

frantic assembly
10 year anniversary



— Hymns —

by Chris O'Connell

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO HYMNS

For students (aged 15+), teachers & arts educationalists.

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1. Why?

Why do this education pack?

Frantic Assembly have always been committed to education. As the company was not formed through a traditional route access has always been a major issue for us and education packs are just one more way of getting the work out there.

Following the success of the *Peepshow* and *Rabbit* projects our hope is that this education pack can offer a detailed insight into the making and reworking of *Hymns*. It aims to offer an enhanced understanding of the creative history of the show as well as inspiring teachers and students in their interest in physical theatre.

As we have developed a reputation for devised theatre we hope this pack will be an asset to students and teachers as they begin their own devising processes particularly at levels AS and A2. We hope it is a valuable contribution to students and teachers looking to study both a contemporary production and a published text. The pack offers a practice insight into our working methods, our directing and performance techniques and the general ethos behind the company.

I have included a section of suggested physical activities and essay questions towards the end of this pack. As you know the needs and abilities of your students it is hoped that this pack should serve as a spring board for your own work.

Why do Hymns again?

We had been wondering how to celebrate our 10th birthday. How can we make it feel special? How can we do something that marks our development yet can also point to the future? At the same time we had a disproportionate number of requests to resurrect *Hymns*. The set was in storage for possible international touring but there had always been a feeling of unfinished business about the show. It struck us that resurrecting and reworking *Hymns* would be a fantastic way of celebrating this landmark.

So what is so special about Hymns?

Well, first, it hurts. It hurts a lot. And I guess we must be masochists. It is a very physically demanding show that burns and bruises the body. And somehow we found that fun.

Secondly, it was an incredibly successful show that struck an emotional chord despite the fact that we never really felt we got it right. We felt there was still a lot of potential in the idea and that it would be fascinating to return to it with wiser heads.

Hymns and training

The performers have to condition their bodies to the rigours of the show, to build up strength as well as cope with the pain of crashing around a metal set with a climbing harness digging into their back. It was important in rehearsals to take things slowly. Warm ups were gradually increased and specifically targeted arms, shoulders and backs. The number of press ups and sit ups, for example, would increase daily at a manageable rate, giving us a sense of development as, despite the greater number, we would notice that they never got any more difficult. Warm ups were very important for bonding and building a group confidence. This is important because if you want a cast to achieve something physically demanding it is crucial not to let those demands crush the performers at the beginning. This is more difficult at the moment as the new performers have half the amount of time to develop as the original cast did. Even so the ethos of the rehearsal room is still about development.



2. The Original Idea

Extracts taken from the original programme notes...

The idea of an all male show was one we had discussed several years ago, when it was decided that we would wait until the time felt right. After completing the generation trilogy we decided to take the step towards a stronger narrative structure for 'Sell Out', simultaneously suggesting that the male show would be next, if we felt we could set up the right set of practitioners to work with.

Liam Steel was the first choice for *Hymns*, having a strong background in both theatre and dance and a seven year history with DV8. In making *Hymns* it was important for us to avoid the clichés of male representation on stage so collaborating with Liam seemed perfect given the extent of his work involving men and their sexual politics. In combining his experience alongside our own (with companies such as The Featherstonehaughs) we worked at creating a fresh and honest depiction of four male friends at the end of the century....

Towards the end of rehearsals there were some anxieties about the show - if it runs under 60 mins do we really consider throwing in the Ricky Martin routine we learned for a laugh? Where is the usual techno soundtrack? Is there enough sweat in the second half? Where's my monologue? and several others as more Frantic trademarks fell by the wayside. What remains is the product of an open, creative, honest and fearless group of practitioners who committed themselves to the aim of producing a truly contemporary piece tackling the dual issues of men and death.

We'd like to thank the Frantic *Hymns* team for the long, long hours, the constant ability to look forward and the priceless quality of always being able to find it amusing.

Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett - October 1999

Like most of our shows, *Hymns* was inspired by the conversations and thoughts that we were sharing at the time. The general notion of a show concerning male issues gradually started to take shape as a piece about male responses to suicide, death and grieving. Apart from the personal experiences of grieving that came along that year there was also a fascinating BBC Panorama documentary and an Observer article on the disproportionate number of suicides amongst young males. This crystallised many of our thoughts and convinced us that the time was right to tackle the issue.

Our main fear was to sound like or just be dismissed as whinging men. This is the fear that put this project back a couple of years but that in itself taught us a major issue of the show - it is one thing to berate men for not showing their feelings, it is another to commit to a conducive environment that would allow men to do so. Simply put, 'don't ask someone to talk if you are not prepared to listen'.





Photograph: John Haynes

Design Concept

The Set

The set is made out of ladders creating the illusion of ascending ever upwards. A cold metal table. Five metal chairs.

The ideas for the design came from early discussions in the rehearsal room. We talked about the harsh rules of status in the male world, the imperative to succeed and climb higher. We talked a lot about death and how its finality is almost beyond comprehension and how its rituals stay with us as images burnt into our retinas.

The ladders and the table allowed fleeting religious images to appear as we see the thoughts that haunt the four characters. We see angels appear, we see men desperate to escape gravity, we see a man desperate to reverse the actions of a friend's suicide, straining to hold up his lifeless body.

What the ladders also offered was an element of risk. As *Hymns* was about four men struggling to communicate we had to get a taste of their fear. When they are close to taking a risk with communicating their feelings we find them also taking physical risks. Through this we can equate the physical danger of what is being presented theatrically with the emotional danger the characters are faced with.

The Table and Chairs - This naturalistic setting is also a useful source of cultural signifiers. Images conjure references to *The Last Supper* and its moment of betrayal. Even the empty chair reminds us of the dead. In some religions this chair is present at meal times, kept clear for the return/arrival of Jesus. Here it is a reminder of loss and guilt as their unspoken obsession with it shows the guys have not moved on and for Scott, in particular, it is like Banquo's empty seat, screaming his own guilt.

The Lights

We wanted the lighting to capture the mood of the funeral, to heighten moments of individual introspection. As this is not a naturalistic set the lighting could help guide the audience's focus around the space and continually create the atmosphere that grows from the tension between the men.

