



Nic Green: The Making of *COCK AND BULL* (2015)

In this episode of the Laboratory, Nic Green details the why and the how of her performance *Cock and Bull* (2015), which won a Total Theatre Award in 2016 and which remains a benchmark in complicating the definitions of verbatim and of political theatre as genres.

Nic Green is a Yorkshire-born, Scotland-based artist whose work, while taking on different forms and formats, is consistently characterised by a strong sense of social, political and environmental responsibility, and always pushes at the confines between public debate and private, lived reality. Her *Trilogy* (2010) unflinchingly celebrated and tackled the historical and contemporary perils of feminism and its representation, and *Fatherland* (2014) dealt with the symbolic, political and emotional weight of Scottishness both in Green's own biography and in the UK in general around the time of the Scottish Referendum.

Here Green offers a step-by-step explanation of and a deep a posteriori reflection on how she went about making *Cock and Bull*, in partnership with her long-term collaborators Rosana Cade and Laura Bradshaw. She shares thoughts on the genesis of the work as a meditation on language and privilege, and on her preparatory research – which included watching the 2015 Conservative Party Conference in full. She lets us into the mechanisms of her rehearsal room, and explains how she went about making the work deriving compositional patterns from minimalist music-making, to 'play' the language of power in order to show its full absurdity and brutality. Finally, she meditates on the resonance the work had at the time of its making and on how the work feels in the contemporary moment, positing the theatre as a place in which we can listen differently or otherwise, and maybe learn how to listen out for danger in our noisy, over-mediatised world: 'there's something about transforming these frustrating, repetitive, monotonous phrasings, into something else that could be interpreted as hopeful'.

[00:00:23 to 00:02:56] Tory Party Conference 2013: Hardworking Bingo (YouTube)

Iain Duncan Smith: –was working hard. Families on benefits getting more than hard working families could earn – that, Conference, is returning fairness to the system. Hard working people on low incomes, that is returning fairness to the system. Conservatives returning fairness to the system, that is returning fairness to the system, we are returning fairness to this system. The hard working people were going out to work...

Conservatives returning fairness to the system, that's fairness to the system, that's returning fairness to the system...

Surely that is returning fairness to the system, to work hard and contribute, rewarding those who do the right thing, surely that is returning fairness to a system. Fairness to hard-working families...

Grant Shapps: Ordinary hard-working people, the grafters who get up early. All they want is a system that rewards hard work that hard-working people of this country, allows people to work hard, to do over time. When you work hard, ordinary, decent, hard-working Britons, a hard-worker is so far removed from hard-working members of their unions. Ordinary, hard-working people. Someone who gets up early for hard-working people to work hard for the hard-working people of Britain.

Eric Pickles: And champion hard-working families, hard-working families, hard-working people, hard-working people, hard-working people.



Chris Grayling: The hard-working, when all of us, all the rest of the country gets up to go out to work every day. Been working hard, working hard, a hard-working.

George Osborne: Families working hard to get on, hard-working people, hard-working people, hard work, hard-working people, hard-working people, hard-working people, hard-working people, hard-working people work hard.

David Cameron: This party is on the side of hard-working people. Working those extra hours. One where people who work hard can really get on with hard work. The best way out of poverty is work. Hard-working people, hard-working people, hard-working people, hard-working people work hard, hard-working people work.

[00:03:00] INTRODUCTION

Nic Green: Hello everyone, my name is Nic Green and I am an artist based in Scotland. I work in multi-disciplinary and contemporary theatre. The forms of the things I make mostly are found through a relational collaboration or practice with people, or place, or material, or context. But maybe one thing that my various forms – which can be quite varied – one thing that does bridge them, or they have in common, is a kind of returning to sound, or particularly rhythm, as a kind of driving mechanism for the work, or even a kind of logic, certainly, for the performer and possibly sometimes the audience, to accompany a kind of, well, I wouldn't say narrative but the journey of the work.

So this piece that I'm going to talk about today, *Cock and Bull*, is certainly an example of that. It uses sound and rhythm as a really key component, but it also uses language in a particular way. Obviously, in a kind of linguistic sense, it uses it but it also uses language or uses language in a sonic way as a sound material, musically and in a more kind of noise sense, and also uses language in a very political sense.

So first of all, it's really nice to be here and thank you very much for inviting me to talk about this piece today. I first made it in 2015, and I last presented it in March last year, 2019, in Madrid. I made it in collaboration with Rosana Cade and Laura Bradshaw, who are both performers in this piece.

My role was to conceive the ideas, I suppose, and direct the work, and I also perform alongside Rosana and Laura in both versions of the piece because there are two versions of this work. One of them lasts for one hour, and one of them is a longer durational work that lasts for seven hours and 41 minutes, which is the average length of a sitting in the House of Commons.

So today, I'm going to try and talk in general about the project and the process and the material, and then more specifically I'll talk about the longer piece towards the end.

I just wanted to also mention near the start that this is a piece that had no support really when I first put it together, or very little support. It didn't have any funding or anyone – well, I always think of it as something that nobody wanted me to make or asked me to make, and having been through years of making things, I guess my reflection now is that sometimes those moments are really liberating for me. I guess this piece is an example for me of a kind of freedom of practice where there was no external expectation on the piece, except from myself and my collaborators. So it feels like an example of that in my catalogue of work, I suppose.

I'll also say that there is a terribly massive mountain of material and references and documentation and lots of ways to look at this piece or to examine the work, and I can't cover them all here. So I've selected a few. Maybe if I was going to do it next week, I would choose to talk about other things or whatever – but I hope that it will leave space for you, the viewer, to have your own process of making meaning and finding relevance or connections between the points that I'm moving through today.

