



**Gracefool Collective:  
The Making of *THIS IS NOT A WEDDING* (2019)**

Aural/Oral Dramaturgies artists in residence Gracefool Collective's singular research into dance and choreography aims to destabilise the role of the dancer and especially of the female dancer on stage, mixing feminist discourse and irreverent approaches to comedy with the language of dance-theatre.

Their 2019 production *This is Not a Wedding* takes as its starting point the questions, anxieties and pressures of the 30-something woman faced with the symbolic rite of passage of the wedding, and deconstructs the ceremony, and the character the bride plays within it, to reveal their absurdity.

In this documentary Kate Cox and Rachel Fullegar, two of the company's founding members, share with us methods and memories of the performance. They illustrate how they developed the conceptual framework of the piece and kept honing it through a series of considered choices in their approach to working with movement, sound, and text, and show videos and photographs from their involved process, which lasted between 2016 and 2019. From the vaster existential issues they grappled with to the minutiae of making the work – studying what happens to the body in a wedding dress, learning how to lip-synch, or researching the websites people use when they have to panic-write speeches – this Laboratory is a rich and generous account of how a devising ensemble operates.

*This is Not a Wedding* is a multi-faceted and open piece, accessible on many different levels to different audiences; it foregrounds crucial feminist concerns through a charismatic, quick-footed mix of stage languages which critiques the social event, with its host of learned behaviours, as much as it critiques how performance itself functions. Finally, the piece also shows how broader political issues play out in everyday life – and as towards the end of the recording we learn that Gracefool's next self-appointed task is to take on the apocalypse provoked by climate change, it's clear that their journey as a collective still has very much to offer.

**[00:00:23 to 00:02:56] Trailer for *This Is Not a Wedding* (2019)**

**[00:03:00] INTRODUCTION**

**Kate Cox:** We're Gracefool Collective and we're going to talk a bit about the making of our second work, *This Is Not a Wedding*, which we toured across the country last year.

The piece itself is a surreal reimagining of traditional rites of passage celebrations. The piece takes place within the structure of a celebration event, so the audience are invited into the event as guests, and they're encouraged to participate and misbehave and disrupt the goings-on and come onstage with us and we also go into the audience. The work itself deals with the existential crises that arise when becoming an adult. It has this feeling of running out of time, wondering if we've made the right choices, these conflicting desires to conform and take the right steps and please others versus following your own path, rebelling against norms. This idea of going against tradition and conformity in expectation and reclaiming this sense of self, going against these expectations particularly that we have on us as women.

I'm going to talk briefly about the overall process and the timeline of the creation period, and then we're going to break down a bit more into the key elements that we used to create the work.

The process itself was quite long. We started in December 2016 and the piece toured last autumn in 2019. It took three years in total. We had various different stages of creation in that time, and also throughout the process we had various performances consistently throughout those three years at varying stages of the process. This was a really important part of making the material for us because



the piece really relies on audience response and interaction to shape it. So we were constantly testing out material live to audiences, and having sharings in order to keep making the work as we went along.

We had several R&D periods, and we approached this work quite differently to our first piece. All of the work that we make is collaboratively devised – we act as collaborative devising performers. But in our first work we were all attempting to do everything. We were all in it all the time, and we were making it, and we were thinking of the ideas and the tasks. So there were a lot of stop-starts and a lot of talking and a lot of discussion. We would try something and then talk about it, and then try again and question why we were doing that and what it meant and where it was going. It was quite a slow, lengthy process.

In this work we made a really conscious decision to approach it differently. And in the early stages in particular, we divided up the days so that we took turns in leading and planning and taking responsibility for the tasks and the explorations that we were doing in the day. This meant that in the early stages we would sometimes be a director and a choreographer, and sometimes we would be devising performers. And those roles were quite fluid – as performers we would also input quite a lot into the ideas and the thoughts. But it was just a way for us to generate loads of material really early on without worrying too much about what it meant.

We also worked, especially in the first period, we worked with a couple of different mentors – Gillie Kleiman and Kerry Nicholls. Both of them make really different work to us, and it was actually really useful for us to work with very different approaches and have input into our creation process that gave us ways of generating material, which was really different to what we might use normally.

It also allowed us to be more expansive and more abstract in our approach to the task, and also to be less precious about what kind of material we were generating and what kind of piece it was going to be. It allowed us to keep generating and keep creating material without worrying too much about what it meant, really early on – which was something we did a lot in the first piece. It meant that we could trust the process – I think we trusted a lot more, in this stage, the ideas would just come through the work and we didn't have to spend too much time talking about it.

## **[00:07:35] MOVEMENT**

*[A promotional image of two Gracefool performers in wedding dresses through screen-share.]*

The first thing I'm going to talk about is the movement, how we generated a lot of the movement sections in the piece. And a lot of our early stages was working with just looking at movement and adding in the intervening and adding layers on top.

I'm going to focus on two key elements which were really crucial in the making of this work and in the movement material. The first was the costumes, the dresses. The dresses were one of the first things that we got hold of. Before we really knew anything else about the piece, we knew that we wanted to at least explore in some ways the wedding dress because it holds so much context and so much symbolism.

We got hold of a load of dresses before we started the process and these were from loads of different places and they were also varying sizes, so quite a lot of them didn't really fit us. And that was part of this aesthetic of something that wasn't quite right, didn't quite fit, it wasn't the perfect bride image that you might imagine.

We spent quite a lot of the first period just playing with the physicality of the dresses. We were playing with the heaviness of it and the restrictive nature of it. It was quite hard to do a lot of movement that would normally be easy, but it added an extra layer to it. Sometimes it made it more interesting: we were able to do more, because there was lots of padding, many layers, it was much bigger, you could fit people underneath it.