Another important role was in portraying the passing of time. In the scene *Lullaby* light appears to pour through a window and spill onto one of the guys. Not only does this highlight the individual within the group but it also, quite naturalistically, evokes a certain time of day. Several times through the scene the light fades out and reappears at a different angle on a different character. This slightly disorientating effect becomes less about naturalism yet still suggests the passing of a lengthy period of time without a word being said. All in three minutes of stage time. (See *Accidents and Creativity*).

The Script

Working with Chris we set ourselves the difficult task of making an eloquent production about inarticulacy. Chris had to tread the fine line of writing dialogue full of banalities without ending up with a banal script. We had to convince him that the physicality would be the principal communicator to the audience, that the sensitivity of these characters would come through their silence and not exposition. It would only be at the end when they have forced themselves into a corner that they have to speak and really let their feelings out.

This is a great risk for a writer. More and more theatre productions are reviewed as literary events first and theatrical events second. Both Chris and ourselves knew we were in danger of getting a critical pasting if the production was seen purely in this way.

We are indebted to Chris's bravery, vision and trust in creating a script for this production. It was great to work with a writer committed to writing for theatrical possibilities rather than the printed page.

Liam Steel



3. Updating the Script

Revisiting *Hymns* gave us the opportunity to improve physicality but also to reassess the script. It gave Chris and us the chance to see if there was a clearer, more efficient relationship between text and movement. All of this was very exciting but there was a more obvious reason to rework the script - we were in our mid twenties when we made the show. We are now in our early thirties!

Time alters your perspective and we wanted the script to feel contemporary and not a curiosity from 1999. We were not doing this production to give a glimpse of the people we were 5 and a half years ago. The script had to reflect our current ages and our current perspectives as a person's relationship with death does change constantly as one gets older.

As Chris was not available for the actual rehearsal period we had to put our work with him in at a very early stage. We held meetings during the summer to try to get our heads into gear, talking about all the things we would like to try.

It was much later, after a redraft that Liam had an idea about a significant plot change. We chatted about its implications within the story and that night typed up the proposed revisions to see if they made sense to Chris. What follows are excerpts from that letter.

Dec 04

Jimmy is depressed. Long term depression. Clinical depression.

The night before his suicide he is visited by Scott. A surprise visit maybe. Scott has told no one else about this visit. As far as everyone else is concerned Scott is still away, earning his big bucks, buying, selling, and shagging his secretary.

The problem is Steven has seen Scott's car at Jimmy's and he knows that Scott hasn't bothered to get in touch with the rest of them. Then there is Jimmy's subsequent suicide.

So Steven knows that Scott was there and is pretending he has had no contact. Why is he doing this? Why is he blanking his friends when they haven't seen each other for so long? Steven knows this is a fake reunion and Scott has a 'secret'. He just doesn't know the true details yet. He has no idea of the scale and how he and the others will be affected by the subsequent revelation.

Karl is traumatised. He found Jimmy. More than that he has a message on his phone from Jimmy asking him to come over on the evening Jimmy died. Karl never picked up his message. Not until the next day when it was too late and the message becomes an accusatory voice from beyond the grave. He never went to Jimmy's when he was needed.

People know this. There are general whisperings of what could have happened if Karl had had his phone on, how he mustn't blame himself, how he must feel terrible, etc. This is driving him mad as much as the images of Jimmy that continually haunt him. As far as he knows he was the one, if anyone, who could have saved Jimmy. He could have left his phone on. He could have gone over there. He could have been a better friend. He does not know, of course, that Scott was there that night. And although Steven knows Scott was there he wants to slowly get that information out of Scott in front of everyone.

This is the secret that Steven tries to work out of Scott. There is a mental battle raging between these two once close friends. (*Guyscrapers* becomes much darker with this in mind. The 'secret' is a much bigger issue. 'When was the last time you were up?' becomes a bomb of a line!).

The revelation works like this...

Steven picks at Scott until he has to confess he was there. This is obviously massive news for Karl who has been allowed to wallow in his guilt by Scott (and, interestingly, Steven). As Scott and Karl clash we find out more about Scott's visit to Jimmy...

Jimmy had asked Scott to stay. A reasonable request from a mate in need. Scott could have done this even though there may have been a pressing need to slip back to his job, etc. But Jimmy needed more. He asks Scott to stay the night in his bed. To hold him while he sleeps. This is the line Scott can't step over. This is too weird. He makes his excuses, says it will be ok, don't be silly, get a good nights sleep, etc. Jimmy then phones Karl. Karl doesn't respond until the next morning.

There is a direct question being raised. 'What would you have done? In that situation?' e.g.

"Why didn't you stay?"

"He wanted me to... share the bed... to... to hold him. In his bed... I couldn't..."

This invites the audience to consider the difference between words and action. Good intentions mean nothing if you can't carry them out. It is not the thought that counts...

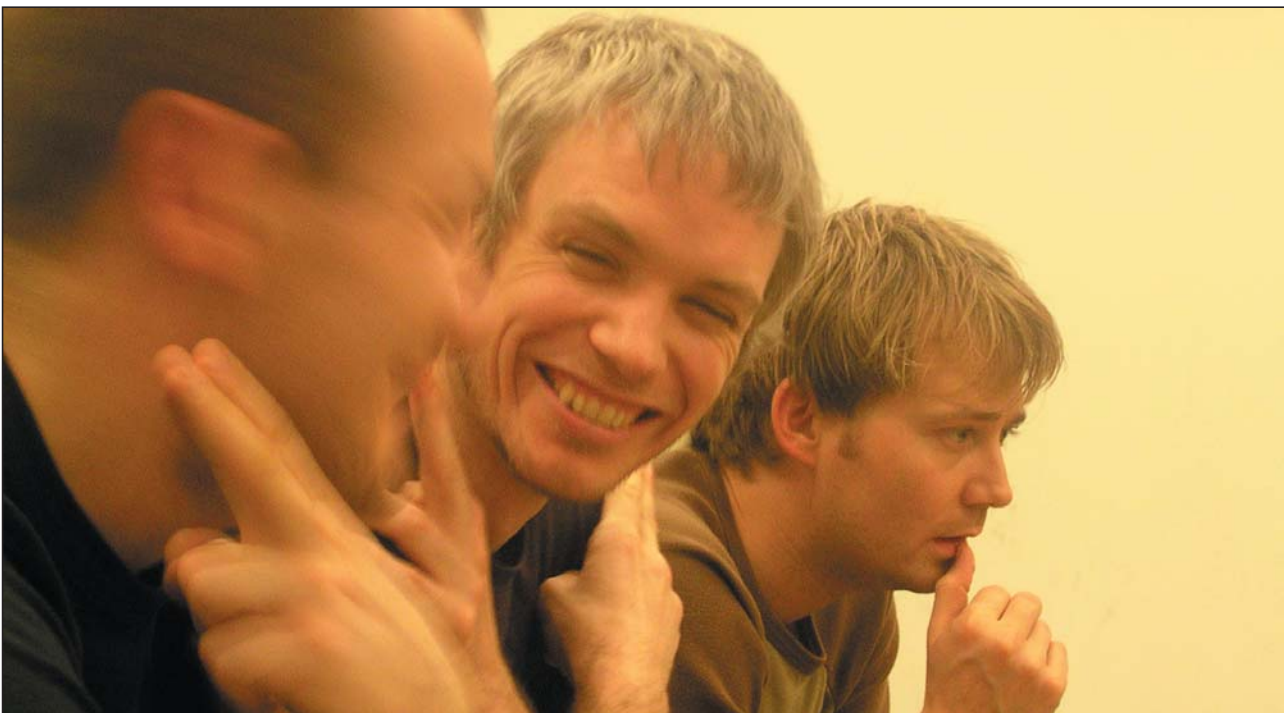
Scott asks the guys to place themselves there before they judge him. e.g.