So to introduce the piece, I'm going to read a short article about the work which I wrote for *The Guardian* in 2015. Just to put it into context, during that time we were just about to basically – well, actually, when I wrote this article we'd just had our General Election in 2015, after five years of Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition, and then the Conservatives had taken power again in 2015. So that's the context for this.



Okay [reads]:

Anyone who has ever watched Prime Minister's Questions, heard a budget speech or listened to a party manifesto will be familiar with the ritualistic slogan speak used to deliver policy positions in easy, bite-sized measures. It is this overly simplistic delivery that prevents engagement with the actual policies of our political administration. It writes us out of our own story through generalisation. No one can interact meaningfully with a monocultural, political-performance factory, riddled with pretence and convention, because it means nothing. When words are so cleverly disengaged from their meaning to prevent reaction or counterpoint, it remains impossible to fully understand how such soundbites might relate to the reality of living.

[Screen-shares a slide show of stills from the show, then continues reading.]

When Rosana Cade, Laura Bradshaw and I set out to make a show to highlight our disenchantment with this state of affairs, we decided to use words from actual Tory party conference speeches. In our piece, *Cock and Bull*, the material of party rhetoric is composed, patterned, repeated and developed until we exhaust both the words themselves and our capability to say them.

The process began with watching all the speeches from the 2014 Conservative party conference. In full. I had never heard so much political speak back-to-back before and, reaching the end moments of the conference, I felt overwhelmed by the presentation of mostly white, male, middle-aged, privileged voices, stuck in the blatant repetitions of catchphrase, motto and tag line.

We are the party of hard-working people! Returning fairness to the system! Fix the roof while the sun is shining!

I was first invited to create *Cock and Bull* by the Arches in Glasgow. I wanted to create a piece for the eve of the 2015 general election, responding to what I was hearing from the voices in power. I wanted to find a space for the frustrations and alienation that I and so many were feeling. With the ballots opening hours after the performance, we thought of it as a potential exorcism of sorts – spitting, chanting and drawling these words out of our bodies. The audience was energised and optimistic, teetering on the brink of potential shift. Making this work had only reinforced how polarised I felt in relation to these men in their navy suits, telling me repeatedly of a 'land of opportunity for all', which most of us will never see.

The context of this work is changing all the time. However, at its core, it remains about trying to find a way through a system that you feel does not represent you. What do you do when you feel your voice goes unheard?

If *Cock and Bull* is a kind of exorcism, then we are purging an inner life possessed by the very darkest of shadows, repeated alienation, misrepresentation and disenchantment.

This feels more meaningful, empowering and effective than many of the crosses I have drawn on ballot papers in recent years.

[Green 2017]

[00:11:59] BEGINNINGS/ INSPIRATION/ REFERENCES

Okay, so I'm now going to think about beginnings, and how I came to make this piece.

Sometimes I think it's quite hard – well, I have found it quite hard to identify a beginning, probably because I suppose lots of ideas have kind of rolled into other projects and they kind of snowball and morph and you get hangovers from things that you've already done. But I think if I had to identify a beginning, I would probably say that it started – I think it was 2013, and I was doing a little research project with the Federation of Scottish Theatre on men in power. And I actually started by looking at bankers that were involved quite directly in the financial crises, and I was looking at this and listening to their testimonies and listening to them speak, basically.



What was coming out was this culture of kind of compliance and kind of dissociation, and a very disconnected culture – like the culture that they were involved in was very disconnected from other people's lives and culture, and very immersive, if you like. There was this fear of stepping out of line in that culture and digressing from it, I suppose.

Anyway, I can't really remember how I got to it but I ended up reading this book, which is called *Wounded Leaders: British Elitism and the Entitlement Illusion*. Basically this is written by a psychotherapist who specialises on the effect of boarding schools on males – and basically he's making this case about how dangerous it is that our world, or at least our little bit of the world, is run by people with unresolved psychological issues that stem from cultures like elite education systems, and basically, these issues are playing out in their adult lives in ways that are quite catastrophic for the general public, because of the positions of elite power that they hold. And he paints this amazing picture actually, of these boys running around in grown-up clothes running the country, and that these people are – I think it's really interesting that he describes them as 'wounded' in many ways.

So anyway, I ended up reading that. And of course it just funnelled me into looking at the Tory party who were almost entirely made up of this demographic. So I ended up watching this 2014 conference in full, and I felt incredibly angry when I was watching it – and also bored and frustrated. I couldn't believe the performativity of it, I couldn't believe the repetition, I couldn't believe the pretence of it really. And I just thought, how are we taking this? Like, how are we taking this, it's just like a really lazy, bad performance! [*Laughter.*]

So I became interested in it and also, even symbolically, you know that they all wear the same things. I mean, I just found it totally extraordinary – actually I'd never looked at it very closely before, I'd always just completely disengaged with it.

So anyway, I ended up looking at them, and then of course what came up was this repetition of language – and to finish this research project I ended up asking Laura and Rosana to help me with a short vocal piece.

It was really simple, you know. We patterned them and composed them in different ways. We just stood with microphones and performed them vocally. But I suppose I was really interested, even at that time, in taking these words and pushing them out of their context, I guess, and out of their original meaning into this kind of sonic world, sonic material, that I could use to make different meanings, and that I could use to transform us in some way.