So these are photos from one of our first marketing photo shoots that we did. *[Scrolls through a number of stills of dancers in wedding dresses from the promotional photo shoot.]* This is something that we played with a lot in the early stages, creating what we call 'bride structures'. Because the



dresses were so big, we found ways of fitting multiple people underneath them and looking at subverting what the traditional image of a bride might be and making these almost like creatures with multiple limbs and these surreal images of flying brides or a bride moving.

**[00:09:50 to 00:10:15] Rehearsal footage – ‘bride structures’**

This is an early exploration. We spent quite a lot of time just doing this thing, where we’d have one or two people underneath the dress and we play around with what images we might be able to make using one or two or multiple dresses to enable us to have different limbs and different movements that looked slightly surreal and monstrous. A lot of the early explorations with the dress were, in a way, quite abstract, they were looking at the physicality in the aesthetics of the dress, and just looking at what movement we could do in them that wasn’t your traditional – what one is supposed to do in a wedding dress, which is really just stand or walk. So there’s quite a lot of possibilities open to us when we allowed ourselves to do more than that.

*[Screen-shares relevant scenes from the recording of This Is Not a Wedding illustrating the commentary that follows.]*

One of the really early things that we did was rolling in the dresses. We also wanted to find ways of moving through the space that wasn’t walking. One of the really early sharings that we had of the work was in a church. So we had an aisle to work with and we wanted to look at this moving back and forward through a space without walking, almost finding subverted alternative ways of walking down the aisle.

This was one of the really early ones. We did this series of rolling images which is a really simple contact improvisation exercise that ordinarily might look quite standard. But because of the element of the dresses, it meant that it ended up looking like this quite weird multi-limbed monster because we got really tied up in the dresses and they caught us and it meant that we moved in strange ways that we actually didn’t really have so much control over.

We played a lot with this moving down the aisle. Another way in which we played with the dress was not just the physicality of it, but also the symbolism of it. So messing with – again subverting this image of everything that it represents: this virginity and purity and femininity, and this sort of piousness that we wanted to find other ways of how you might use this dress. In a way, to misbehave in the dress and mistreat the dress.

One of the things that we again did quite early on is something that we called ‘subtle sexy’, which started as subtle and ended up not so subtle. It was like how could we find ways of doing the opposite of what you might expect a bride to do? So the white dresses, the literal image of purity and virginity, how might we subvert that and push the boundaries of what you might imagine to see women in wedding dresses doing?

Another way in which we did this was this section that we call ‘bridezilla’, which again is this really aggressive – you can’t really hear it very well here, but we make sounds over the top of this music. *[Relevant clip is running in the background.]* You can see we’re making with our mouths, but it’s almost as if we’re these weird robotic machines that are aggressively using these dresses as something other than dresses. This is something that we’ve explored throughout our whole process – is looking at failure essentially, and looking at how we might both physically and emotionally explore the idea of being on stage and being imperfect, and allowing the audience to see the vulnerability of having a human on stage, rather than these perfect highly trained bodies, which is how we’re taught especially in dance to think of what the professional dancer on stage will look like.

We are really much more interested in what happens if you make awkward, uncomfortable, unbeautiful dancing and what happens if you see the effort and the struggle on stage, see how hard it is if you see the sweat and you see the heavy breath – there’s something that for us is [interesting]. There’s much more space to find humour and poignancy and vulnerability in being able to explore, not just this pushing the boundaries of awkward movement, but also we’d spent quite a lot of time giving each other impossible tasks to do in the space, so adding many, many layers on top of something until it’s just impossible to do. But it’s in those moments of effort where we’re really, really committing to trying to do this thing that we often find some of our most interesting moments.



We had the section of movement that we called the 'solo trio' which, when we first started making it, came from a task which was about exploring awkward, uncomfortable, unbeautiful movement.

It was about us trying to find ways we could move that was not how we might normally slip into our patterns of movement. We really loved this movement but we really couldn't place it for quite a long time. We really wanted to include it but we couldn't quite work out how the hell this very strange movement fit into a wedding scenario. But we kept mining it and kept exploring it for a long time because it was really interesting to us, and in the end we added more impossible layers on top of it. So one of the things that we added was that we tried it with lots of different types of music, and in the end settled on this piece of opera music – which you might hear. We then gave each other the task of singing along to the opera music. Obviously, none of us are trained opera singers and we actually didn't know the song.

So that kind of impossible task of doing this very hard, very restrictive movement which actually was quite tangled, over the top of which we had to sing as loud as we possibly could, as well as we possibly could, to an opera song that we didn't know, which affected our breathing and then affected the movement. We were interested in how those things, our utter commitment to that could – how we might be able to find something that made sense within the context of the piece.

And the more that we did this, the more it came to represent failure on a larger scale. The idea that of those moments of pomp and ceremony within tradition where you're really trying to give your best face and trying to give the impression of perfection, but there's ways of seeing underneath it and there was something about allowing for the voice to come through that gave this layer underneath of the difficulty of those situations.

The other element that we added on top of this was – and this was kind of by chance – Rebecca in the week that we were rehearsing it was ill so she couldn't dance. So she was outside of it, and she was directing us and giving us instructions. We started to find that as a concept really interesting, to have someone on the outside of this very surreal, abstract movement doing something very normal. At first she was just talking, and then we started to add in these elements of her eating food, sitting just watching, taking photos, and there was something suddenly that clicked for us in the juxtaposition of having this very pedestrian movement next to something so strange, that was how we managed to find a place for it and it ended up being this photography moment that was part of the event that everyone has to take part in and no one really enjoys taking part in and there's someone on the outside, controlling it and bossing people around. Suddenly I think it was a way in which it could be contextualised for the audience and for us.

