hull connection and that that was the time and the place you came together. So maybe just going back there, when was it you were at Hull?

**Helen Goalen:** We were there 2006-2009, which now feels like a very long time ago. The first thing we did together, we worked – because we did the same course at Hull University. So we did a little bit of work within our course – we made a very strange thing as part of a module. I don’t even know which module that was, the one with the cogs, it was Arthur and Lancelot and the Knights – and something about the Round Table. It was bizarre, it was a kind of bizarre thing. But we enjoyed working together – we didn’t really enjoy what we made, but we enjoyed working together and experimenting together. And then we–

**Abbi Greenland:** I remember bashing little corrugated pieces of metal into – that we kept calling ‘croc dogs’ – into bits of wood and then wrapping the wood in cellophane–

**HG:** Because we were building our set–

**AG:** Pressing ourselves up against the cellophane. So we were making cellophane frames and then being Arthur and Lancelot, wearing suits–

**HG:** We were probably dictators within that process in a really, like, probably not a very nice way but I guess we discovered, in working in that way, that we had a similar desire for something – to be something, to be really good. Not that that was really good, but you know, had a similar kind of drive and energy behind the project. And then we directed something terrible at the Edinburgh Fringe. This was all sort of – this was pre-RashDash, really, but it was finding a way of working together, and that was where we saw Do Theatre, that Fringe, which was at the end of our first year at university. And beyond, like, seeing the stuff we saw there–



**AG:** We saw a lot at the Aurora Nova that year–

**HG:** We did, yeah–

**AG:** And seeing Do Theatre together was big in that I don't think I'd seen theatre without words before. I think I'd seen dance and I'd seen theatre–

**HG:** I'd seen Gecko by that point I think, because I'd seen *The Race* the year before–

**AG:** Yes, I remember that being big for you–

**HG:** Which, yeah, that was really big for me as well. Being like: 'Oh, theatre can be this weird, experimental, but also fun and dance and–'

**AG:** And really political – *The Race*, right? I'm thinking about *The Arab and the Jew*–

**HG:** *The Race* was about fatherhood I think, and like the race of life. So yeah, I think it's less political – but yeah, *The Arab and the Jew*, I didn't see that one actually. But yeah, we came away from that festival and were like – again, didn't really like what we made. Found all that quite difficult, working with lots of people and lots of bodies, but we enjoyed working together, so – let's just do something that's just us! And let's perform in it, because that's the thing that we're interested in doing as well – like, being performers in the work but making it ourselves and that–

**DR:** Just the two of you?

**HG:** Just the two of us, and that piece was entirely physical, with no words at all. And it was called *Strict Machine*. It had a feminist agenda, but not a particularly specific one–

**AG:** It wasn't a very sophisticated message. I think I can remember talking about the glass ceiling a lot when we were making that, which is just hilarious now considering that we were just at uni and nothing had really got in our way in terms of that. If we were just like: 'Oh the glass ceiling's awful, we must smash it!' So we put on black and white suits and made a show about smashing the glass ceiling. And I remember when we took it to the National Student Drama Festival, lots of people were talking to us about this interest in the fact that we had chosen a very '80s aesthetic, and we had no idea we had chosen an '80s aesthetic. So taking our work to a festival where other students could watch it but also where a load of professionals could watch it was interesting because we realised how out of control we were of what we were doing. And that we were doing something we liked, but that we weren't really making strong enough, controlled enough, decisions about all of the messages that we put on stage, outside [of] we just like singing and dancing and we're feminists. So the next show we made had a guy in it – Mark Graham, who's in *Middle Child* now – and we made a show called *Never Enough*. This was still at uni as well, it was our third year piece. We took it back to the [National] Student Drama Festival, and I feel like that was around the beginning of the time where we decided: 'Shall we go off and train separately or shall we just do the company thing now?' And Adam Ledger, who maybe teaches at Birmingham now, but was teaching at Hull at the time said: 'If you start a company now, then you'll be poor and not knowing what you want to do at the same time as all of your friends are poor and don't know what they want to do, whereas if you do training, do acting, then get together and start a company in like five or six years, everyone else will have money and know what they're doing and you'll be at the beginning again.' And I remember that being a real strong persuader for me just going: 'Yeah, now's the time to do it, now's the time to take a punt.'

**HG:** Did he say that to us specifically or was it more of like a general, because I can't remember–

**AG:** He said that to us in his office when we'd gone in there saying we might start a company, and he was like: 'If you're going to do it, do it now' essentially, which was really good advice. And then we made *Another Someone*, which was after we graduated the first show we made. We stayed in Hull–

**HG:** *Honeymoon!*

**AG:** Abbi, *Honeymoon!* [Laughter.] Sorry, Helen's got the better memory. We made *The Honeymoon* which was about two women who were having a double wedding who both decided to run away from their husbands. Another–

**DR:** Was that a RashDash show?

**AG:** That was a RashDash show.



**HG:** And that was, in a way, the first RashDash show, because it was the first one outside of a university environment. So we took that to Edinburgh, performed it at Bedlam and it also had Becky in it. So she has been there from the beginning which some people are kind of surprised by because there was a long period where she wasn't in the company.