K *I would have stayed*
 S *You don't know that*
 K *Yes I do*
 S *You weren't there*
 K *No. You were. And you left*
 (or. *No! You weren't there!*)

Both Scott and Karl have radically different notions and experiences of what it meant to 'be there'.

See 'Scott and Jimmy'

As time was an issue we had to be sure that we were not unravelling what we had or even throwing out the baby with the bath water. *Hymns* was very successful as it was. It was of utmost importance that we could convince Chris (and ourselves) that the work we were asking was manageable and would leave us with a better show. What follows (an extract from the final part of the letter to Chris) was part of that process.



So where are we?

It means that *Hymns* is not about being gay (not that it ever was but it did run the risk of being misunderstood by idiots). It is about communication and connections. About the ability to act when pressed to do so (a manly trait?) and to act honestly without the baggage that society heaps on us. To speak when we need to speak and to listen when we need to listen.

It means that Scott still has a secret, Steven wants to 'out' him, and Karl feels guilty, and Simon is Simon.

There are issues with the 'I was in the kitchen, he was upstairs' part of the story. Maybe they are looking for signs of Jimmy's state of mind knowing that Karl was last to see him. But Steven knows that Scott was the last. So why does he push Karl into talking? Is it a ruse to provoke Scott into responding, to stop the torture? And does Scott's failure to intervene further disgust Steven? Consider the new weight to Steven's line that concludes the 'torture' of Karl – 'You've just been away. We're the same mates we have always been'.

And in *Guyscrappers*, should there be a little hint to Scott that Steven knows that he has been down to see Jimmy? It keeps the fear for Scott that Steven could possibly out him. And the implications of this are greatly increased now.

The fear of being thought homosexual or his masculinity being questioned is still something that motivates Scott but it is now something that we are all asked to confront. Were the requests of Jimmy reasonable male requests? Was the required response a reasonable male response?

I think this could be the can of worms that we should open.



4. Getting to work

Confidence - strength - attitude - personality through movement

One of the first tasks in the rehearsal room was to develop a group confidence. From there the cast learn to trust and push each other further. In addition to that we quickly identified that the performers must feel confident enough to push their own personality to the fore. If the rehearsal room can crackle with the laddy banter of four confident performers then we would have taken the first steps towards capturing the world of the four characters. We unashamedly had to find the lads!

Initial movement sessions

The performers are asked to improvise using rolls and lifts but never coming off the floor. Smooth contact work looking at taking the effort and conflict out of contact work. They continually move across the floor taking each others weight and momentum, 'listening' to their partners physicality and learning how their partners operate. This stands the performers in good stead for when they have to work quickly together to make material for the show. This is all about opportunities and possibilities.

This is also a development towards a strong, grounded performance quality. Liam makes sure there is never an element of 'waft' in the physicality. It is not full of meaning or emotion at this stage. The performers are working very hard to explore and retain a particular quality. (Go to http://www.guardian.co.uk/saturday_review/story/0,3605,268491,00.html to find what Lloyd Newson, director of DV8 has to say about the 'myth of the waft' in dance).

When setting up sessions like these always look out for students emoting during movement, embellishing their moves with earth shattering importance. Movement does not have to be a dumb show. It can be a heightened reality and can be rooted in everyday situations and, most poignantly, be performed by everyday characters - see Essays and Practical ideas.



Stopping Points/Connections

The 4 performers were asked to pair up in the space. They were asked to move around the set amongst randomly placed chairs. They could sit or stand or move in any way but have to take the impulse for their starting points and finishing points from their partner's. What you have is two people listening closely to each other, using their periphery vision to key into the quality and timing of their partners moves. At no time do they mimic or mirror. It is only the quality and timing of the moves that connect the partners. Both sets of partners share the space but never become aware of each other. What appears is a scene of four individuals whose physicality or body language is subconsciously connected. As one person moves they push or pull another across the space. The small movement of a person's arm may appear to be connected to the completely different move of another person. It is important that they don't do identical moves but just try to do moves that have a similar quality and dynamic .

It was crucial for the performers to master this simple exercise as Liam wanted to explore much more complex arrangements and structures. In practice this would present a room where the physicality of four men would scream a whole spectrum of desires, needs, grievances without ever saying a word.

Even if this exercise did not directly become a scene it served to instruct the performers of the importance of body language in the show. It serves an incredibly rich subtext. It is used without setting it within the play. This avoids the performers temptation to 'tell' the story with their moves, to only do sad or frustrated moves to show sadness and frustration. Remember the sadness of a scene may truly lie in the audience's reaction, in their judging this to be a sad situation.

For example, a character who feels there is no hope when the audience knows there is none is sad. A character who feels hope when the audience knows there is none is infinitely more sad.

We are always inviting and guiding the audience towards our preferred conclusion. We don't have to spell it out for them in every action. Engage the audience. Don't just present what they need to understand.