### **[00:17:50] SOUND**

*[A still from the show of a performer screaming into the face of another.]*

Another element that we use loads in this work is sound. It's something that we use in all of our work, but in this one in particular we played with our voices a lot. I think, more so than our first work, we wanted to push the boundaries of what we were capable of in terms of experimenting with voice and sound in our bodies and also to look at how that affected the movement and how the movement affected the sound. So we played with tone and modes of address and making mechanical sounds and singing. We use the voice a lot in all of our work as a way of interrupting and disrupting an image or to add layers and meaning on top of it or to add a context.

You can see with the solo trio, it was the addition of Rebecca, in a way, it was an addition of her speaking and being on the outside and instructing us that suddenly allowed us to have a context for that material within the structure and in this piece we use it a lot to subvert or undermine an image or to provide a contrast or a juxtaposition to something.

It's often to break the facade or to break this idea of perfection and to let the audience in to the realities of what is going on behind the scenes and there's the three main ways in which we use sound in this work.



One of them is talking. We talk a lot in this in this piece. Some of it is improvised and some of it is scripted. And it takes a lot of different modes within the work. One of these modes is conversational, so we have this direct address to the audience and this always happens in a microphone and they're usually scripted these moments because these were moments where we wanted to stop and allow – they were pivotal moments for the structure. So it was important to us in these moments that the audience heard everything that we said, and sometimes we would be in conversation with the audience and asked them to respond and leave space there for that to be a back and forth improvisation, a conversation with the audience.

But in contrast to that, we also have these moments peppered throughout the piece of whispering to each other. So they're the moments of negotiation and conspiring almost. These always happen without the microphone, and the idea of this is that the audience get a sense of what's going on, they get a sense maybe of the urgency or the intention that's going on behind the whispering, but they don't hear very much of what's going on, they might hear certain words.

For us it's really clear what conversations we're having in those moments, they're not scripted but we have a sense of the themes that we're talking about. In fact it's important that the audience don't hear everything that we're saying.

We also have a mode of talking or shouting over the top of music, and this is another mode of talking, again similarly to the whispering, that is not important that the audience hear everything, but it is important that they get a sense of what we're trying to say, and that they might perhaps hear some words. It's important that they get a sense of the tone and the intention rather than the content of what we're saying.

The difference between this and the whispering is that with the whispering the intention behind that for us as performers is that we don't want the audience to be able to hear what we're saying. The difference with the talking over the music is that we're trying very hard for them to hear what we're saying but there's some outside force that is limiting or crushing the voice a bit and stopping us from being understood or heard. It's these moments where our perhaps agency or control has taken over a bit – or, in contrast, where we're trying to command that space.

And then the final very clear mode that we use in the piece, and that we played with lots, is miming. We had a lot of different moments where one person would be speaking into the microphone and another person would be miming their words.

At first this came about really because we were interested in how we might use the space of the theatre differently, how we might play with where sound came from, and break the fourth wall and go into the audience and perhaps sometimes have a microphone in the audience rather than on stage.

We were interested in there being moments of this sound coming from other spaces, but it also came to mean much more in the context of the whole piece. It then was able to add to this feeling of there being moments that were out of our control, where our voices were taken away, where our agency was taken away, where someone else was – and equally moments where we were taking control. There's some moments where we are putting words into the audience's mouth, for example. So it was a way of us literally playing with that sense of control and loss of control.

We have this introduction speech that Sofia gives which is a very formal introduction to welcome the guests to the event.

*[Relevant section of the show is played in the background.]*

But she, as you can see here, is standing there in the dark, and I'm on the stage mouthing her words. She goes into the audience and the whole speech is delivered from the audience with me just mouthing it. I am interrupting this with 'It's not a wedding' – and the reason for having two different voices here is because it's to contrast this formality of this very traditional welcoming speech with, again, this moment of revealing the reality of what's perhaps really going on inside our heads, this sort of panic moment.

**[00:24:01 to 00:24:21] Sofia's welcome speech from the recording of *This Is Not a Wedding* (2019)**





Another way in which we use sound quite a lot in this is singing. This was one of the first times that we explored this. Initially it was because we like singing and we found it fun and we wanted to find other ways of exploring our voices. But it also felt like it made sense within the context of this ceremonious event, having these elements of entertainment and celebration, and it fit within that structure of a wedding.

But it was also, again, something really interesting for us of coming back to this idea of failure. None of us are trained singers and there were moments where we were attempting to sing things that we shouldn't really have been trying to sing, like opera songs, and there was inevitably going to be moments of attempting to do this thing and not quite managing it. Again, there's something interesting to us about the vulnerability and authenticity of singing very loudly and very badly on stage and really going for it and not quite managing it.

We also use singing – like with the other sounds – as a way of breaking or undermining an image. Each moment where we have singing in the piece, it's often a moment of softness and calm, that is then broken by something.

One of the ways that we did this towards the end is we had this moment of a 'Swedish sermon', we call it. Rebecca and Sofia wrote this speech that was meant to be a sermon. They wrote it in English and then translated into Swedish because we wanted to have this otherworldly sense to it, and it was important to us that actually it was the sounds that people heard rather than understanding what the words were. We got Rebecca's mum, who is a church choir leader, to help us put it to some tones that are traditional church-preaching songs. Sofia sings this speech and it's this moment of calm and softness and it feels very pious and formal and then we undermine it by swearing.