**AG:** But also because in that one she stood at the back and looked down whenever she wasn't playing. Hilariously. We had a very unsophisticated approach to music which was, Becky wrote some brilliant songs. I still really like some of the songs from that, although I question a lot of the lyrics. She stood at the back and every so often she would go to the side, pick up a microphone, bring it to the middle, and just sing. I remember people, Holly Kendrick, who was running the Student Festival at the time saying: 'That's fine if that's what you want to do, but maybe have a think about that.' Because we weren't really in control again, we were: 'We want to sing now and I need the microphone to be in the middle. It's in the way if it's there all the time.' Kind of low budget—

**HG:** And lots of the things that you might – if someone had been on the outside of a process with us they might have been going: 'Oh, let's have a think about how we manage that moment.' But there was a lot of, I guess, just a lot of stuff that we were ignoring and going: 'Let's just, like, do this in the most functional way possible.'

**AG:** Because there was no outside eye or director. And it's always been that – it's always been led by performers doing what they want to do. I think.

**HG:** But we knew around the time we were making that last show at the National Student Drama Festival, *Never Enough*, we were really kind of desperate by that point to have music in the work. And we were going: 'How do we do this, how do we do this?', and didn't feel confident enough to make that happen ourselves, and so bringing Becky in was an amazing thing that really shifted the shows and made them much more music.

**DR:** And how did that happen? How did Becky become—

**HG:** Abbi's known Becky for years and years—

**AG:** Me and Becky met when we were 11 at high school. So it's one of those things where she was in a school band, and they were really good – it's not like they played some shitty covers badly. She's always been, well, since she learnt to play the piano, she's been an excellent pianist. She's a brilliant songwriter, and I remember going to gigs when she was 16-17 in the pubs around where local teenage bands played—

**DR:** Manchester presumably?

**AG:** No, I grew up in Suffolk. Around Ipswich/Colchester area – village pubs. And loads and loads of people would come to their gigs. It wasn't like: 'Oh, please come', it was always a big event. She was in a band called Charlie Brown that then became Making Eyes at Elvis and they were really good. And I had played a CD of Becky's high school music to Helen in the kitchen, and Helen had really enjoyed it, and so when I said: 'We could ask Becky to come and write songs for *The Honeymoon*', she was like: 'Yes, sure!' Becky was in her second year studying English at Bristol and I think was questioning having abandoned music and feeling like she hadn't really brought out here musical side at university at all, and yet it was a really big part of her. So she said: 'Yes, I'll come and live in Hull for six weeks and then come to the Edinburgh festival as part of my holiday', and I'm so glad she did.

## **[00:12:10] MUSICAL INFLUENCES**

**DR:** And I'm interested to hear a bit more about those musical influences that you brought individually to this space of working together so – like, you just mentioned that interest in the music scene in Ipswich and so on. And I just want to dig a little deeper there in terms of – what were other formative influences on you as individuals that you could associate your aesthetic to?

**AG:** In *Strict Machine* we sang a song at the beginning of the show – which was the first show we made together – I think we rewrote the lyrics to Amanda Palmer's Dresden Dolls' 'Missed Me'. And I think that Dresden Dolls were a big influence early on, and the kind of – angry cabaret.

**HG:** Also Meow Meow as well, but maybe less from a musical point of view, although she is obviously



a singer, but more from a performance point of view. But that kind of cabaret world. I think also musical theatre to a certain extent.

**DR:** As in West End musicals?

**HG:** Yeah. Kind of, older ones like *Cabaret*, the musical. I think I grew up being quite into all of that kind of stuff. Yeah, Camille O'Sullivan, I remember as well. But again being really into her performance, that really bold, semi-improvised, big personality.

**AG:** But in terms of the music that we were playing in the room – not necessarily just the music that we were singing to – we would go from listening to the Chemical Brothers and Prodigy and Orbital and those kind of techno world, to listening to a Finnish band called Tsuumi Sound System that change the time signature in their track every you know five bars and have a wild combination of instruments, to Björk, to somewhat classical stuff–

**HG:** And very poppy stuff like Rhianna and Beyoncé and yeah. And I think your dad was really great at putting in some more obscure world music choices, like Tsuumi Sound System that have then led to us being able to discover more and more things.

**AG:** Because my dad is a musician and he listens to a lot of world music. I remember saying to Ian – that's his name – 'We just want some more music, we just want some more stuff that's not got lyrics that we can have in the room', and he supplied us with loads. But I remember that coming from being emboldened by seeing Gecko – again – so maybe this is *The Overcoat*, and they use a real smorgasbord of world music in that. It goes from Bulgarian nuns to Elvis or something – croonery, at one point, and I remember just being like: 'Oh, yeah, we can do that!'

**HG:** And I think that palette, that diversity of palette, has always been a really exciting thing that we've looked for, and I think that we really pushed that to its full extent in *Three Sisters*, being like: 'Let's have a rock song, a punk song, a pop song, a ballad, a musical theatre number – let's just go wild with the genre', and that was very intentional and really fun to do.

#### **[00:15:32 to 00:17:14] 'Work' from *Three Sisters* (2018)**

**HG:** But it's kind of interesting, I feel like now that we've done that, we might not on the next thing. And actually I remember Becky saying recently: 'No more rock! I've had enough – I don't want a drum kit. I don't want a guitar. Let's just make this vocals and piano.' So we did a sharing of a show called *Mary vs Elizabeth* which is in development at the moment, which is about Mary Stewart, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth the First. And that's got a lot of music in it, but at the moment the only instrumentation is very stripped back drums, a synth and a piano – it was a grand piano that we were using which was kind of wonderful – and voices. So the sound, the spectrum of song is, I guess, is smaller – but there is still real diversity in that. There's folk and there's pop and there's – I don't know how else I'd describe the music in that – kind of rap but in a musical theatre world.