So it wasn't particularly theatrical or very impressive what we did, but I knew that I was interested in looking at it more, so I asked Rosana and Laura if they would accompany me on this process. And like I said, I didn't have any support or anything like that, so I just said: 'Do you fancy doing a bit of research together? Just low-key, no pressure.' And so we met every Tuesday night for quite a long period of time, which was actually a great way to work because I basically had all this time between our sessions where I had the time to reflect on what we had looked at and what we'd done and prepare a bit. And because of the nature of it, because we were working with these kind of rhythmic and numerical patterns and compositions, it gave me time in the week to figure it out a bit, so that we could move quickly in the time that we had.

I suppose it was also a really good way to work because some of the stuff that we learned was quite difficult to learn. It took a long time to get it into the body and the brain, and I think working in this long-form rehearsal process really did help that.

I was looking at some of the notes that I had from this time.

[*Holds up a sketch of three men in suits on plinths framed by geometrical shapes.*]

Now I can't remember what the instruction was for these, but we've all done these drawings. Can you see that? Sorry, I can see there's some light shining there. But we've all done these drawings. I think the instruction might have been something about reimagining what we did with the microphones in a different setting, or how could you take it into a different space or something, I don't know, but anyway.



And actually when I looked at these, I was really surprised – and this was quite early on – but I was so surprised at how much I can see from these drawings in the final piece. Obviously – I think Rosana has drawn this one, but I don't know – but there's these three podiums here and this kind of triangular shape. And, you know, we're working a lot with the number three and in groups of threes and patterns of threes, so the triangle obviously was in there. But actually when you look at the piece now, there are many shapes, there are many actual physical triangular shapes in the piece. I just feel like it really – we don't have these podiums, but we do elevate ourselves in different ways and we have these chairs and–

[*Holds up another staging sketch.*] Yeah, and again this one has a triangle, but also has this centre point which choreographically the whole piece is actually mapped around a centre point. The audience probably wouldn't sense this in a conscious way, but we have this centre point in our minds all the time, which means that we are positioning ourselves in a very exact way around the centre point, in different shapes and stuff. So I don't know, maybe that influenced me. I don't know.

[*Holds up another staging sketch.*] And then there's this one here which I think is a bit more of a hangover of that original thing: I've drawn three microphones, or whoever – I think this was me, but maybe it wasn't. This one is like a Commons, which in the end the piece is in traverse, and I think, yeah, it makes sense to me that somebody would have drawn this and we would have acted on that. And then we have these three chairs almost in exactly the same – if I was applying this – in exactly the same position as the start position in the piece. I think this is meant to be speakers, which is kind of how we had it in this beginning scene but – and *that*, I think, is some sort of dog. Thank goodness that didn't happen, I don't know what that was about! [*Laughter.*]

Anyway, we were obviously already at this point thinking about some of the other things that came into the work. The symbolism of this suit, of this navy suit, which you will have seen in that first video I showed of members of the Tory party in 2014 all wearing this very clear symbol of their place, I suppose. Which of course is the Tory party, but much, much bigger than that. I've done quite a bit of reading about the suit and stuff like that. It's a really important symbol for me in this work, and the really interesting thing about it – A. A. Gill wrote this article about suits, and he said that the power of the suit is in its mass. It's in the how many people adorn it, how many people choose to wear it as this uniform.

So I guess also it sort of spoke to me a bit about our unison and all of us there, but in the piece we also try to deconstruct this symbol a little bit for ourselves. But I'll talk about that more later.

I suppose other symbols that we use in the work are visuals, I guess, that we have this gold that we have on our hands and also across our mouths. There was a review – there's quite a few reviews of *Cock and Bull*, but there was one by Matt Trueman, and I liked what he said about the gold because he described it as depicting this idea of a kind of immovable statue of the Establishment, but also that it might look a bit more like Winnie the Pooh having been at the honeypot, sort of dripping from the mouth.

And also that this gold – as we move, the gold becomes smudged and it actually turns to a kind of brown, it becomes like a grime actually. It gets transferred on every surface that we touch: the audience, the suits, the chairs, the floor, our own bodies. It becomes this sort of smudge of sort of grubbiness, I guess, which I really, really like, that transformation through the work.

Actually I just think everything in the work transforms over the time. That's the point of it, I guess: that we established this thing that seems so solid and so kind of never-ending or something, but then we just allow ourselves to take it apart or let it disintegrate and fall apart.

So we are going to look at it. But before I look at it, I just wanted to also talk about some other pieces which, as I was making this with Rosana and Laura, I took a lot of inspiration from some other pieces. Often when I'm making things I have like normally a little collection of – it's like a kind of mental shrine or something of pieces that I find really inspiring and relevant in relating to the piece that I'm making.

Sometimes I also have a book, a particular book or something like that, and I just use them as a reminder when I get lost in the process or when I feel confused or I'm forgetting what I'm trying to



think about or where I'm going. I often return to these pieces, or literature, or whatever it is, just to remind me.

The first piece is by an artist called Lenka Clayton and she has made this piece called [*Qaeda*,] *Quality, Question, Quickly, Quickly, Quiet*. And this is a piece that uses George Bush's famous 'Axis of Evil' speech as a source material, which basically was the speech which was kind of justifying the Iraq War. All she's done is alphabetise it – I mean, 'all she's done', oh my gosh, what a labour of love that is! – but yeah, she's alphabetised this speech, and it is just so brilliant what she's done.

Let me show you a bit...

This is Lenka Clayton.