**[00:26:41 to 00:26:55] 'Swedish Sermon' from the recording of *This Is Not a Wedding* (2019)**

Again, we were interested in what it might be like to very beautifully sing a swearword out loud in a setting that felt like it shouldn't have been allowed.

One of the other moments that we played with for a really long time, which involved singing and then evolved to seep into lots of other parts of the work – this is an example of how long we spent playing with an image that we like and how much of it we might then dissect and take out and place bits of it elsewhere, when we couldn't quite find the right context for this but managed to take elements of it and put it in different places.

We wanted to look at this idea of putting – kind of demonstrating the words to a song. So really practically putting gestural movements to the words of particularly very cheesy love songs and to see if you could play with songs that have so much symbolism and pare it back to something very practical. This is some early rehearsal footage. This, I think, was one of the first tasks. We did loads of variations of this task, but the first one was just to put a gesture to each word and to have them very clearly, almost like signs, for the words.

**[00:28:14 to 00:28:32] Rehearsal footage – putting gestures to words of songs**

We also had this idea in the back of our minds of wanting to use backing singers somewhere. And again, it was like a nod to the entertainment of a big traditional ceremony or an event, but we also liked the representation of backing singers as this sort of pretty background that was very nice and glitzy and perfect, and finding ways to mess with that. And so [here] the task was to put the gestures to a song, but to do it as if it was a backing singer dance.

**[00:29:08 to 00:29:32] Rehearsal footage – putting gestures to a song as backing singer dance**

A third version that we did, which actually made its way into another part of the piece, was the idea of interrupting the singing with speaking. And actually, we ended up taking this to a very different part of the piece where we interrupted a speech with singing. But this is an early version of it.

**[00:29:47 to 00:30:22] Rehearsal footage – interrupting singing with speaking**

And final version we did, which again we took elements of was adding in sounds over the tops, so replacing some of the words with sounds.

**[00:30:32 to 00:30:50] Rehearsal footage – replacing words with sounds**



And then just a final way that we use sound in this piece which was different to the first pieces is because we spent a lot of time talking in the first piece. But this one we also wanted to explore just making sounds with our voices and how we might put those sounds or narrate movement with sounds and how those sounds would impact the movement and how the movement would impact the way that we made those sounds.

One way we did this a lot was using screams. So it was something that in the early stage of our improvisation we disrupted lots of things with screaming. It was something I guess within the context of this kind of perfection of the wedding of the event where everything was supposed to go right, we really liked the idea of undermining that by perhaps showing what's really going on inside someone's head which is just total chaos or disaster. It felt like a very clear juxtaposition to a lot of these pretty images.

So one of the places that we used the literal scream was we have various versions of this best man's speech and one of the ones that Rebecca does is an early version and it keeps getting interrupted by a scream. What's also happening in the background is that there's what we call 'the first kiss moment'. So we wanted to have this beautiful romantic moment but we wanted it to be interrupted.

**[00:32:16 to 00:32:27] 'First Kiss' scene from the recording of *This Is Not a Wedding* (2019)**

We played a lot with the quality of the scream. It took us quite a long time to get the right kind of scream, there were moments where it was too much and it's also quite intense for people's ears, both for the audience and for Rachel and Sofia, who were having to do it in each other's faces. So we had to find ways of finding this surprise quality and finding different qualities of scream that said different things. We spent quite a long time working on that, thinking about how the sound in those moments could disrupt the image and undermine it, give away the facade of what was really happening versus what was happening inside the mind.

**[00:33:16] TEXT**

**Rachel Fullegar:** I'm going to talk about our use of text and particularly how we start writing text.

We trained as dancers so we definitely haven't learnt any formal writing techniques. A lot of it is just feeling out our way through getting started and how we edit. But we're all interested in words and interested in wordplay. And we often enjoy using text to add layers of meaning to the images that we create, as Kate said earlier, and where we choose to write is often at the very beginning to get a sense of the world that's being created. But also where we choose to then develop that writing is where we want it to be a longer chunk of text that's supporting a more simple image.

As Kate said also we particularly enjoy the juxtaposition between what's being seen visually and then what's being said – revealing the reality or the truth of the situation as opposed to what the characters, particularly in this work, are trying to uphold all the time.

So we write collaboratively, and because of this and our personal interest in absurdity, the text we write often has a nonsensical quality to it. It often takes a recognisable form, but the meaning is specifically messed with or made unclear.

Early in the process we generated reams and reams and reams of text, giving each other quite broad tasks as starting points or using existing sort of found text as templates for getting started.

So we often all write separately on our laptops and develop these texts for a period of time and then we will pass the laptop along to each other and the next person will add or develop what's there before we then perform the very loose material. Not only to each other, in that moment to understand how it's sounding in our heads – it's very much related to how we think it's going to sound or be performed, but also then later on in a loose structure layered with other images that we're interested in, before going back and developing and editing again.

That collaborative process goes on for quite a long time until we've figured out who's going to be delivering the text. Then they're usually the person that creates the final version, mainly because of



that sense of how it's going to be performed and what feels natural to their clown really and their persona they're developing on stage.

So really we're not focused on meaning at all in early drafts, there's no sense of trying to direct it anywhere. That comes much later once we've got those early versions of texts on their feet. Seeing and hearing it and discussing what connotations pop up in the testing of it physically and also watching it is crucial. We keep everybody's versions of texts for a long, long time, clogging up our Google Drive because elements of them often then become something else later on. And that means there's a huge amount that we don't use. In a similar way to us developing material, it's just generation, generation, generation and then taking a small part. But it really is crucial in building that shared language when the process is so collaborative. Because the worlds we create are often totally off kilter, it's really important for us to try and find ways to get on the same page. So even though the process [is that] we keep questioning the material we've got, that helps us to then make quicker final edits later on.