**AG:** That synth one that I randomly wrote, it feels much more like it's in the world of Yorkie, James Blake-y–

**HG:** Imogen Heap-y, kind of, yeah. I would describe that as pop, but I guess, a particular–

**AG:** Just weird it feels like, pop, I feel like, you have a structure to it, and that one just–

**HG:** It's not a 4:4 rhythm – it's more of an experimental pop sound.

#### **[00:18:46] PLACES OF PERFORMANCE**

**DR:** So going back to Hull, I also remember you saying, that last time when I heard you talk about your work, that what was useful/helpful in that particular kind of training was the way in which you got to make everything. So it wasn't just about training to be a performer, training to be a designer, but you actually had to make the sets and so on as part of that time there. Was there a particular reason why either of you chose Hull as a place?

**AG:** I only put it on my list because there were five places I was interested in going to and there was a sixth place on the UCAS form, and my mum had gone, so I thought I'll put down Hull and that'll just fill up my form. And they were the first people to offer me an interview. I thought I'll go and I'll practise



interviewing there. And when I went, it felt like none of the students were very interested in ego – or none of the students I met on that day. They were very friendly, very warm, and I remember somebody – who I then met when I was there and still know – said: ‘If you get in, you should come here because it’s really fun and we all just make stuff.’ And I remember thinking that’s exactly what I want – I want to make stuff with other people who want to make stuff. I do want to get taught, I do want all the modules, that’s fab, but the idea of being in a theatre as much as I wanted to be, and no one saying: ‘Okay, you only have rehearsals Tuesdays and Thursdays 7 till 9:30’, which was my youth theatre times – was yes, hungry, I’m hungry for that! And I think also what I really wanted was to go to Hull and meet someone like you. And it worked! I think I always wanted to start a theatre company.

**DR:** And what about your choice?

**HG:** I applied to four universities, I think – Bristol, Exeter, Royal Holloway and Hull. But I got a place at Royal Holloway and Hull, so was deciding between those two, and I think I always thought I would favour Royal Holloway actually. And I did really like it and I enjoyed my interview and it was cool, but I didn’t want to be in Egham. That’s what it came down to. I was like: ‘I don’t want to go to university in London and be on the outskirts of London.’ And although I was a bit like: ‘But what’s Hull gonna be like?!’, and I was a little bit sceptical in quite a snobby way probably, because of the bad press. And I think Hull’s changed a lot, and it being the European Capital of Culture Hull 2017, so much has happened. But I was a bit like: ‘Hmm, I don’t know.’ But it just felt, I was more drawn to it between the two of them. And we just happened to have like the most amazing year and fantastic years above us as well and really aspiring people, really down to earth people, really unpretentious people.

**AG:** But also hungry for it. Think about the fact that RashDash and Middle Child both came out of our year group. That’s quite like a high percentage of people who are really hungry for it, whatever it is.

**DR:** And Middle Child have stayed in Hull?

**AG:** They have, yeah...

**DR:** Why was that, why do you think?

**AG:** They all – they didn’t form straight out of uni, they left. Lots of them went to university – drama school, even. And then Paul Smith, who’s the director – I think he wasn’t quite finding what he wanted to find out on his own, and he knew that a lot of his friends, who were actors who had also graduated from Hull at the same time as us, weren’t. So he said: ‘Anyone,’ – he sent a big group email and was like: ‘Anyone who wants to come and be part of the beginning’ – I think he wrote a manifesto, I think he went totally old school on it. Wrote a manifesto – everyone came and there were 13 of them initially that said they wanted to move back to Hull because they identified a place that there was a need for it and where they wouldn’t be crowded out. I think they were all felling like: ‘What the fuck’s here for us in London, it’s very crowded’–

**HG:** And Hull is very cheap to live in as well.

**AG:** You can be poor there–

**HG:** The whole setting up a company thing feels more doable in a place like that as well as that thing of their being a need for it. They’re not, yeah, it’s not saturated and, again, there’s loads more going on there now I think, but at that time it was: ‘Oh, we could be really useful here as well as have space to make things.’

**AG:** Not have to work all of the hours just to pay rent, therefore we can do this theatre company thing.

**DR:** So they chose that other option that Adam was talking about? The option of going to train and then coming back to–

**HG:** Yeah, exactly because a lot of them did do that, they did postgrads in acting or directing. And they came back together. They were really inspired by that article, weren’t they, I always forget which Mike it is...

**AG:** Mike [Bradwell’s] ‘Steal a van’, that one–

**HG:** ‘Steal a van’, yeah – just like – do your own thing, because you’ll probably get more out of it. I remember, yeah, I remember that being quite formative.



**DR:** So when you made *Another Someone* which was probably the show that put you on the map, is that correct—?

**HG:** Yeah.

**DR:** It was the three of you and a couple of other people?

**AG:** Mark Graham, again—

**DR:** Ah, there was a guy...

**AG:** So he's in *Middle Child* and he'd been in our graduation show I guess, *Never Enough*. So it was the four of us on stage right, there was no one else?

**HG:** Yeah.

**AG:** And that was when Becky went from being on the piano at the back to being on the piano at the front and talking.

**DR:** Okay. Okay. Was it described as 'gig theatre' at the time?

**AG:** I don't think so.

**HG:** I don't think so, no. I think it was – I remember people struggling a bit with the definition of it, but in quite an interesting way, like: 'What do we call this?' It's not musical theatre, but it's not a play, but it's like, it's a show, there are songs in it...