The above exercise was then moved to the table with the 4 guys sitting in chairs. Here the exercise was moved closer to the theatrical context of four men contemplating the loss of a friend and desperately wanting to say the right thing. The stillness is now informed by the context. The subtext remains rich and full of possibilities. The characters are complex in their silence. What they don't say is what they need to say and the audience plays a crucial role in articulating the unsaid.

As a general exercise this is very useful for the performance style that dominates the show. Naturalism can smother our subtle body language. As *Hymns* is often a dance of that body language, about what we are screaming from the inside, it was really important for us not to bury that physicality under extraneous movement. It serves to remind the performers that they are responsible for every move they make, that every move they make has a reaction or impact upon someone else, that a well trained audience eye is looking keenly for the story beneath the surface. It means that every moment on stage has been considered. And this is evident from the beginning of the show. Moments are held. Physicality is awkward. It gives the impression of people physically and emotionally holding back. As the production moves on and the characters start to clash and open up, so their physicality responds and becomes more open and demonstrative.

Found the lads. What next?

Once the performers had found their own confidence we had to take the time to find the characters. Liam led a hot seat session, something we had not done since *Look Back In Anger* in 1994, to help the performers find some depth to their portrayal. This was the first character work of the rehearsals and proved very important as the guys had been bombarded by moves and choreography in the first week and a half. It was a timely reminder that all of the moves need to be infused with character.

What emerged was the feeling that all of the characters are in some kind of denial over the death of Jimmy and the state of their friendships. Various physical characteristics and quirks emerged, all of which were perfect to retain and exploit as choreography.

It was a brilliant surprise to see such a textual 'actor' exercise inspire new moves and consolidate old ones.

Homework

Liam asked the performers to read through the script and list everything their character says about themselves, from the simplicity of 'I really like that urn they put Jimmy in' to much more complex comments.

Then they had to list everything that the other characters say about their character. This gives an insight into the sea of opinions that wash through the piece. Some are, of course, trivial. Others may come as a complete surprise to a performer to find out that their character has such an effect on another character.

This exercise gets the performers deeper into the world created on stage.

Last Minute Inspiration!

Manchester. The night before the first show the four performers buy a crate of beer and take themselves off to a room in the hotel they are staying in for an informal lines run. As they relaxed with the beer they found that they were listening to each others lines differently. In some cases they were listening to lines for the first time!

The exercise brought out the humour and rhythms of the text and the performers found they really started to believe in the friendship of the four characters. This 'real' situation left the performers much more confident that they knew the show from the inside. Not just the lines and the moves but the emotional context and subtext too.

I do not suggest that you take your performers off to the pub but the exercise reminded us of the importance of taking time to listen to what is said to you on stage, rather than just making sure you know your lines. Taking the lines run into a relaxed informal situation informed the playing of the scenes greatly and left the performers eager and excited to put what they had discovered onto the stage.

5. The Show - A Selection of Scenes

This pack gives students, teachers and practitioners the opportunity to get behind the scenes. What follows are some insights into the creation of selected sections. Each scene has a title that evolved through rehearsal as a way to differentiate between sections. For example, there was no Act 1 scene 4 type structure so we developed our own shorthand. Sometimes the genesis of the name is obvious ('*Can't Get Used To It*' being the first line of that scene) while others are slightly more cryptic ('Guyscrapers' - because it is a scene between two men placed as far up the ladders as they can get). At other times the name might come from the music track used in the scene.

They were never meant for presentation or as a way to break up the script. They are shown here and in the playscript merely to reflect a typical working practice of the company.

All page numbers quoted are from the *Hymns* play script, printed by Oberon. ISBN: 1 84002 548 4).



i) Lullaby

This scene is called *Lullaby* after the music track used. ('*Lullaby*' by Lamb from the album '*Fear of Fours*'). See 'Accidents and Creativity' for more details of how the track came to be used.

Lullaby is the first scene of the play where the four men sit around the table (p.23). Previously they have laughed and joked their way out of the funeral, through several bottles of beer and now find themselves with very little to say. This is a moment of introspection after the macho bravado of their reunion.

The intention was to follow all of the spectacle of the first section with a fragile scene of choreographed stillness, bringing the audience forward in their seats and training them to look for the tiniest flicker passing across the faces of the characters. Clues as to what is going on in the inside, beneath all the attitude and posturing that felt so uncomfortable coming out of the funeral scene.

And this is an important observation. It was the explosive physicality of the preceding scene that forces us to look at this new scene in a much more precise way. Similarly it is the sensitivity of this latest scene that makes us reassess the thoughtless laddishness of the previous scene.

We learnt a long time ago that you have to earn your prize moments on stage. It is how you set a scene up that counts. Early discussions and projects with DJ Andy Cleeton taught us that good theatre is constructed exactly like a good DJ set, full of carefully planned highs and lows.

Lullaby is about time passing and not a word being said. A friend has died and all that has been shared are jokes and beers. We wanted a scene that captures the extended introspection of the hours following the funeral where the information of the day slowly starts to sink in. We wanted to build up the tension and create a palpable need for someone to break the silence and earn the actual first written words of the play.

Scott *Guys! You can loosen up a bit, yeah? No one's going to report you* (p.23)

Words spoken prior to this were mostly developed in rehearsal. They give glimpses of the persona that the guys want to present. The boisterous lads in suits with beers in their hands, cracking jokes and not talking about their feelings is the cliché they feel safe hiding behind. The emptiness and stillness of *Lullaby* allows the audience to explore the cracks in this facade.

Lullaby is a series of opportunities for connections between the four guys. At times their actions attract each other. At others they repel. As one person moves forward to possibly speak, address, or even touch their mate that person is pushed or feels compelled to move away. Why? What do they fear from those connections? What would the touch mean? What can worms would it open? These are four men not ready to talk yet desperate to get things off their chests. *Lullaby* was an attempt to portray that dilemma - the need to connect with the people you care about in a moment of grief versus the fear of opening oneself to ridicule. It is a particularly male dilemma.



ii) Slabslammers (p.28)

The idea for this scene came from discussions in rehearsals. We talked about how difficult it is to accept the finality of death, how it turns the people we know into meat. It sounds crude but that is exactly what we were talking about. How can something that still looks like the person we knew now be utterly devoid of life? It is the age old problem of trying to understand 'nothing'. Almost every instinct in our mind fights the notion (See the poem '*Nothing (For Ruth)*' by Edward Lowbury. The guys are experiencing a similar moment to the child in the poem).