[00:24:52 to 00:26:17] Excerpt from Lenka Clayton's *Qaeda Quality Question Quickly Quickly Quiet* (2002)

Okay. I would watch it all if there was more time. I think when I saw Lenka Clayton's piece, I just felt that it was a brilliant – I mean, I just thought how simple it is to alphabetise this, because actually it does mean a lot how many times he says 'weapon'. But when it's wrapped up in a speechwriter's tricks and sort of spin, maybe you don't notice it. Actually, maybe it is really great for someone to just show me how many times certain words are said, and that there is a lot of meaning in the repetition of that, in how many times in one speech. I found it really, really powerful, and actually a really powerful tool to dismantle the conventions that are used in this delivery of language. So I loved that.

The other piece that I'm an absolutely humongous fan of is a piece called *Chain of Command*, which was written by Graham Fitkin, and it's performed by Joby Burgess of Powerplant. And basically it's again taken from a George W. Bush speech. And again, the language has been sort of deconstructed and then sampled, and then the samples have been patched into an instrument called a xylosynth, which allows Joby to play this composition of the words.

So I'll just try and share that just a little bit...

[00:27:48 to 00:29:00] Excerpt from Graham Fitkin and Joby Burgess *Chain of Command* (2018)

Again, I just want to watch it all, but it is quite long. But I actually really encourage you to have a look at that. It's on Graham Fitkin's website and it's just gorgeous, the journey of it. It just ends in all this noise and then this last really poignant word, which I won't say – but it's very nice.

Anyway, that's another piece that was – I just was sort of thinking about the power of actually just showing you the words in a different way. Just helping me see what the person said, but in a different way. So of course, the meaning of what he said is different when it has been deconstructed and reconstructed, but it's still – and you know, there is an agenda to it, in terms of what Fitkin's done with it and stuff like that. But it still helps me recontextualise this language, and actually, it helps me understand what I think about that speech, which I think is what *Cock and Bull* is about. It's a space to understand what do you think about these things that these people say – I mean it's partly about that, I think.

So I feel like these two pieces are really good examples of how they offer me that space to do that, and I find it very powerful. I've actually been to see the *Chain of Command* piece twice because I just am so excited by it. I just find it so amazing.

And the other piece, the other sort of reference that I have – which I can't find any good documentation of this – but maybe some people might remember it from National Review of Live Art a long time ago. It was a company called Los Torreznos, a duo. They used – for instance they would do these quite, I suppose, kinetic sequences, where they would walk around in circles really quickly counting, just counting [*laughs*]: 'One-two-three-four-five', you know, in unison.

In some sense, the act of counting numbers didn't necessarily offer the same political content or whatever as the other pieces I've referenced, but the energy – they have this energy in the space, this kind of unified energy of movement and voice. And just the drive of that has always stayed with me, and I did think of them a lot in making this work.



[00:31:25] THE PIECE: LANGUAGE, STRUCTURE AND CHANGE

I think in general it's just the power of things being abstracted from their context, so they can just hang there, and give the viewer this space to reflect on how they feel about it, I guess I was searching for things like that.

The other thing I suppose in the making of it, the other references, there is a kind of minimalist sensitivity in the piece. [Laughter.] I mean, other people might use different ways to describe it, like, you know, 'terribly repetitive' or whatever! But you can't think of those things without thinking of people like Steve Reich or other minimalist composers who tried to deal with these techniques in their forms.

So I had this little collection of techniques that I would try different words or phrases too. One of them is phasing, which Steve Reich is very famous for working with phasing in his work, and that that's basically like imagining a unison part and then imagining, let's say, two people as singing a phrase together and imagining one person just going like a little bit one beat in front and then moving forward again and again until potentially you can come back together again. So it can create these cycles, I suppose, of disbanding from one another and then meeting again.

A really good visual representation of this is performed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker in some of her work to Steve Reich's music, so it's really, really good to see that in a visual sense. And so that was one technique that we use actually more in the long version.

It's really, really, really hard: it takes a lot of concentration to stay with it and I'm not like an amazing musician or anything like that. None of us are really, so we had to work extra hard on that.

Augmentation is another one that we used, which basically, simply extends the values of the notes or the tones or the words or whatever, in terms of time, or decreases them or does the opposite of that. Hocketing, which is where a phrase might be passed in syllables or words between two people. You can see this a lot in the work of Meredith Monk, for instance, or Dirty Projectors use it a lot, or the artist Hanna Tuulikki, who I've also worked with, she uses hocketing in some of her pieces.

Addition and subtraction is about adding parts into a phrase to extend it or taking them away, which is basically the basis of the structure of *Cock and Bull*. At times, things are being added on as other things are being taken away, and things like that. Reconstructing, which is moving the parts of the phrase around, which is happening beautifully in Joby Burgess and Lenka Clayton and things like that – and also does happen in *Cock and Bull*.

All of these structures are used definitely in the long version, and most of them are used in one way or another in the shorter version. So what I thought I'd do is show what we would describe as the first phase of *Cock and Bull*. There's a ten or 12-minute introduction, which I'll skip past, but basically the introduction sort of frames us embodying this world of a male politician by taking it on, in our bodies. It kind of establishes some of these symbols like these golden hands and a suit and also our voice – so we bring our voices down in that first ten minutes. We did quite a lot of work on lowering the register of our voice over the time that we made it. And I do think that we did hit at least a tone or two lower than what we were able to access in the beginning. Which was really interesting, you know, just like extending that vocal range over time.

I'm going to show what we would call 'The first phase', and I am going to subject you to the entirety of it, which is about ten minutes, but I think it's good to see in real time. I just think it is.