**DR:** And it had dance in it as well—

**HG:** Yes.

**AG:** I feel the first time anyone called what we did a gig was when we made *Scary Gorgeous* and that's because we were working with a band and they had electrical instruments, and so it felt like it, it felt more like – the song parts of the show felt more like a gig than theatre.

**DR:** That was the next show after *Another Someone*?

**AG:** Yeah, it was.

**DR:** And was that also in Edinburgh, is that where you launched the—

**AG:** Yeah, *Bedlam* again. We worked with a band called *Not Now Bernard* with that—

**HG:** And that show felt much more overtly political, I suppose, because it was about pornography.

**AG:** It was the first of our shows about porn—

**HG:** Yeah, because we felt like – it's a very difficult thing to make a show about, and we felt like with that show we hadn't got to the core of what we wanted to say, and maybe we didn't with the next attempt either. But yeah, I think that felt like a shift for that reason, *Scary Gorgeous*, because we were like: 'Oh, there's this thing that feels like it's really affecting the relationships of young people, and let's examine that, let's talk about that.'

**DR:** And did you at some point – because I remember reading about one of your shows being co-produced by Latitude or Latitude Festival being somehow involved. This is also interesting that you talked about the NSDF – so there was the NSDF, and then Edinburgh, and then Latitude came on the scene at some point—

**AG:** Really it was the Lyric Hammersmith, so at that point they were commissioning companies that were kind of new to make outdoor work. They were the people commissioning but the money came from Lyric, Greenwich and Docklands International Festival, Latitude, and was there a fourth?

**HG:** Imagine, Watford.

**AG:** Imagine, Watford!

**DR:** And which piece was that?

**AG:** We made both *Set Fire to Everything* and *The Frenzy* with that group of commissioners—

**DR:** And when was that roughly?

**AG:** 2012-13 because it was two years in a row.



**DR:** Was that your first outdoors [show]?

**AG:** Yes. *Set Fire to Everything* was first–

**HG:** I was going to say first and last, but that's not true because we made *The Darkest Corners*. Quite hard working outside. I'm not a massive fan.

**DR:** The reason I'm asking you about this is because I'm wondering to what extent the producing model might contribute to the form? If you knew that you were making work for a particular kind of venue or a particular kind of context – let's say the Edinburgh festival or the Latitude Festival – would that determine, or did that determine the choices you were making in terms of how you were making the show?

**HG:** I think it did. For those outdoor shows, it was quite specific what they needed to be, because the Lyric said to us: 'It needs to be no longer than half an hour, I think. It has to be able to be repeated, like, three times a day. People need to be able to come across it and immediately access it or get something from it.'

**AG:** But what I would say is the other companies that were commissioned at the same time, because they commissioned four each time, responded to exactly the same brief, but chose not to put live music in there. So I think that was more – that that's how we approach taking hold of a space. Because one of the other things they said was: 'The rhythm has kind of got to change every three or four minutes, because people will be with you and then, if it stays the same after that long – they're off, so you've got to keep changing it!' And we decided to do that – take hold of a space with live music, but the other companies didn't.

#### **[00:28:48] TAKING CONTROL**

**DR:** At what point did you recognise you were starting to take control of your work? Because you were saying how the early stages was not so much about being in control...

**AG:** *Two Man Show*.

**DR:** Okay.

**HG:** Really – would you say not until then?

**AG:** Yeah, I would say we definitely tried. We definitely tried to be in control, we increased our – I think every time we made more and more meaningful, controllable decisions, but I don't think that we made what we meant to make until *Two Man Show*. I think *Two Man Show* was the first time where I was like: 'Yeah, that's what I mean.' I think every other time before that, we got to the end and I was like: 'Okay, so this is what we made – it's definitely not what I planned, but here we are and I like it.' It's the first time that when people asked me questions about it, I'm not like: 'Oh yeah whoops!' about anything.

**HG:** Yeah. Because I feel like there was a bit of a shift that happened around *The Ugly Sisters* actually, but we came in and out after that time, but I felt like something kind of landed in that show. There was something kind of simple about that show in a way. It was like, the story was quite simple. But I think there was something about the genre that felt kind of whole, in a way that it hadn't done before.

**AG:** I feel like that is when we took control of the form. That is when we made a load of decisions that were like: 'Yes!', that costume makes sense and that, yeah we're not just wearing black leggings so no one sees our bum, which is essentially what we'd done every other show. The costumes made sense, the set made sense. We'd worked with a designer, and kind of for the first time?

**HG:** Yes, I think, probably, yeah.

**AG:** There was the concept – we saw through a concept from beginning to end that we intended to see through – but what we were saying was kind of underwhelming and obvious and not very radical.

**HG:** It was like a fun show.

**AG:** Yeah, we took control of all of the things that meant – everything meant what we meant it to mean, I think, but what we actually meant wasn't that great. Whereas at *Two Man Show*, form and content came together for the first time.



**HG:** Yes, I would agree with that.

**[00:30:48 to 00:32:51] 'I Thought I Could Tell You' from *Two Man Show* (2017)**

**[00:32:52] RASHDASH DRAMATURGY**

**DR:** Was that the first script that you published?

**AG:** Yes. *Two Man Show* was.

**DR:** Because I was just reading yesterday the interview on your website with Maddy Costa in which you talked about at that time – whenever that interview was taken – that you were working with Alice Birch because you felt that as writers you weren't able – has that changed, do you feel that that's changed since *Two Man Show*?