In this scene we had the characters try to take on the physical qualities of a dead body. To be utterly unresponsive on a cold slab. They are so full of life and energy and they are trying to understand the opposite. They literally slam their bodies onto the table/mortuary slab in an effort to achieve this.

The scene ends with a sequence where the four guys try to find places to sit within the five chairs. They have three or four attempts but each time they appear to be unnerved by the empty fifth chair. Jimmy's chair.

It is clear that Jimmy is haunting their thoughts, both in memories of what he used to be and in them trying to understand what he is now.



iii) Caterpillar (p.40)

Caterpillar is the explosive physical scene in the middle of the show. It is called *Caterpillar* after the track used.

The intention was to show a massive burst of energy and frustration, a private moment for each of the characters. Despite the movement being inspired by Scott's depressing accusation it is actually a moment where we glimpse what they share, the similarities in their predicament

Scott *What's wrong with you guys?*
 Steven *You've just been away. We're the same mates we've always been*
 Scott *You reckon?* (p40)

From the notion that everything has changed comes the realisation for the audience that they are still very similar. In their private moment they share the same inner turmoil. And when this moment is over they won't talk about what they share as they were unaware of it. They go straight back to pretending that everything is alright.

The scene is performed in unison but also in isolation. This suggests that all the possibilities for connecting still exist between the guys but the opportunity is once again lost.

Caterpillar was created using the four performers imagining they were facing the ladders of the set. (The set was still on order!) Liam asked the performers each to create 2 bars of material based on trying to grab or capture something that always remained out of reach. He then shaped this material, moving it to the floor, rearranging it to suit his idea.

This was extended and more material was added but Liam always pushed for us to retain that original quality, that simple logic of always trying to catch something out of reach. The movement then progressed onto the ladders inspired by ideas of status and competition between men. The characters struggle up the ladders only to snake down at breakneck speed. It is the speed of the descent that emphasises the struggle of the climb.

Interestingly the initial creative sessions were not to the track *Caterpillar*. Liam used the track *Mr Sand* by Marc Almond to set the material. This is a much slower piece of music, full of swaggering attitude, that proved easy to fit our moves to. Unfortunately the moves became swaggering too and they had lost their edge. The next step was to challenge the choreography with the much faster, much darker *Caterpillar*. If this wasn't hard enough and didn't quite capture the bone crunching quality Liam was looking for then the next stage of rehearsing in the climbing harnesses we needed to use in the show would surely do it.

It did.

iv) Can't Get Used To It (p.28)

Time has moved on. Many beers have been downed and heads are starting to ache but they are no further ahead.

Within this scene we wanted to capture a particular quality as economically as possible. We wanted to suggest the beginnings of a hangover at 3am without ever mentioning those details. (We also talked about the film *Twelve Angry Men* and the idea that the guys almost sense they are trapped in this room until they have confronted their demons).

To achieve this all the physicality is heavy. Every time the body settles it wants to stay there but the constant sniping means that there is never a moment to properly relax. Comments towards a person become explosions in slow motion. Words become physical provocations, never allowing their targets a moments peace until the whole issue of these words must be addressed. The moment is squeezed towards an inevitable conclusion.

Steven *We could just talk... That's all I'm saying* (p31)

As the tension builds to this moment it is instantly pierced by the flippancy of 'Headwrecker'.

v) Headwrecker (p.32)

All throughout the first half of the show there is the expectation and pressure on the four guys to talk, culminating in Steven's request.

Steven *We could just talk.. that's all I'm saying* (p31)

Liam wanted to create a scene that would be a flippant response to that request. A scene that would not be about men not talking but would be about what people think men talk freely about - all the clichés - football, women, cars, directions, DIY, etc.

The show was feeling heavy with all that expectation. It was in real danger of being moribund, morbid and emotionally indulgent. It needed to respond to that situation in exactly the same way as the guys would by lightening the mood and relieving the tension. A moment of light relief. So what followed was an incredibly complex dance stood on the table using numerous everyday male gestures and physical illustrations of the topics of conversation.

Unfortunately this count heavy crowd pleaser was made in the last two days before the first preview. It pushed the performers as close to despair as we came through the whole of rehearsals. As all the other pressures converged this extra scene threatened to drive us mad just as our inability to master it started to infuriate Liam. Not that anything ever became ugly. It was one of those times when there was so much work to do that the pressure actually became funny. The aching muscles and bruised bones, the sleepless nights and missing lines all became lesser problems in the face of this new scene. It was almost the catalyst for hysteria.

In the midst of this hell we all stopped rehearsing to step outside to witness a solar eclipse. As the light inexplicably faded and the air cooled we actually started to calm down. Standing there in a small crowd, people with their special eclipse observer glasses resting wonky on their nose, was such a surreal experience that returning to finish the scene felt like normality. From there we just cracked it just in time.

From all this a name for the scene emerged and it was a unanimous decision. *Headwrecker* was born.





vi) Slow Warren ('A Toast. To Jimmy') (p.18)

After the funeral the guys let loose. They have not seen Scott for some time and despite the sobriety of the occasion they all fall into a ritual of banter and horseplay, cracking tired jokes and roughhousing.

Liam wanted to use this cliché of male inarticulacy and lace it with moments of near connection, as if every moment that they grab, push and escape could almost have been an embrace. What he was looking to do was hint at much more complex emotions running underneath, reminding the audience that the men have just buried their best mate and despite all their bravado they are hurting and are in need to grieve.

This sets the show up perfectly because it is quite clear that the guys are not dealing with the situation in the way that we might expect. It is important that the audience can sense cracks in this facade or else they will never invest in the character's journeys. Immediately we get a tension between what they are portraying on the outside and what they might feel on the inside.

The scene also creates a reaction to the funeral, a pace and energy, that we know cannot be maintained. It would have been far less interesting to have the guys come out of the funeral with their faces tripping them and talking about loss. That is not the way things happen when people feel they have something to hide, when they are afraid of letting the truth out, whether that be based on events or on emotions.

vii) Guyscrappers (p.40)

This is probably the simplest scene in the show. Scott and Steven grab a quiet moment following the turmoil of *Caterpillar*. They both take chairs and place them at the top of the ladders. They sit close together but crucially not facing each other. What follows is a gentle scene where Steven tries to engage with his once close friend but finds that time and their mixed feelings over Jimmy's death have had a corrosive effect.