So a really good example of this collaborative writing is in the speeches in *This Is Not a Wedding*. We're just really interested in the concept of a speech anyway. As Kate was talking about earlier, it allows us to have the direct delivery to the audience and make it clear that we are talking to them, we expect them to meet us, look us in the eyes.

But we also find a lot of humour in the pomp and ceremony around delivering a speech, the hyperbole of the language, the grandiosity and the way a speech is performed in the command of a room. And of course these are hallmarks of weddings and celebration events but often really similar in format to one another.

I think for us, we're intrigued in general by the aspects of life that have sets of rules to them that everybody has the social contract of understanding around, and those for us are really easily recognisable and allow us to subvert them really easily.

[Screen-shares 'All Speeches Great and Small' website.]

So what we discovered in the very beginning of the process is that there are hundreds of thousands of websites which help people write speeches of any kind, but the most popular seems to be the best man speech. As you can see in this website here: 'Most best men are weighed down by the expectation to be funny and have no idea where to start.' And on these websites there are so many different videos which tell you the advice of how to deliver it, but also essentially structure it and write it for you. So they give you quite generic opening lines, tell you what to do and what not to do, and we just thought that was hilarious in itself that people were going and using these templates in different places.

Here is a document [screen-shares a Google doc] which shows the iterations that this writing goes through. As you can see on the page, the first version here is actually a template that we've lifted from one of these sites which tells you what you should include in the structure in each part. This is really interesting [reads]: 'The examples of how this person has influenced you or what the person has done to you or for you or done to others.' So we started off with a really broad task of just trying to work with this template. If we were going to write a speech and follow this template, how would we do it?

So the first version here you can see that what ends up being written is on this influence angle [reads]: 'I can already sense you have had a tremendous impact on my life.' 'We mustn't underestimate Tim's role in all our lives.' 'You are the single most influential person I've met in the last 15 minutes.' So, playing with that vagueness and following the template.

What we would then do is after this first version read it aloud to each other, and there would be a discussion of what we find interesting about this piece of writing. All four of us would read something out and we would listen and then respond. So this is usually what makes us laugh, what we think is funny about it, what we're interested in the wordplay that we've written or the unexpected word combination.





But primarily I think we're interested in the form or the structure or the rhythm, which I often think is quite a choreographic way of looking at it because we get more of a sense of that in the performing it to one another. You know: 'Actually, I like the rhythm and the pacing of this.' 'I like it when you do it faster.' That's what we're picking apart, and as a group we then decide a new focus that we're going to do on the next text.

So in this second version, you can see what we've decided to amend is the adding in of general questions to the speech. 'What does it all mean, how does it work, where is it going?' And also we wanted to meet this pomp and ceremony of what can be included in the speech with name-dropping and showing how clever you are. So in this speech you see often: 'As my dear friend, the renowned intellectual—' and then name-checking someone.

Once we've read that again to each other, we often write notes for ourselves, which you can see here. [*Screen-sharing Google doc.*] They're sometimes notes, which really keep track of our thoughts, and again help us hone down what we're actually interested in.

Sometimes they're images – so in this one it's Sofia in the audience, asking for their names – and below we've taken an aspect of the text that we like and tried to find other ways that we can play with that aspect of the text in another part. So, again, that might be in a dialogue with the audience or within an image.

Often at this point is where we would put that really, really loose text within a structure. So we would have a piece of paper with what we imagined to be different sections on, and this text would just be sometimes very arbitrarily attached to a section so we would see it amongst all the other material.

You can see in this third version [*scrolling down the document*], it started to get much more specific. So we've actually taken the names out because it was more absurdist and we just didn't think that tone was right.

Often that is a common thing that we end up doing. I think our sense of humour is possibly sillier than what we put up on stage, and we're testing always the boundaries of what we think might be the right tone. Actually, the version prior stayed with us quite a long time. It was only when doing a sharing with some invited friends that we suddenly felt: 'Oh, this feels a little bit too on the nose.' You know, what we really, really don't want to do is to make it feel like an in-joke, even though that there is an element of silliness or slapstick to what we do.

I think we're constantly walking this tight line of how obvious something is and how literal it might be in the reality of the movement that we're exploring. But also then how abstract and nonsensical we can make things. So in this version it's much more streamlined, but we've kept in the questions and that becomes actually the bulk of the text.

And also in the performing we realised that this speech was going to then eventually become a precursor to a more serious piece of text, which Kate delivers, which we wanted to have much more of a sense of sadness about it and loss. And so in the final edit, which we can see here [*scrolling down the document*] – 'Keep less aggressive' is a performance note to me' [*laughing*] – which within the structure we didn't want it to have a boisterousness which it was designed originally having that quality in mind. It became much quieter and it became much calmer, so that it could support the text that Kate then delivers afterwards. So it really is shaped and honed through seeing it amongst other material as well.

Once we've actually hit upon an interesting piece of text or few lines that we're interested in, we often use repetition to have these re-occur at different moments within the work.

We had to make performable versions, as Kate was talking about earlier, of the material at multiple points in the process, to meet the requirements of funders in the R&D and the development phases which led to the creation of what we saw as the first half of the work.

Our mentor Gillie reassured us that we didn't need to make a whole load of new material to complete the second half. We could reuse or remake what we have, changing the imagery or the form that supports what's going on in that moment. So repeating material helped make it easier in the making,



but also allowed us to then find motifs in the work which again drew out meaning that we weren't necessarily aware of before.