**AG:** The intention has changed. I think we're both more interested in writing and being good at writing than we were then.

**HG:** And I'm not sure, actually. I feel like I'm in a process of thinking about that. Because I definitely, when we started working with Alice, particularly, I kind of went: 'Oh, I don't want to do writing anymore, because you're a proper playwright', and I really enjoyed working with her in that way. And then Abbi quite quickly after that got more interested in writing again and did pretty much all of the writing for the company that is text, character text.

**AG:** Not lyrics.

**HG:** And then more recently, I've kind of gone: 'Oh, but maybe I miss the grappling with text again.' But I'm personally not sure, I'm just in a bit of a process at the moment of trying to work out whether that's a thing I want to do more of, or whether I was right the first time in going: 'No, I'll leave that there.'

**DR:** It was a very interesting script. The script of *Two Man Show*. In the sense that it had photographs, it had drawings. It had, you know, and also what was quite striking about it for me was this decision to credit it to the company rather than to the individuals who might have written the words. It's something that has broken a lot of ensembles, this idea of who do you attribute the script to.

**AG:** *Three Sisters* is different. I think we say – lyrics by Abbi, Helen and Becky, text by Abbi, with Helen and Becky, because although I assembled the words, lots of the words have come from free writing that everyone had done, so it is a lot more... It's a tricky one, I feel like it's nice to be clear in crediting so that people know how it comes together – I don't know whether this is just a British thing, but it does feel like there is such an emphasis on words in British theatre that the reason that we have been so particular about what we do when, who we say does what, specifically with words, because you notice that no one really cares who came up with the idea – original, and all of that stuff. It's because people think the writer kind of invents it, but there's just so much invention that goes on between all of us, there's so many discoveries that are made that it's impossible to find the percentage of that idea, who it belongs to.

**HG:** Because it's alchemy, and that's like one of the exciting things about working. But I think it also depends on the process as well, because *Two Man Show* and *Three Sisters* were quite devised processes where a lot happened in the room or together in terms of discoveries. Not everything, but quite a lot. But then there are other processes that we might do that are more written and then other elements get added in, so I guess that would then be a different thing in terms of how to credit that and how to talk about that.

**AG:** But they haven't really come to fruition yet.

**HG:** No, no...

**AG:** That's the thing – none of the things where we've worked differently, that's kind of something that we've been working on a few of those projects for a while but none of them have happened yet. So it's hard to know how a relationship with writing has changed until it's changed. It's just in the process of changing.

**DR:** And can you describe your process then? What happens when you have the initial kernel for an idea? And then, how does it develop into a show?



**AG:** It really changes from show to show. The process characterises the form and the form characterises the content. And of course the people in the room characterise the process, so it goes: people – process – form – content, in terms of those ripples in. And I think we're becoming clearer and clearer on that, so getting the people in the room to begin with, and with our next show – which if we get the funding for we will make with my mum and a musician called Yusuf Ahmed who is a jazz drummer – the process is very different because of those people and what they bring in the room. They're actually both – even though they've never met each other before working together – really interested in Carl Jung and his philosophy and his work with subconscious. So our process, which is firmly rooted in the conscious, I think, is suddenly being completely disrupted by people who are interested in the subconscious. And that is going to make that process very different, because, I imagine, we'll go more into 'authentic movement', we'll go more into processes that allow subconscious to flow through, which we've never explored. But with *Three Sisters*, we went on a journey that was – we were angry with the play, we were angry that we had to do a piece from the canon in order to be taken a certain kind of seriously. And so the first thing we thought we would do was do the play without having read the play. I mean we've all read the play and seen the play at various stages but not refresh, [would] do no refreshing. And actually then what we ended up doing was reading the play, everyone took out the quotes from the play no matter who said them–

**DR:** You already had all five people in the room at the start?

**AG:** This was initially just Helen, Becky and I. And that was a funding decision. We couldn't apply for more than £50,000 because we thought we wouldn't get the funding. So we only had the musicians join us after a lot of the original concept work had been done. Which is a shame, and I would like to have done it differently.

**DR:** So you went through the script?

**AG:** Went through the script, everyone took out the words that they liked, that they thought: 'This does resonate with me.' Because that thing that people always say about the canon, where they are like: 'But it still resonates years on', and it's like: 'Well, some of it really fucking doesn't.' So we took out the stuff that did, no matter whether it was a man or a woman, and we were like: 'I wanna say that.' And then we also wrote things that we wanted to say in a drawing room, so if you put the three of us in a drawing room and you said: 'Just talk about your lives', we wrote some stuff that we were thinking about, and then we mushed them together, and we gave them the structure, the four-act structure that *Three Sisters* has, which is: in the first one it's Irina's birthday, and they're going to have a party that night, or going to have dinner that night. In the second one, there's a party that evening that doesn't happen. In the third one, there's a fire somewhere, and that became a kind of version of Grenfell in our third act. And in the fourth one, people are leaving, and that became we all moved to London, now everyone's moving away. So we tried to find the parallels between the undercurrent thing that's happening in each act which held the drawing room scenes together. And in between, we said: 'We'll do those drawing room scenes, but in between we'll just sing songs and dance about stuff we want to sing songs and dance about.' So that became the songs that we wrote, but also it became us talking about arts and bashing our heads against the fact that we were supposed to be reproducing the work of dead white men in order to be taken seriously as artists.