We talked with Chris about how we wanted this to be an 'empty' scene, for the silences to scream out. We had to see the effort it takes these guys to speak in this moment. We needed to see the risk associated with them sharing their feelings. If we are to feel the pain of two close friends being so guarded then we must appreciate their fear of falling versus their desire to connect.

The physical setting of this scene creates that feeling of danger. The performers are in a physically dangerous place just as their characters are in an emotionally dangerous place. This effects the way the audience watches the scene. They subliminally get an understanding of the risk involved for the characters.

This is also a massive change in focus. From the spectacle of *Caterpillar* the audience are now asked to look at a very still, naturalistic scene. It is this change of focus, we believe, that keeps audiences fresh. There is no point following a big physical scene with another big physical scene. They cancel each other out

A rule of thumb used in film is that a shot must change by 30% from the preceding shot if it is to be seen to be effective and keep the viewer interested. We feel this is a very good rule to observe in theatre too.

viii) Smokers - 'Just forget it yeah?' 'I can't, it's etched on my brain. It'll never go away' (p27)

This scene comes at a time when the guys are getting lost in banter and appear to have forgotten that they have been at a funeral at all. This is what appears on the surface. We wanted a scene that shows this to be a facade without the guys verbally communicating it. Therefore this scene does not appear in any script.

The guys smoke, moving around the table and chairs, oblivious to each other. As they smoke their focus is purely on a bottle of beer. We wanted the characters to suddenly become introspective at the point when they realise that they have five bottles of beer on the table rather than the four they need. It is as if someone has bought a round of five out of habit and the fact that there is now one spare screams the new group dynamic. There is one person less than they are used to and this is going to take time to adjust to.

The same applies to the chair. There was a definite decision to have a fifth chair for Jimmy and at times the emptiness of this chairs visibly upsets the characters. It is used as a constant motif throughout the first half of the show. (See *Lullaby* and *Slabslammers*) It is only after the outburst of *Caterpillar* that they manage to escape from the power of Jimmy's empty chair and use only four.



6. Accidents and Creativity - a conducive environment

As we rework *Hymns* we are in the Lyric Hammersmith's plush new rehearsal room. We have the set and are surrounded by our technical equipment. It is a perfect environment for what we need.

When we first made *Hymns* in 1999 we spent the first three weeks in an extremely plush dance studio in a new purpose built venue. And we found it less than perfect. The beautiful clean lines may have been conducive for pure dance and to be fair we did work very hard creating a large proportion of the more dancy elements of the show but we struggled to get any theatrical inspiration. A case of all perspiration and no inspiration.

We were in danger of leaving that space still unsure about ideas surrounding set and design. We knew we wanted ladders but how could we tour with them? How could we slide down them like we imagined without shredding our hands? What was the overall aesthetic of the piece? It was when we were looking through a maintenance cupboard for a mop to clean up a spill on the immaculate sprung floor that we found a ladder. The sides were smooth and it broke down into 90cm sections which meant we could potentially create the 5 metre ladders we hoped for. This accidental discovery was probably the most important moment of our 3 weeks rehearsing at a premiere dance studio.

We moved into a temporary rehearsal space in BAC in the week between the dance studio and the production weeks in Warwick Arts Centre. We had a scabby little room but as we had no set yet it was no problem fitting in. Not being able to work physically in that room meant that we had to concentrate on the more static elements of the show.

While working on the scene that would become *Lullaby* we were using the track 'Five' by Lamb but things were not quite working. While we were trying to get our heads around what was going wrong no one pressed stop on the CD player. As we were talking the next track on the album drifted under our words and moves. When we eventually twigged this we realised that we were using the wrong piece of music and we immediately solved the problem by using *Lullaby*. Now it is hard to imagine another piece of music for this scene.

Since this happy accident we always play music in rehearsals, at every stage, trying out different tracks all the time. Music is so important to our creative process as it instantly suggests atmosphere and emotion.

We learned that the first answer to a problem is not always the best one.

As we were running this version of the newly titled *Lullaby* the sun came out from behind a cloud and shone a perfect cast of the window across one of the performers. We instantly knew that was the basis for a motif that would accompany *Lullaby* and underpin the lighting aesthetic throughout the show.

Learning from these accidents, we have since ensured that we rehearse in spaces that have the potential to inspire us. We believe fully that creativity comes from responding to limitations and not from complete freedom. We feel lost in an empty dance studio. As perfect as the Lyric rehearsal studio is for us now it would not be where we would choose to be if we were making this show from scratch.



7. Scott and Jimmy

There has always been interest in what happened between Jimmy and Scott. In the original script there was more than a suggestion that something intimate happened between the two. Maybe even something sexual. Although the intention was to suggest how the two of them connected beyond their blokey stereotypes some people thought that the whole play was about being gay and coming out. If this was the case then we have a character who commits suicide because he is gay and we never wanted to put something as crass as that on stage. What follows is another extract from a letter to Chris O'Connell.

The interesting thing is that Scott felt he could not do what Jimmy was asking. Why? Was there a homosexual context to Jimmy's requests? Were Scott's fears based on this? Were his actions based on the social barriers we all have? (i.e. don't kiss me good bye outside Brixton tube!). How would Scott be feeling about this now? Regrets? Self loathing? If Scott had done that he would be absolutely gutted/furious with himself BUT he would also have had the experience of having been there and feeling that the request was too much to ask and not something he felt comfortable doing. It is with hindsight that the act becomes utterly callous. In the moment we would probably not see the gravity of the situation. We like to convince ourselves that everything is going to be ok.

What I like about this is that the sexuality question becomes an open question rather than a peculiar ambiguity within Scott and Jimmy's relationship. This places the men in the audience in the same place – would you put aside this bullshit in the chance that it would save your friend? Of course you would but how deep does this 'bullshit' run? And how much would you convince yourself that this is not a life and death matter? As it is unveiled Scott's actions are completely reprehensible but I think it is inevitable that the audience has to put themselves in his shoes and reassess their judgement. (Even if the conclusion and judgement on Scott's actions are the same, the point is they had to place themselves in the moment before Jimmy's actions and this is somewhere we have never really been able to take our audience so far).