So in this section I suppose we're trying to establish this rhythmic backbone and this pattern of phrase and mode. And also we're trying to establish this – well, we already kind of have, in a way – but this very togetherness between the three of us. So I'll just play it, if I can.

Okay, right. Here we go:

[Switches to screen-share – a still from *Cock and Bull* video.]

Here we go. Like I said, I'm going to show from about ten minutes in, and we're going to watch what we would describe as 'the first phase'. Everything in *Cock and Bull* for us is either a phase, a loop, a



shape or an interruption of some sort. And of course, you know, like everyone doing what we do, we have certain titles to help us navigate our way through that. Anyway, this is 'Phase One'...

[00:36:45 to 00:48:20] Excerpt 'Phase One' from *Cock and Bull* (2017)

So that was 'The first phase', as we would call it, followed by what we called 'The knee song', which was this quicker patterned 'hard working people/ people who work hard', which was named after the little interludes in the Philip Glass opera *Einstein on the Beach*.

Watching it now, it's interesting to watch it just standing here in my home because I can still – I just know when the changes are coming even if I'm not counting along. Just the bodily memory of those patterns is really, really ingrained, and we worked hard for that because the first few times we performed it we were counting like mad, just trying to get the counts ready. But it's actually quite a stressful thing to have to count, it's very easy to be slightly distracted by the movement of an audience member or something going slightly wrong or a discomfort in the body or whatever and then you lose it. So we ended up just drilling it on a repetition to the point that we didn't really need to intellectualise the patterns too much in the – and of course every now and then you have an off day and you have to go back to counting, and in the long version, you have to count because it is so, so long you can't possibly remember. And you know, we found other strategies of cue points and stuff for that. But I think it was important for us to get past the counting into something different together, partly because I just felt like we needed to be this unflinching machine. I think you can tell when we're counting. [Laughter.] I think you can, I think you can. There's a little lack of confidence that I think is very clear when it's there – and it does happen to all three of us, it happens at different times in the show. You don't always feel like on top of your game or whatever.

Also, the other thing about it was – the main note actually for the whole piece, all the time, was just: 'Don't work too hard. Don't work too hard, let the material do the work.' If the performers start having to push the material, it loses its power to me. So always the sort of structure and the build and the drive of the material, the rhythms and the looping and the layers – that was the work. In a sense, we were just on the vehicle driving along in it, but the engine is the structure, is the material.

So I don't know, I think it's also the performance of this slight kind of arrogance. I mean, you really do feel the audience silently groaning in that first phase because, you know, the poor – that was at Southbank Centre and you did get the sense that some people had just come along to see a show, and they're just like: 'Oh god, are they just going to do this?' [Laughter.]

It's that kind of arrogance of holding your own in that space. And it has to be that because of what we're referencing, like we have to just do what we've decided with no care for what anybody else thinks. It has to be austere and it has to be repetitive and it has to be kind of uncomfortable and exhausting and kind of arrogant because of what we're trying to address, because of the thing that we're trying to deal with. I think it does get a bit easier for them after that phase.

So maybe I'll just show you a little tiny bit of going into 'The second phase'. Just to say that this first phase is trying to establish this supposedly solid and unified system or mode between the three of us. In the second phase that does continue, but we just start really – slightly – to dismantle some of those things, like start to dismantle the costumes, start to dismantle the language or leave space or that kind of thing. So I'll maybe just show you a very short bit.

[00:52:50 to 00:55:54] Excerpt 'Phase Two' from *Cock and Bull* (2017)

So I'll maybe just skip through a little bit just to show you... [Fast-forwards video.]

This is 'The third phase'. And just to show you this sort of development, I guess, of what happens... [Plays video and speaks over it.]

You'll be able to sense a change of pace here that is probably a little bit more imperceptible watching it real time, but we're concentrating on the pacing together quite a lot and bringing it up a little bit at certain key points. And you'll see we've started to kind of digress from each other a little bit. It gets a bit more tiring. The suits are starting to change in their appearance, we're starting to change. [Stops video.]



Something I want to say about it as well, just looking at it there, is that every thing in this piece, like everything in this piece, is stolen or borrowed or found or whatever you want to call it. Nothing is generated in that way at all. [Laughter.] Actually, I often think I'm not very good at making things up, which is embarrassing to say as an artist! But I feel like I'm more like a composer or somebody making a collage or something in general, especially in this piece.

Obviously the language is taken from the Tory party conference, although not all of it. There's a little bit – so most of it's taken from that, just those key phrases that are in the piece like 'hard-working people', 'people that work hard', 'fix the roof while the sun is shining', 'Jaguar', 'Land Rover', things like this that are on repeat in their speeches.

Also there's some language taken from a poster that comes later that says: 'You get up early. You work hard. You save. You do the right thing.' Something like that. And then there's one more bit of text that isn't from the Tory party, it's the only bit of text that isn't from them – oh, that's not true, actually. But yes, the only bit of this type of text that isn't from them, it's taken from a documentary that I watched about people who were living in fuel poverty. It's a really upsetting watch, and again, a bit like some of the similar emotions actually to watching the conference, you know, made me feel really angry and really upset and really frustrated and hopeless.

But there's a bit of text that I borrowed from that, where somebody says: 'It's always been hard. But this year it's not been hard, it's been impossible.' And I just wanted this other version of 'hard', even though it's not clear where that comes from or anything in the piece, but I just felt like: 'No, that – *that's* hard.' I just felt like I needed this other version, I needed this other description of that word that had a different, lived understanding of that, I think. And so that's in it.