**DR:** At what point do the songs come into the process and how? I mean is it – that classic question: Does it start with music or with text?

**HG:** They come in quite early I think, normally. Often things are sort of happening concurrently, so we're having dramaturgical conversations and going: 'Oh, what about – okay, do we have this space that's the drawing room where we all get to talk?' Yeah, we were talking a lot about rooms in that particular show in the development process and talking about – yes, this main drawing room, and these solo rooms that come off it. So Irina's got her room, and Olga's got her room, and Masha's got her room. What [is] in those rooms? So everything was kind of happening at once, which would be dependent sometimes on what we fancied doing that day. And if someone fancied writing some lyrics, or we all fancied writing some lyrics, then: 'Oh, okay, there's something for Becky to start writing some music to', and now songs arrived. But then songs were still getting written like right up until the very end and one of them we only finished in tech. So yeah, I think they keep going through.



**AG:** But we swing between the big picture and the small picture, so we go: 'We think we're making this, and we start making stuff.' Then we go: 'Okay, we've made this stuff and it doesn't fit in that big structure', so that big structure changes. 'Okay, so we think we're making this.' And we never really solve the problem until previews. We never solve what the dramaturgical structure is until right then. Making small bits of the show means we're creating problems we've got to dramaturgically solve later. But that's how we do it, and that's how we did *Two Man Show*, as well – a version of that – continuing to make stuff even though we don't know the shape we're going to put that stuff in. But then as soon as you've made something you like enough that is the heart of the show, we're like: 'Well, we know that this is in the show so now we have to find a dramaturgical structure that means that makes sense.' That's how we do it really, isn't it? We create problems to solve.

**HG:** And create things that we really like that feel like the most important thing.

**AG:** And usually things we really like are movement or music. I feel like the things we really like are very rarely text. Maybe *Man/Woman* [*Two Man Show*] was one of those text problems for us at one point, but usually it was – it wasn't Dan and John, they weren't the problems to solve. The things that we really loved, like the 'Reviews' rap – we knew that was in there, and we knew it was towards the end, that's just a problem to solve. But that's in it. You know.

**DR:** In the *Three Sisters*?

**AG:** In the *Three Sisters*, yeah.

**DR:** And does Becky always respond to the lyrics or does she bring music sometimes?

**AG:** It never starts with music. Although actually–

**HG:** Sometimes it does–

**AG:** She had a riff for years that she'd been waiting for, and she realised it was for this.

**[00:43:12 to 00:48:28] 'Reviews' from *Three Sisters* (2018)**

**DR:** Was the *Two Man Show* different then to the *Three Sisters* you just described in terms of how it came about, because it was smaller and more intimate?

**HG:** The process started with just the two of us, Becky actually came in later to that one. And it first of all started with a lot of reading and a lot of research, which is sometimes a really important part of our process. So we were doing reading about the origins of patriarchy, we were going to the British Library and reading a lot about language and when language or the British language was first written down and how grammar was created and all of that kind of stuff. Learning about how 'he' was the pronoun that was–

**AG:** More comprehensive than 'she'–

**HG:** Yeah, just all of this stuff about how patriarchy is instilled in language and therefore how do we think in a non-patriarchal realm if we think it through language.

**DR:** So this moment or the fact of writing down solidified patriarchy? Is that what–

**HG:** Yeah, or contributed in developing it – instilling it.

**AG:** Well, it's when you say this is right and this is wrong, because everyone's using language in various ways, but then the minute that you ban women from education and from writing stuff down but you say: 'This is how it's done'–

**HG:** And also trivialise some of the ways in which – which are traditionally female to speak. Like gossip – being one of them, even though actually gossip and those kinds of conversations are really important in terms of the way we relate to each other, but it's kind of like–

**AG:** Talking about your feelings means gossip.

**HG:** That's not important. So all of that hierarchy. So yeah, that gave us loads of material and we did loads of writing actually that could have been in a show. But we had a feeling that it wasn't, that nothing was really right.

**AG:** It was all a bit on the nose, all a bit like: 'This is what we think about the patriarchy', which is not what we wanted to make. Although it did make its way in in one way because we did decide to start



the show with the speech about the origins of patriarchy.

**HG:** Yeah. So we kind of went in to a rehearsal room at Northern Stage with a lot of that stuff.

**AG:** Had we seen Angélica Liddell by that point?

**HG:** I think so, yeah.

**AG:** Because I wonder whether she was a massive influence on us in terms of the fact that she stood on stage and talked for three hours.

**HG:** She was. I think she was.

**DR:** Who?

**AG:** She was a Spanish performance artist and we saw her at the Schaubühne in Berlin, and it was about lots of stuff. At one point it was about motherhood, at one point it was about Victoria. At one point it was about Peter Pan. And she would talk, talk, talk about what she thought, and she was hoarse by the end of it, and then every so often she would sing 'The House of the Rising Sun', and then talk again. And we saw her and thought: 'We can say whatever we want. We can absolutely start the show with an essay about patriarchy.'

**DR:** And she was improvising the whole thing?

**AG:** No, I don't think she was. She actually at one point, for half an hour of the show, she bought in an entire orchestra and two dancers too, that danced to about four or five pieces. Ballroom dance, five songs, five tracks, and then they went off, and the show continued.

**HG:** It was epic!

#### **[00:51:53] THE ENSEMBLE DYNAMIC**

**DR:** Can we talk a little bit about that aspect of how you work together? The alchemy, the actual dynamic within the ensemble?