It becomes a question of male identity, of when we feel that gets compromised, and the risks we are willing to take to make connections. (And the depth of the connections.) There is very little social stigma attached to the idea of two female friends in the same situation sharing a bed and holding each other through the night. There was clearly a male need for such an action, such a connection. Why is it so difficult to fulfil this? This takes us right back to our starting point about Men and the difficulty to cry for help. The cry is hard enough. It may be that the response is even harder.

Which leaves us with Karl. He never had the choice that Scott had. That choice was taken away by a combination of Scott's actions, his mobile phone being switched off, and the ultimate action of Jimmy. (It still remains that Jimmy knew Karl would get the message and come round the next day and find him. He is the same 'selfish bastard'). So is Karl's lack of choice a curse or a blessing? He deals with and is haunted by his actions in the moment of finding Jimmy – something no one else has the experience of. This is still Scott's fault, in his eyes. He may realise he is merely a victim of events... etc. etc. His speech is about what happened that morning and how it shouldn't have happened ie the same

Chris responded positively to these ideas. In the draft that we have at the moment Scott feels Jimmy's manipulation and counters telling him to sort his life out and stop indulging in this self pity (hardly words of wisdom for the depressed). As he is leaving Jimmy asks him to stay and hold him and Scott refuses. Currently we have a problem with this and are looking to change it slightly. We feel that this is asking a massive leap from Scott, to turn from angry person leaving the room to be that special friend holding his mate. This is not the point. It is not the kind of leap that would engage the audience. Scott IS a loving mate, somewhere beneath the facade, and he probably was holding Jimmy. It is the request to take that to the bedroom that is the step too far. For us it has to be a step and not a leap. It is the simplicity of this step that must haunt Scott otherwise his actions are too easily justified.

8. The Performers - Actors who dance or dancers who act?



i) Steven Hoggett

English graduate. Making it up as he goes along

ii) Karl Sullivan

Dance trained. Got bored of being mute. Fell into acting

iii) Eddie Kay

Dancer trying a bit of everything. Nice to be saying words

iv) Joseph Traynor

Actor finding a new love of counts and bruises

9. Essay Ideas and Physical Exercises for Devising



1. 'Listening' to each other physically.

At every stage of working together we ask performers and students to listen to each other physically. We call it listening but it is actually the use of periphery vision, sensitivity to touch and just learning to communicate non verbally with your fellow performers. This is the building block for all our physical work.

Start with the whole group walking randomly around the room. Explain that anyone can decide to clearly stop and stand still. When the rest of the group can sense this they all stop too. Then they all start again randomly. This may start as chaos but eventually (allow five minutes to build up to this) the group starts to communicate extremely efficiently. To the observer we cannot see how they are doing it. It is important that the group do not try to find shortcuts. It is not about finding new ways to do it. It is not about predetermined counts. It is just about getting better at listening.

Then split the group into partners. One partner closes their eyes and trusts their partner from here on. The other partner places a flat hand gently on the back of their partner's neck and leads them around the space using the slightest pressure possible to indicate directions and speeds. Both partners are communicating through the area of contact.

Try the hand on different body parts. Try more difficult connections (possibly not with hands).

2. Try the exercise outlined in Getting to Work: Stopping Points/Connections.

Once you develop a confidence between the performers and everyone is listening to each other physically try taking the movement out of the studio and into real environments. Place people within oblivious crowds so that the movement looks like a heightened, slightly magical reality and witness all the connections emerge between people who appear not to know each other.

3. Look closely at Lullaby. (p.23)

What stories emerge from the moments of near interaction? Try defining the atmosphere created. Articulate vocally what is happening in each moment. Why do they move away from each other? What draws them towards each other? What have they got to hide?

Create a simple scenario where 2-4 people have a need to speak yet say nothing. Allow them to improvise similar moves emphasising the importance of stopping points, stillness and near connections.

Then try different music tracks and eventually start to define a context. Is it a cafe? Are they in a waiting room? Around a dinner table? What emerges? Who are these people?

And what would the first words be? What are they building towards? Ask the rest of the class what they think could be said at this point. Run the scene including the first words.

Does someone leave? Are they looking at each other? Does this make a difference?

All throughout this engage the audience (the rest of the class) by asking them what they see. Let them define the story rather than the actors. This exercise is all about what the audience brings to the scene. Once we (the practitioners) know this we can exploit it and start setting the work and atmosphere so that we are then in control of it.

Directing is about knowing how to manipulate your audience as much as it is about manipulating the actors.

4. Create your own Headwrecker

Observe everyday gestures and distil them down to a highly defined movement that can be consistently repeated. Split the class into groups to represent different aspects of your chosen theme (for example if the theme was football then one group could be players, another could be managers, another could be medics, and the last may be the crowd. Any televised football match gives a wealth of material for each of these groups). Each group then creates a string of 16 moves (two bars of 8 bar music). These are the clean crisp gestures now linked. Aim for unison within each group at first. If things go well you can start mixing the moves up, assigning moves to individuals within the group, creating a much more complex piece. This can be much more satisfying but is infinitely more difficult. Remember it is not called *Headwrecker* for nothing.

5. Time passing

Think of a simple setting for two characters. A sofa in front of the TV. A cafe. A date in a restaurant. Ask your performers (or characters who inhabit the setting) to picture their moves over an extended period of time; all the changes of position, the different poses that one might get into quite naturalistically over the space of a couple of hours. If it helps to visualise it, think of a CCTV camera spying on the event and capturing the moves.

Get the performers to set their individual moves, taking care to include moments of stillness and rest. If you then run the two individuals together in the space a physical story emerges. There may be moments that you want to hold on to, to set. Others that you might want to change.

Give your performers a section of fairly sparse dialogue from the script (or a script of your choice, of course). Let the performers run the moves under the dialogue while the rest of the group look for moments where the moves and the words really work. (They should be looking for a pleasing dynamic relationship rather than moments that match literally).

Now let the performers give plenty of space to words, take plenty of time. As the moves have a life of their own it might appear like this simple conversation has taken all night to run its course. Or it might suggest that the characters are very uneasy and are desperate to escape from this situation. The very least you should find is that the characters are possibly saying things that they might not believe. Their physicality is undermining their sincerity, although there might equally be moments where the movements actually enforce the sincerity. Either way what the 'audience' have discovered is the important relationship between context (the cafe, the dialogue) and the subtext (the discomfort, the need to escape). It is a great example of how from simple physicality a complex subtext can emerge.