And then other stuff that is lifted is – basically we used 'Dido's Lament', which is a very famous opera aria from the end of *Dido and Aeneas*. And I don't know why – I was trying to remember why before I did this, and I was like: 'Did David Cameron do it on his *Desert Island Discs* or something?' So I was looking through that, but it's not that. Maybe another politician mentioned it or something, I'm not sure. But anyway, we use this, it's a very beautiful and opulent aria, but basically for the majority of its use I actually use a stripped-back piano-played version. The sort of repetitive piano loops that you hear under the text in the piece is the bassline basically deconstructed, and then it's extending in the different phases. Again, I just wanted to like have this idea of this beautiful sort of opulent thing that you could get lost in – but in complete austerity. [Laughter.] That's what I wanted it to be like, so we used it like that.

Sometimes we do use the full piano version and also at the end we do – oh no, we don't! In the long version we use the full operatic version, I think we felt we deserved it or something! But in the short version we don't, we only use this really austere stripped-back version. Maybe not everybody would recognise that, but it's meaningful to us. Even the movement is borrowed. Much of it is just taken from hand gestures of politicians, which I think is quite clear.

I think it'd be good to talk – yeah, I'm going to talk a bit about change in the piece now, because I think also there's this kind of monotony to it, there's this repetition to it, actually, change is really, really important in it. [Laughter.]

To us it's never staying the same – well, because it isn't. Maybe if you look at it, you know, like from far away, in a broad brush stroke, it might seem like the same thing is happening, but it's not: there are many, many details that are added into every loop, and things about where the eyes are or what the hands are doing, and then more obvious changes. There's a really, really big change in the piece, which is a total change of tone and shift of everything really – mode, delivery. When we were making the piece, we were discovering this pattern with this 'hard-working people' and at the same time we were messing about with this really gratuitous material of, like, much more on the satirical scale, I suppose, of just arsing about being these idiots. I don't know, the idea of these idiot politician men, spraying champagne – I think it was Lidl cava or something that we had – but you know what I mean, this kind of, oh I don't know, just gregariousness or something.

I never actually thought they would come together. I thought for ages: 'Oh we need to make a choice here about which direction this piece is going in, because these two modes can't possibly live in the



same work!' But actually it came about that they do. And this little bit of change in it is really needed and necessary because the repetition in the main body of the work does wear us down. It wears us down but it also wears the audience down, I think. Which again it has to have a bit of that – that's the point. But we need a change to stay with it, to keep going with the bigger journey of the piece and also this change that we – this satire space that we move into. For us, we could lose our power as makers, as artists with agency or whatever in the piece if we just let it run itself into the ground. Do you know what I mean? It could all lose its power.

So in a way, this moment helps us to take it back in a different way in the piece, but also in a bigger way, I guess, because we *are* just doing a massive 'eff you' and taking the piss satire. I guess, yeah, it's like exercising a small amount of agency in a system that tries to completely take it away from you. That is why we have satire, I guess, because it is a way of accessing that agency.

So this moment in the piece, it comes as a bit of a surprise, it changes the energy of the piece. It changes our relationship with the audience in quite a dramatic way because the only time we've had any direct contact is when we say: 'People, people, people, people...', when we allow ourselves to look at people in the eyes. But in this section, this change, we really do have much more direct contact.

Also it's quite tiring, for instance, it changes our respiratory patterns, it changes our body temperature. And that, in turn, affects our ability to say this text or the way that we say this text, because we keep on saying the text all the time. So it changes, and you might notice that this low register that we've worked so hard to keep, it just slips away during this because once you get out of breath, it tends to return to your comfortable range.

So yes, there's a lot of things that shift in it and it feels really, really important, and it was a surprise to me that it would ever be in it. So I'll just show you. I'll maybe skip through some of it because just because basically we do it twice because we just think: 'Fuck it, we can.' I think it's that kind of gratuity in the truest sense of, like: 'I can do this, so I will.' So yeah, we make people watch it twice.

[01:05:22 to 01:11:56] Excerpt from *Cock and Bull* – a satirical movement sequence

I'm just going to skip on a wee bit... [*Fast-forwards, then continues to play to the end of section.*] So, just to show you... [*Plays the next section of the video and comments over it.*] We do return to this vocal pattern again, in a different way. You can see even on the video that we're quite altered in our physicality now. And we come back to this physical pattern as well.

[*Stops video.*]

So I just wanted to show that about how the different modes and changes, and how we can allow this – I don't know what the word is – with this transitional space of that having sex, basically fucking everything you can see space. Also it really reminds me again of this guy [*holds up Wounded Leaders book*] talking about these boys dressed as adults – and I really feel like I think of that when I see that. But yeah, how this how this transition can help us return again to that material and look at it again in a different way, see it again in a fresh way.

[01:12:43] MEGAN VAUGHAN '5 TIMES I TRIED TO WRITE ABOUT COCK AND BULL'

Okay, so the thing that I wanted to look at is actually a blog entry that Megan Vaughan wrote called 'Five times I tried to write about *Cock and Bull*', and I'm just going to get it up. Let's have a wee look.

So I'm going to skip some bits because it's a bit long and we don't need to maybe hear all of it. Her post is called 'Five times I tried to write about *Cock and Bull*', because Megan's actually been to see it quite a bit. The first time we did the durational one, she was one of the people that didn't – I mean, I think she only left once and it's a long day! [*Laughter.*] So she actually knows the material very, very well.