**HG:** Quite often we just agree.

**AG:** That's true, I mean obviously, there are moments where we don't–

**DR:** All three of you or–

**HG:** It's quite hard to unpick actually.

**AG:** Becky prefers to respond and, she also detests conflict. You're not a massive fan of conflict–

**HG:** No–

**AG:** But Becky is seriously conflict-averse. And so she'll have an opinion but she's not really interested in back and forth until it's solved. Usually she comes with the music and it's really great first time and sometimes we're like: 'Do it again', and she's like: 'Yeah.' That's pretty much how it goes with Becky – it's very, she's very easy-going. She gets very frustrated with herself when she doesn't solve something immediately. But in terms of that, how we work together, it's very tricky, and I feel like we're quite nervous about talking about it. Because sometimes it's very important for us to name it and say what it is, and sometimes it feels like we might break it by naming it. I don't know whether that's right whether you feel like that.

**HG:** Yeah, I don't know–

**AG:** I'm nervous to say what I think, because I don't want to piss you off–

**HG:** Yeah, but also I'm like: 'What do you think?' But also I'm like–

**AG:** But sometimes when I say what I think, you're like: 'That's not how it goes!'

**DR:** So I guess that's some sort of mutual respect for each other's boundaries at the core of it in a way?

**AG:** Yeah, and we've been working together for ten years now, and we lived together for three of those years. It's a very – it can be a very intense relationship. Much less so these last few years. Because, I don't know I guess we just – our lives outside of the company have become fuller



and therefore that's taken some of the pressure off it.

**DR:** And do you see it terms of any particular compatibilities? My previous project was about ensemble theatre and I was interviewing various kinds of ensembles, and various ensemble models emerged from that. One that I found interesting was being told about how in one particular ensemble what really helped it was the way in which each core member kind of brought a very specific function to the working of the whole – the whole became greater than the sum of its parts because everybody took a very particular role.

**AG:** It's difficult because I feel like when we started the company we started it because we both wanted to do the same thing. And actually that makes it sometimes hard when it feels like we couldn't or shouldn't in this particular story. That's like: 'Who gets to do that bit? And who gets to do that bit?' It's sad not to get to do everything you want to do – not just in terms of what we do in making and performing, but also what we do outside of that for like strategising and administrating, and that kind of thing. It's taken us a really long time to do different bits of that as well. It's only very recently that we've become almost solely responsible for different parts of administrating the company as well, because we'd both just do everything. And that took a lot of communicating all the time, because if an email comes in and either one can respond you have to decide who's going to respond rather than just knowing that's my job.

**HG:** I'm sure, I know that we do have, like, quite different things that we bring – and maybe it's fine... I don't know, it's hard. One of the things I find hard about naming the different things that we bring is that obviously it's quite particular when you're working in a dynamic with someone, because you kind of complement each other, and you sort of ying and yang, and you fit together and you, kind of, make it work. And sometimes I feel like, in going: 'I'm this and you're this', I worry for myself, because I don't know how you feel, that I will then say to myself: 'I don't do that', in another context. And I think that's something I'm conscious of for myself of not wanting to shut down, just because it's not my natural instinct in this dynamic–

**AG:** Because it might be your instinct in a different dynamic.

**HG:** Yes, exactly. And that's purely a self-preservation thing of just making sure that my own narrative about myself doesn't become entirely dependent on this dynamic because this might not always be the way that we do things. For a number of reasons. Like if one of us takes time off, or has a baby, or like, you know, things might change and I can't be scared of: 'Oh, but I don't do that bit', because I suppose I do want–

**AG:** To grow, still–

**HG:** Yeah, and to find new things.

**AG:** I feel like that's the negative side of it. For me, the positive side of naming 'it', sometimes, is that I don't have to try and be good at something I'm not good at. So like, I know that I really struggle towards the end of a process when we're in previews, and we've already put all of this energy into getting so far, continuing to keep making the show better and better, I don't have the same finishing capacity as Helen does. I like making massive changes, I like going: 'We've done this wrong, we're going to rearrange all five scenes and we're going to do it backwards, and that's right!' And I like the big solutions, I like the big dramaturgical shifts, and I'm satisfied by them, and I'm like: 'Done!' But I am really terrible at: 'Just let that be one last moment there, and then this light needs to go two seconds slower.' That kind of detail stuff, I like not having to be good at that, because I'm not, and it makes me quite stressed, I think, and then I can be a more agitated, angry version of myself in tech, which is a really important time in a rehearsal process. If I'm doing that, it takes me so much of my energy because that's not what I'm good at, that I become a less nice version of myself, and then it also takes my energy away from being a good performer. So it's nice for me to go: 'Helen's got that.' I'll see what I see, but I don't need to squeeze something that isn't there, that I haven't got.