6. Hot Hands

A simple physical exercise. Take a naturalistic monologue with someone sitting in a chair. Allow them to explore loads of naturalistic physical positions eg. resting their elbows on their thighs while they talk, folding their arms, clasping their hands. Now instruct the performer that every time their hands or arms rest a burning pain jolts them out of this position. It may only be a tiny pain but the important thing is they do not want us to notice. They must give the impression that everything is ok.

What effect does this have on the monologue? Is the character less sincere? Is there something going on unsaid?

Film this exercise and see if there is a choreographic potential. If so, watch the playback noting the best bits. You may be surprised how many of the best bits are accidental.

We ALWAYS film improvisations. This gives us the outside eye because we have found that you can't trust the feeling from the inside. We have rushed to see what we thought might be a brilliant improvisation only to find it was rubbish. Yet from the footage emerge some accidental gems that we can then claim as our own ideas!

7. Essays

a) In the original script the phrase "Be what you are" starts an argument between the guys. (p.29) The reworked version, not included in the current printed script, has changed that incendiary phrase to 'Just let it all out'

What does it mean to the four men to 'Just let it all out'?

What are the separate risks for the four?

How different would it be with the original line 'Be what you are'?

b) Consider the moment when Simon tries to console Karl with a card (p.42). Why does Karl have such a problem with this?

c) The production begins and ends with jokes. Why is the effect of the jokes so different at the end?

d) Steven *You've just been away. We're the same mates we've always been* (p.40)
Scott *You reckon?*

What is the effect of these lines? Are they the same mates? If not, how might they have changed? Who do these lines effect most?

e) How would you describe the performance style of the production? What performance elements come together within the piece? How does non naturalistic movement work within the performance? Would it work purely naturalistically?

f) Note the differing dynamics at play within the production. Comment on the use of action and stillness. Look at how the use of height effects the quality of a scene.

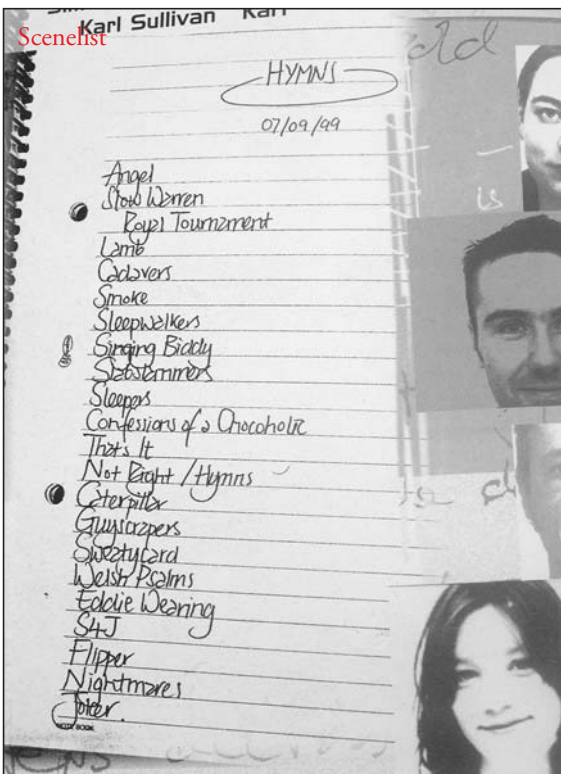
g) What impact did the music have? Frantic have always thought about the using music like a soundtrack, as in a film. How does this effect the audience?

i) How is meaning portrayed through physicality? Think about physical theatre in terms of context and subtext. How does the subtext emerge from the context?

j) This production has 'script' by Chris O'Connell. Why is the production not a 'play' by Chris O'Connell? Consider this decision using what you know about the development of this production. Is this definition justified? Is there a difference between a script and a play? Now that a playscript of *Hymns* exists in print does that change things? Does it mean that the original production uses the 'script' to *Hymns* and subsequent productions by other companies in the future will produce the 'play' of *Hymns*?

k) What is meant by focus? Identify a moment where this is apparent. What is the effect of this change of focus? How does it effect the audience?

l) Where is this production set? Is that defined? If so, how is it defined? As the design is non naturalistic how do we get a sense of place and time in the production? (consider the use of the table, chairs, bottles of beer, lighting, etc.).



10. Suicide

Suicide is a difficult issue. It is of course not an exclusively male issue and effects all types of people but it remains that the most common factor that places you at risk is simply being male.

It does not take much research to get an idea of the scale of the situation. Type 'male suicide' into the Google search engine and trawl through the weight of horrifying statistics that are testament to the problem. At every age in any country men are much more likely than women to take their own life.

Below are some links to articles and web sites that may be of interest if you want to look into and around the subject of male suicide.

www.ukmm.org.uk/press/article.htm

'Reasons for Male Suicide all too Clear'

www.bnn-online.co.uk/news

'New minister for men only'

www.statistics.gov.uk

suicide statistics for the UK

www.bbc.co.uk/health/mens/mind_suicide.shtml

www.menshealthforum.org.uk/userpage1.cfm?item-id997 (and -id1212)

www.mensproject.org/facts/suicide.pdf

a pdf download



11. Bibliography

I believe references to be shortcuts to understanding and not the long way round. I have included anything referred to in the rehearsal room that helped consolidate meaning.

The list serves as a reminder to practitioners that influence comes in all shapes and sizes. For us the creative process is not about locking yourself away and finding out just what is in your own mind. It is about opening up and finding out how your mind relates to the rest of the world.

The following references may be interesting starting points for further exploration.

<i>Stiffed - Betrayal of the Modern Man</i> , Susan Faludi	Book (ISBN 0-099-30491-0)
(http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/stiffed.asp)	
<i>Not Guilty</i> , David Thomas	Book (ISBN 0 297 812165)
<i>Nothing For Ruth</i> , Edward Lowbury	Poem
<i>The Snow Man</i> , Wallace Stevens	Poem
<i>Enter Achilles</i> , DV8	Film/Performance (www.dv8.co.uk)
<i>Local Boy in the Photograph</i> , Stereophonics	Song
<i>Televue Angry Men</i> , dir Sidney Lumet, 1957	Film

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