This is the second time she tried to write about it [*reads*]:



Cock and Bull is an hour-long performance by Nic Green, performed by Nic with Laura Bradshaw and Rosana Cade. It takes soundbites from the 2014 Tory party conference – empty slogans and smug retorts – and reconstitute them into an exorcism – reprising and distorting.

Number three: The best thing I've seen so far this year has been *Cock and Bull* by Nic Green with Laura Bradshaw and Rosana Cade. I've seen it four times now. I have a seemingly endless capacity to watch it. What's interesting to me, I think, is the way it presents itself, apparently so simply. Just three people, repeating small soundbites of Tory party rhetoric, working out to its rhythms. And yet you could carve the whole show into ten-second chunks and each one would say at least five things: about exploitation, greed, love, lies, men, women, consumerism, motherhood, paternalism, freedom, desperation, song.

And then you'd plug those ten-second chunks back together again and it would say new, different things about all of those subjects, but also more: about memory, labour, performance, resistance, exhaustion, the inevitability of collapse.

Number four: I've tried to write some notes on what happens in *Cock and Bull*, partly as an aid for future writing, and partly because it's a show with a kind of confounding journey. In one way, the performers embody such a clear and present narrative, communicated so viscerally and so immediately, but in another, their words and actions are built like a game of Tetris or something – they are like construction pieces – which could go in any order. And maybe, in my memory, they kind of do.

This is what I think happens, in the order I think it happens in:

[Pauses.]

And then Megan's written this list of what she thinks happens [*continues to read*]:

Rosana hello>>x three different looping tracks>>gold hands, gold mouths>>all three wheniamwheniamwheniamwheniam>>long haaaaas gradually becoming harrrrr harrrrrd hard>>voguing poses>>hands in the light>>working hard working hard>>'

And actually she's nearly perfect, and but she's also included things that I haven't ever written down, like about gasps and howling, 'arms upwards, tip toes', 'sacrificial', 'walking as if to a pulpit', 'sometimes statuesque, sometimes just shitty'. Yep, so I like her additions there.

Then she says:

There's another bit the bit that goes: "Pistons firing. Pistons firing in all parts of our economy." It's especially strange that I can't remember where that bit goes now, because when I was watching it the last time it came to me just a split second before they did it, like the way you can suddenly hear the start of the next track on an album that you love, even before it starting, almost before the end of the track before. The last time I watched it my brain knew that bit, and now I'm not sure where to insert it. The Tetris is reordering itself. ...

The first time I saw *Cock and Bull*, we'd had a Tory government for a year, but it already felt like much longer than that. Maybe this was because the previous Coalition was Tory in everything but name, or maybe it was because politics is just so fucking *exhausting*.

The second time I saw *Cock and Bull* I was coming to terms with the result of the Brexit referendum of three weeks earlier

The third and fourth times I saw *Cock and Bull* were only a day apart, and I had been dislocated from all time and space and social relations. I don't know what politics was happening. I don't know anything apart from that square half-mile to the north east of Edinburgh. It was like a compression chamber, a self-imposed quarantine.

The second time I saw *Cock and Bull*, a woman cried out for it to stop. It was the running bit. The bit where it's hard to watch and breathe at the same time.

The fourth time I saw call *Cock and Bull*, one of the chairs broke. A series of alterations diversions deviations followed. Glimpses into their working friendship and their care of one another.



The first time I saw called *Cock and Bull* it was about memory, the passage of time and the loss of hope.

The second time I saw *Cock and Bull* it was about the silent endurance of hardship (by women).

The third time I saw *Cock and Bull* it was a brutal deconstruction of machismo.

The fourth time I saw *Cock and Bull* it was about love.

[Vaughan 2016]

So – I wanted to just read some of that because I feel like Megan articulates something that I am still maybe struggling [with]. Well, she's helping me articulate something about it that I want to reflect on, and that is that she comes back to it over and over again. The piece actually is still the same structure mostly, I mean the audience would not recognise the changes that we make – even Megan, I think. But she just really identifies that this piece can have this role in a shifting context and help you re-evaluate the context that you are living in, and it just reminds me that that is what art does for me in my life – particularly performance – and that that's why it's special. The only thing that changes is you and the context that you were in, in this instance anyway.

And also that *Cock and Bull* for us, the performers, has become this kind of holding tank, this sort of barometer, or like a container, and it holds all of this stuff every time we go back to it: this constantly changing and sometimes devastating political landscape that is unfolding and is continuing to unfold now. Snap elections and Brexit referendums and all of this stuff, actually it's become – or it was for those four years that we performed it – this space for us to deal with that. It's not that the piece wants to tell us, or anyone what to do about it. [Laughter.] Or even what to think about it really, although I would think it'd be disingenuous to say it didn't have any agenda. But yes, it doesn't want to tell people what to think about it. We're not trying to make like this effectively political piece, but we're trying to turn the effects of this political world into 'affect' in this space, if that makes sense. Trying to push this deluge of language, which is all around us all the time if you listen for it, beyond its original meanings and beyond its original context, and push it into something else that is felt in the room.

For me there's something about transforming these words, just these frustrating, repetitive, monotonous phrasings. It's something about transforming them into something else that could be interpreted as hopeful, depending on how you're watching it. That is important to me in this piece.