**HG:** Because I guess in one of the simple versions of going: 'How do we complement each other?' is by going: 'Abbi's really good at starting, and I'm good at finishing.' And Abbi gets a lot of energy from coming up with an idea, and beginning a process, and just the sort of – the imagining thing. And sometimes I feel a bit like: 'Oh, god, we've got to start at the very beginning.' And that can feel quite



heavy and daunting, but that particularly is one of the things that–

**AG:** We don't want to buy into–

**HG:** Yeah, I suppose I can't buy into that too much, because I don't want to entirely go: 'Oh, well, I never have to do that', even though sometimes it's really nice not to have to do that. But actually, when I was running a workshop recently in Leeds, I actually chose to run a workshop about starting projects because – and I held my hand up at the beginning and went: 'I find this a daunting thing and I work with someone who is very good at doing it. And I could... If we continue to work together for the rest of our careers, I could go: "I never have to do that bit", but I don't think I want to, so I've got some ideas of how to start finding material to work with – let's all do that', which was interesting. And it's definitely something I'm trying to work on for myself because, yeah, I guess, then it feels to me... And of course it's always particular from the position that you're in, but when you talk about finding it relaxing because you don't have to end a project, I feel like you'll always be able to find people to do that for you, you know what I mean–

**AG:** Yeah, because I can't do it on my own, I just don't think I have it–

**HG:** That feels like a simpler thing, whereas finding a starting point feels to me like a more essential thing – if we were to not work together, I suppose. Unless I was to work on a – unless I was to collaborate with some else who was like: 'Oh, what about this', and then I could... But as I say, that's me coming from my particular position, and you might go: 'Actually, no, I don't agree with that at all and they're both equally–'

**AG:** I don't know. I guess, if I think about directing something on my own, because that's the situation in which I'd be trying to finish something to a high standard–

**HG:** And the finishing is a big job in directing.

**AG:** I'm like: 'Fuck, I don't want to, I don't want to!'

**DR:** You recently had to do that, didn't you, at the Royal Court?

**AG:** Yeah we directed *Hole* at the Royal Court–

**HG:** We directed two shows last year actually, not last year the year before.

**AG:** Last year was a disaster, the year before we directed two shows.

**DR:** And how was that for you?

**AG:** Directing?

**DR:** I saw *Hole* and, yeah, I'm just interested how was that for you?

**HG:** It's quite hard.

**DR:** What do people expect from you when they ask you too actually direct?

**AG:** Hard to know–

**HG:** Yeah–

**AG:** Hard to know whether they want it because – the thing is, our work has us in it and it's so different when we're not in it.

### [01:01:58] 'GIG THEATRE' AND BEYOND

**DR:** I just wanted to ask you also – I'm not sure that I actually got a clear sense of how you feel about your work being described as 'gig theatre'. How do you feel about that label?

**HG:** I don't love it as a label actually–

**AG:** Me neither–

**HG:** And I think it feels like – I don't know, this is probably just my personal associations with it as well – but it feels like, kind of loud and brash and like – a knowable thing. You know what you're going to get from a piece of gig theatre. And I really don't... I wouldn't want – even though that's probably quite useful branding in some way – I wouldn't want anyone coming to our show and going: 'This is exactly



what I'm going to get', because I think I want to be able to be a bit more surprising than that.

**AG:** Slippery–

**HG:** Yeah–

**AG:** My problem with it is – it feels like a brand, and I don't really want to be making work that's in a brand. I want to be making – yeah, slippery work.

**HG:** And I actually don't think – I mean, I haven't seen one of our shows – but I don't think our shows do feel like gig theatre–

**AG:** Depends what gig – when we went to Björk at Cornucopia the other day, I was like: 'This is wild...!'

**HG:** That's true...

**AG:** But also I do like going to shows that call themselves gig theatre.

**HG:** Yeah, me too–

**AG:** So it's not about not liking gig theatre, it's about not feeling like I am it. I really do like Middle Child's work–

**HG:** Yeah me too–

**AG:** I like shows that are gigs, I really like gigs, I really like theatre.

**DR:** Interesting! Okay–

**HG:** That's why it's interesting that you say we were amongst the first to do it – which I also really like and kind of go: 'Oh, that's really cool that you recognise that', but then I also feel, like, we're moving past that maybe as well.

**DR:** That's really interesting because actually you have mentioned the way you use music is changing and you have talked about having several things on the go that might take on new forms and so on. Do you have a vision of where RashDash might be in five years' time?

**AG:** No we're in a big transitional moment, I think. I think we're really struggling to make the transition from – I guess, small-scale studio work emerging company to mid-career artists with various options. I think we're struggling, and we're about to start working with a new producer that will hopefully really change how we approach that. We're working on various ideas of various forms. There's a lot of ideas. We're also thinking about making a small film. And thinking about making a project that entirely is a gig. It's not gig theatre, it's just a gig. So I don't know. And I feel like it's not good not to know, but it doesn't really change the fact I don't know.

**HG:** It feels hard to predict at this point what's going to be the 'thing'. I don't know, I have this sense that like there's going to be a 'thing', and that will shift the direction in some way. Not that it will necessarily be like: 'And then that's just the thing that we do!' But like there'll be some sort of 'oh, okay!', but there might be a few of them. It might be like – big musical, short film develops into something more of a film, and then a music project, and they might all kind of be tentacle arms for the company that continue for a few years. Or it might be something totally different, but it definitely feels like we're sort of sitting in a soup of potentials.

**DR:** Great!

**AG:** That's a nice way of saying that... [*Laughter.*]

**HG:** Hopefully they're potentials!

**DR:** That's great! Thank you so much.

Transcription by Matthew Powell & Duška Radosavljević



### Clips Summary

[00:15:32 to 00:17:14] 'Work' from *Three Sisters* (2018)

[00:30:48 to 00:32:51] 'I Thought I Could Tell You' from *Two Man Show* (2017)

[00:43:12 to 00:48:28] 'Reviews' from *Three Sisters* (2018)

Audio available at [www.auralia.space/gallery1-rashdash/](http://www.auralia.space/gallery1-rashdash/).

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