Once we knew that Rebecca would be delivering some form of speech in the screaming section, she went away and amended some of this material to use in that moment. So you can see here [*screen-sharing another Google doc*] this is her version, and you can see just here in with the yellow highlighted text where she's lifted some of the same lines. Exactly the same material is existing in different parts. But here you can see that she's actually got an earlier version of that Tim speech that I showed before. So it's really important for us to keep these multiple versions because some bits aren't right for some places but we can have echoes of them elsewhere.

When we get the material on its feet before honing it down and we layer these early texts and images, we can see the potential of where these different versions will be. They really help us communicate the shifts that are happening in the work, predominantly to show how the brides are feeling, how the characters are feeling at different points and reflect their exhaustion.

I think really crucially they also then allowed us to show, with the repetition, how they were keeping control of the events and how they were using that material to ensure that they were sticking to the line and sticking to the celebration.

Here you can see another early version of the Tim speech [*screen-sharing another Google doc*]. This one's called 'Speech about a speech'. You can see here the template version of the best man speech which has been played with in a different way.

We were interested in the notion that it's usually the men that do the speaking at a wedding. But of course, we have no men in the company, and eventually we hit upon the idea of co-opting a male audience member to deliver a speech for us. This led to us using this template exactly as it was, essentially to give directions to who was picked. We chose Sofia to be in the audience, delivering these instructions. We called this 'The man speech' – the section eventually became known as 'Fred' because we named this person as well.

In the second half of the work we were wanting to show us rebelling against the expectations of the event. There was a moment where we were regaining and taking back control where – before, the pressure had seemingly come from the audience and they were pressuring us to do these things, and we were subverting this to give the audience a taste of that pressure by leaving the man picked on their own on stage, and giving our own ludicrous demands.

These two lines here: 'Tell everyone how beautiful and wonderful they are' and 'I will then graciously and gracefully hand over to someone better' can be seen in here [*screen-shares another Google doc*], which is now called 'The man speech', this almost finished version of what eventually went on to the stage – as you can see that those two lines have literally been picked. We will keep that early material to do that picking of the lines.

Just a point to say really that it's not necessarily important for the audience to notice this repeated material, as the different combinations of text and music and image and performance style give a sense of the changing atmosphere or change of feeling at different points, rather than us using repetition to double down on the point that we want to communicate.

If the audience do recognise the repetition, it gives a sense of times running in circles and being stuck, which helps the theme that we're working with in the work.

Here is Sofia [*screen-shares a Vimeo page*]. This is taken from a little bit of an extract from a video where we performed to students from Barnsley College – so quite a young audience, really excitable, which was lovely to feel what the energy would be with that sort of crowd. It's maybe – gosh, like four or five versions before what we'd settled on, so we were still very much playing with the text in this speech. This young man who's been picked out is quite confident and wants to speak a lot in this role, in 'The man speech', and so Sofia can choose to interrupt more or be more forceful in tone to engage in the power play and pressure that we're dealing with in this moment.

**[00:51:18 to 00:52:22] Excerpt from the recording of *This Is Not a Wedding* at Barnsley College (2018)**



We realised, obviously, that because we were putting the audience member in this high pressure moment and giving them instructions, obviously they were going to react differently and we needed to make space for that reaction. Here you can see actually because he's such a confident pick that Sofia is creating moments of awkwardness to make him feel uneasy because we needed to have him feel more of a sense of pressure, and the pressure of doing it right for us. So really it was important to give her space around the material so that she could ad lib and improvise, but also play with the pacing of how it was working.

After the premiere we edited the text again because the man we chose in that instance was incredibly nervous, and we sensed that the audience were beginning to feel too uncomfortable at the length of time that he was actually up on stage – he wasn't enjoying it at all. I think he said at one point: 'This is the worst thing ever' or 'This is my worst experience ever.' So it was really important that we just edited the text down a bit. It didn't need to be that long, we could do what we needed to do without putting him under extended amount of pressure.

So really often the right pitch in tone and scope of what we can do with the text comes from testing with the live audience. We want them to feel involved, but we also are aware that we have to have a guiding, playful hand on how much they get to do.

This freedom to ad lib and improvise is really important for us to retain the responsiveness with the audience and make them feel part of the event and make them feel like they're playing the role of guests, but we also use improvisation in studio and in performance to generate large amounts of texts as well.

'Let's talk about' is a section which uses a technique called sentence stemming.

Sentence stemming is essentially where we play with repeating the beginning of a sentence multiple times and then ending the sentence differently. For example, we would use 'this as a dance about...' and we would say: 'This is a dance about my hair. This is a dance about the computer screen. This is a dance about my life. This is a dance about my work and how I'm feeling about my work and what I'm doing today.' It would just be an improvisation where your mind sort of makes associations between the endings of those sentences.

Here's an example of us playing with the sentence stemming where Rebecca is also playing with the movement image of moving down the aisle and Sofia is also sentence stemming on top.

#### **[00:55:11 to 00:55:53] Rehearsal footage – 'sentence-stemming'**

We often layer and layer, layer, layer and eventually strip back when we know we have a better sense of what we feel the text is and what it isn't or what we feel the image is and what it isn't. So we're exploring all its possibilities before taking it right back.

We took 'Let's talk about' as a starting point because we liked that beginning of the sentence stemming and tried to set it. But in doing this, we actually really liked the performance mode that came from not knowing what was going to come next – and it didn't matter about the meaning of the words. It really ended up in terms of what meaning we were trying to communicate about trying to fill the awkward pause at the beginning and trying to fill time and get this sense that it was just someone basically trying to fill the conversation and then make the audience not feel awkward – but we needed to see there was a slight sense of unsureness.