I also think Megan captures this really great thing that actually I haven't really thought about before until I read it again recently. This thing about live performance that she describes it as 'this Tetris', that things happen in a certain order, in a certain way, and you can take them away and look at them as bite-size chunks but it is the sum of their parts that makes the experience. Of course, if you work in devising theatre, you know that you can be frightened about doing something and just think it is so crap, but suddenly you find the right space for it and it takes on a whole new world and it has a new agency and relationship to other things. And yeah, the sort of systemic nature of making this kind of work in that way. I feel like she really points that out in it. But it really made me think about how difficult it is to disentangle those parts. Like she can't find where 'pistons firing', she can't identify when that happened even though she knew it in the moment. And it made me think about where we are now, in 2020, and what Tetris am I in? And I haven't fully – none of us could have known the shape of what has been, of what is being built piece by piece, because some of those pieces are incredibly quiet or you don't notice them or their shape is imperceptible or the shape that they hold in relationship to other stuff is imperceptible on its own. But now here we are: here we are in this Tetris. And so I hadn't really thought about that in that way, and now I can't stop thinking about it!

[01:23:24] 'GOOD LUCK, EVERYONE'

I'm just going to talk very briefly about the long version because I haven't talked specifically about it.

We basically made it because I always thought I couldn't decide if it should be a really long-form piece or a short thing that you could show at festivals easier and venues easier. So I made the shorter one because it fitted in with the contexts that were available for us to present in at the time,



but at the back of my mind, I always wanted to make a longer one. So when the opportunity came up to do it, we did it.

It is the same in a way, in some ways, as the short version. There is no improvisation in it. So for seven hours – well apart from this end bit, which I'll talk about – but for the majority of that time it's highly structured, learned, patterned work in unison, or in close-patterned collaboration. So it is hard, but very amazing to do. There's just two of us who do that, and that happened just because of circumstance, in the first instance, but actually it became clear that it should have always been two in the long version because actually the concentration in the space is so prolonged and so high, [that] with two people if something goes wrong you can sort out non-verbally – sometimes imperceptibly – quite quickly. With three, it's harder, it's just harder. So I think it's really good that there's two of us.

The other thing to say is I've been surprised at the audience in these long ones. I've been surprised by how willing they are to endure it with us, because it does feel like that sometimes in it. Some of the loops, there's this one loop of that bassline, the second phase, that just goes on for about 90 minutes or an hour and it is quite wearing. But a lot of people do seem quite able and willing to endure it with us and I do just think it's probably just because maybe it's mirroring something else that we're enduring and it's – yeah, maybe it's doing that, I'm not sure. Or maybe they just want to see how, where it goes.

Anyway, at the end of the piece, we say: 'Good luck, everyone', which we do in the short version but we say it on repeat for a very short period of time. But in the long version we say: 'Good luck, everyone', for a little over one hour. And this is a bit different: it's the only time that the rules of what we can do are a little bit looser. There are still rules there, and the rules are that we must always be in physical contact with one another, we should have our eyes closed, and we should try to say it together if we can. So, I mean, in a way, it's still quite limited, but it's just a little bit looser.

I just want to talk about this moment, in doing that, the first time we did it, which was at Buzzcut where it's the only moment – I mean, I haven't done millions and millions of performances – but it's the only moment in my experience of being in performances where I've forgotten what I was doing or I've forgotten that I was being watched, basically. Which I have thought since then was a really, really, really special moment to be in: to completely lose yourself in this sort of chanting with another person. Just this connection with another person.

The only experience I've had like it is giving birth, actually. [Laughter.] I mean, yeah, it wasn't as extreme in *Cock and Bull*! But just this soft tunnelled space where you are just with this person and just concentrating on this one thing, and that you just sort of fold into it together, and there you are. And then there's a musical cue towards the end, which tells us that we're nearly finished, which woke me up – and then I realised that I had just forgotten that I was being watched. Amazing really! I think it would be very disingenuous for me to pretend that I don't imagine that I'm being watched when I'm performing, I think that's bollocks. Of course I do. That's what it's all about. But yeah, this particular moment I lost that awareness.

Anyway, just to finish. I'm going to show a short video of that that end moment in the long piece. It's not the moment where I forgot I was being watched. I don't have a video of that. This is in Toronto, last year in January. It's Rosana and I, although we do perform the long one in different constellations but this one is Rosana and I – and yes, I am very tired in this one. I am still breastfeeding and have my little baby with me in Canada, and it was a challenge. But I did it, we got through it! Good job Rosana was there! [Laughter.]

So let me just share that, and then I will finish. So thank you, very much, for listening.

[01:28:43 to 01:32:52] 'Good luck, everyone' excerpt from the long version of *Cock and Bull* (2019)

Transcription by Nick Awde



Clips Summary

- [00:00:23 to 00:02:56] Tory Party Conference 2013: Hardworking Bingo ([YouTube](#))
[00:24:52 to 00:26:17] Lenka Clayton's *Quaeda Quality Question Quickly Quickly Quiet* (2002)
[00:27:48 to 00:29:00] Graham Fitkin and Joby Burgess *Chain of Command* (2008)
[00:36:45 to 00:48:20] 'Phase One' from *Cock and Bull* (2017)
[00:52:50 to 00:55:54] 'Phase Two' from *Cock and Bull* (2017)
[01:05:22 to 01:11:56] Satirical movement sequence from *Cock and Bull* (2017)
[01:28:43 to 01:32:52] 'Good luck, everyone' from the long version of *Cock and Bull* (2019)

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Audio available at www.auralia.space/laboratory2-nicgreen/.

To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Salazar Cardona, Juan Felipe; Green, Nic (2021) LMYE Laboratory #2: Nic Green - The Making of Cock and Bull (2015), *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.14013647.v1>.