So the actual pressure in doing this in performance contributes to an uneasy or panicked rambling or grasping for words with the quality of being unsure, and the realism became what we needed to really focus on. So we just let Rebecca's skill in improvising and wordplay be the task in a performance here.

We're quite confident improvisers and enjoy the sense of jeopardy that comes with improvising with a live audience, as well as how it contributes to our natural clowns, which do really emerge in high tension or discomfort or the need to control, which again really works with the concepts behind the piece. Often in a dress that went in front of an audience, we would improvise around all the text before making set choices.



The final aspect of texts I'm going to quickly talk about is a 'splicing', where we take two separate texts and merge them together. So the 'sing-speech' is an example of this – just going to pop it up here [*screen-shares a Google doc*].

We started with the song 'You're Just Too Good to Be True' [*'Can't Take My Eyes off You'*], which we just had a feeling about which was liked – it was one of those mood board collection of images, of sounds that we thought was interesting. But we weren't really sure what we were interested in about it, it was just this feeling. So we tried it in loads of different ways: with movement, using it as a karaoke track, cover versions, and eventually decided to play with the text itself and connect it with this image or idea of a wedding singer. So you can see this splicing happening here [*indicating the Google doc*].

The song is about the idea that this person or this love can't possibly be real, obviously. So Kate went away and wrote down a list of interjections that might work around the idea of reality. A lot of these reflect money or work, success and achievement, and feeling like the system hasn't given you what you want.

Then we began testing where some of these lines could go, amending and developing them according to what meaning became apparent in the connection to the song but primarily where the lines could run into each other. So [*reads*]: 'Can't take / ...any more of this waiting around. I've been successful up till now but when exactly should I take / my eyes off of you.'

So again, at this point, getting on its feet became quite crucial, and you can see here an early version of this with different texts performed by Kate in a rough structure.

#### **[00:59:39 to 01:00:12] Rehearsal footage – 'splicing'**

So from this, we noticed that actually we liked it much more when there was that connection between the text, but also mainly our interest was in how the singing and the speaking mode sat next to each other and how Kate could make the tone and the physical quality of how she did this quite different. So that then informed our understanding of where we were going to take it and very much it's about how the imagery and the text sat together.

What was also really important is you can see that it takes place next to the 'spinning chat' in which the characters come forward and communicate conflicting desires about whether we should carry on with the event or the pretence or whether we should wait and stall it. The sing-speech then develops out of this by showing that Kate's character is compelled to keep singing the song adhering to the traditional notions of love and what she's expected to communicate in the event, but she sometimes then slips into what she really thinks.

#### **[01:01:20] STRUCTURE**

[*Screen-sharing a rehearsal image of the performers looking at sheets of paper and post it notes on the wall.*]

Structure for us comes really, really early on. Whilst everything is in these very early stages of development, it's really, really rough, we've just started to touch on different ideas and images, we actually start putting things in a structure.

We wanted to start with a clearer sense of structure than our last work. We thought that this might make knowing where the work's going easier and speed up the process, but also might make our sense of world-building easier when we were finding connections between material before it properly had this sense of development. We therefore took the elements of a wedding – the first dance, the first kiss, speeches, sermon, aisle – and use those to be our potential sections. But we were really conscious and cautious about making literal representations of this on stage because we didn't actually want it to be about weddings, hence the title of *This Is Not a Wedding*. We started to make a combination really of more abstract material and things that really loosely related to, for example, the concept of walking down the aisle. We use the headings of 'first dance', 'first kiss' et cetera, to try out orders in the process.



So, here's a picture of us in early R&D, looking at structure and order. Most of the material of the sections is either that abstract or sort of representational state, really underdeveloped. We obviously move around the pictures, the paper to test different compositions. The main thing is to start performing it really early and improvise the transitions to find new material or to help us get sense of what's missing.

I think because the work sits somewhere between narrative and abstract and starts really broad, this helps us figure out the meaning behind what we've generated – mainly because we're not trying to hone it down too early. In this way also, we can get out of the discussion mode that Kate talked about earlier, and let the performer brain do the work and figure it out physically. We're always trying to trust that the body and the mind is connected, and we just need to make sense of how our bodies are interpreting the thoughts. So that's a way of us doing that.

As we go along, to make sense of this vast amount of material and these multiple versions of structure that emerge, we have to find ways to keep track of these half-finished images and we often use spreadsheets to do this.

[Screen-shares a Google Excel sheet.]

Here's an example of a really early spreadsheet. As you can see we have actually been quite – we've separated out movement and text. And that's because of the layering process that we go through. You can see things that were just – who knows what we were thinking? We've just written down vague thoughts or notions of something [reads]: 'plastic poncho', 'umbrellas', 'wedding ghost' are just things that come up. Also you can see things that obviously captured our attention and were developed right the way through: 'someone making a speech without a microphone', 'the microphone is in the audience'. So it really helps us make sense of all of the disparateness of it. Later on we use spreadsheets to ask questions about the material which has become a little bit more moving towards being set. You can see here talking about 'objections' and 'first kiss' – these are suggestions for how we might change or develop the movement. You can also see questions to ourselves about: where it happens, what the performance mode is, what the music is. I think it's really interesting that we put these in spreadsheets. I think because the process is so loose and there is the sense that it could become quite chaotic and also to keep the sense of openness that comes from being a collective and collaborating and being okay that you don't know where it's going when you're dealing with the deadlines of making the work and making these small performances that need to go out for the funders. This more traditional, business-like way of organising helps us feel like it's progressing forward and we are doing a lot and we have a lot and there's lots to work with – but also to remember everything that's going on.

We do have our own individual notebooks that we work with, but the Google Drive is our shared hivemind. It's where we can all have a sense of where we're heading together. I think without it we might panic a lot more. So it helps us in a way to box in the ideas and to be more open.

## [01:06:33] NEW WORK

[Screen-sharing a Google doc schedule.]

One thing that we really enjoyed in our last piece was gaining a greater connection with the audience, breaking the fourth wall, and being really playful in the way that we made material and performed. So we've started thinking about where we're going with our new work. Building upon that connection is one of the main drivers behind the ideas that we're working with. So we're really interested in immersion, in interaction, engagement in order to create and be in dialogue with the audience and to draw them further into the world and perhaps play roles as part of that.

The themes that we're looking at, at the moment, are around collective versus individual responsibility in light of impending doom as a result of climate change. The initial ideas that we're exploring physically and in text are around the end of the world, the apocalypse and time endings and mortality around this, which very much came out of *This Is Not a Wedding*, and became things that emerged that we didn't necessarily have a lot of focus on but just seemed to be there in the





combination of material. As always, this process is like a lot of other Gracefool processes really broad, with really big themes, and that's where we like to start really, not knowing where it's going to go. We have done an initial mini R&D in September, and because this was in the pandemic, we had some performers in the studio with us and some remotely engaging with us via digital means.

We gave the performers lots of tasks, both written and physical, to run with and improvise around. So it was quite broad. This is a sheet that was an info sheet for our collaborators. We shared a Google Drive with them – actually, the Google Drive became the hivemind for this new group of people. You can see we have the schedule here, we have ways that they can connect with each other, and we have a list of tasks that they could pick and choose what they want to do and how they wanted to respond to it.

What was really crucial was creating this space to share material and to communicate, because we were really aware that that commentary and discussing of what comes up physically is really crucial in honing down what we're all interested in. So we scheduled in Zoom chats, we had a WhatsApp group which people sent each other memes and images and bits of news, and a shared Google folder where they all uploaded the videos that they were working on so they could see each other's work.

[Screen-shares a Google Drive folder of video clips.] I'll just quickly show you a couple of things that came out of that. This is Madeline Shann who is a fantastic performer and maker, and here is her collection of apocalypse looks for the end of the world.

**[01:09:55 to 01:10:23] 'What is your apocalypse look?' rehearsal video by Madeline Shann**

We also gave them the task of waiting for the end of the world, which people interpreted really differently.

This is Daniel, who was doing this from Sweden. In a waiting room...

**[01:10:43 to 01:11:08] 'End of the world magazine' rehearsal video by Daniel Jeremiah Persson**

What was really interesting for us was that actually, without meaning to, we are playing with what we can achieve digitally, that we may not be able to achieve on stage. We liked the fact that we were able to use performers in different countries – and we wouldn't have necessarily been able to do that. Or it's been made it more easier to do that and more climate-friendly, to have them working remotely. Making videos is something we hadn't really thought about doing before, but it emerged in this process. The work itself we think won't be in a theatre, to play with this element of immersion, but also we're re-evaluating and thinking about how we can make our work more relevant to our audience. One of the ways we're thinking of doing that is using higher production values to create spectacle or taking away from maybe the norm.

The DIY aesthetic emerged in our work through need in that essentially in the beginning, we'd have small budgets, but this did fit with our ideas about struggle and failure. So it'll be interesting to see how potentially higher production values might then affect that as a concept that we enjoy working with.

We're also thinking about collaborating with a sound artist and a DJ to find ways of expanding our relationship to sound. Only a couple of times early in our career have we worked with live or original sound, so it's really exciting for us in terms of world-building and a party atmosphere which definitely has also come from the themes in *This Is Not a Wedding* that we would like to explore further.

I think essentially each process for us, we go in expecting it to be different. This time we have lots of different collaborators and we're keen to see how our process changes again.

We really like to learn from very different people and people who make different work – a lot of these collaborators make their own work as well. And we like to be challenged by their approach to things. So it's really exciting to see what will emerge out of this new project.



## Clips Summary

- [00:00:23 to 00:02:56] Trailer for *This Is Not a Wedding* (2019)
- [00:09:50 to 00:10:15] Rehearsal footage – ‘bride structures’
- [00:24:01 to 00:24:21] Sofia’s welcome speech from the recording of *This Is Not a Wedding* (2019)
- [00:26:41 to 00:26:55] ‘Swedish Sermon’ from the recording of *This Is Not a Wedding* (2019)
- [00:28:14 to 00:28:32] Rehearsal footage – putting gestures to words of songs
- [00:29:08 to 00:29:32] Rehearsal footage – putting gestures to a song as backing singer dance
- [00:29:47 to 00:30:22] Rehearsal footage – interrupting singing with speaking
- [00:30:32 to 00:30:50] Rehearsal footage – replacing words with sounds
- [00:32:16 to 00:32:27] ‘First Kiss’ scene from the recording of *This Is Not a Wedding* (2019)
- [00:51:18 to 00:52:22] Recording of *This Is Not a Wedding* at Barnsley College (2018)
- [00:55:11 to 00:55:53] Rehearsal footage – ‘sentence-stemming’
- [00:59:39 to 01:00:12] Rehearsal footage – ‘splicing’
- [01:09:55 to 01:10:23] ‘What is your apocalypse look?’ rehearsal video by Madeline Shann
- [01:10:43 to 01:11:08] ‘End of the world magazine’ rehearsal video by Daniel Jeremiah Persson

## Works Cited

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Audio available at [www.auralia.space/laboratory3-gracefoolcollective/](http://www.auralia.space/laboratory3-gracefoolcollective/).

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